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# What You Can See from the Top: A Novella

By Alicia Bones

## Introduction

My interest in John Waters' movies, along with my decision to revise a play I'd written for Lawrence's *24 Hour Play Fest*, inspired me to create the characters and subject that came to be these vignettes. My first term at Lawrence, a night of no sleep, caffeine drinks, and pizza combined to create Tracy Cooper, a shaking, twitching teenager afraid of everything because of traumatic things she'd witnessed in her past. Long after the performance during the *24 Hour Play Fest*, I couldn't forget Tracy and her story. Somehow, probably because time pressure made me stop overanalyzing everything, I found the kind of thing I wanted to write about and the way I wanted to write.

My decision to revise the play into a short story coincided with a presentation I gave on John Waters' films for American Studies in third term of my sophomore year. I became obsessed with Waters' "camp" or "trash" characters. Waters used the same set of actors--obese drag queens, lanky, big-eyed women, and skinny,

conspicuously homosexual men--in all of his movies. I was also drawn to Waters' ideology about his films. Waters writes:

“Irony ruined everything. I wish my movies could have played at drive-ins, but they never did, because of irony. Even the best exploitation films were never meant to be ‘so bad they were good.’ They were not made for the intelligentsia. They were made to be violent for real; they were made to be sexy for real. But now everybody has irony.”

With this quote, Waters implies that he imbued his characters with an earnestness that American ironic culture would not accept. The people watching his movies weren't supposed to view the characters' over-the-top attitudes ironically; Waters isn't satirizing his characters, but rather glorifying their quirks. Waters created his characters as people outside of the mainstream, but his audience also was not supposed to make fun of them—if the audience laughed, as Waters implies in this quote, they should be laughing with, and not at, the characters. I tried to follow Waters' model. Tracy, and the two other main characters, Septimus and Stan, the effeminate circus master and his drag queen husband, are placed into unusual circumstances to be sure, but I tried to make them real people to be viewed seriously. Although society delegitimizes these characters, their underlying humanity made me legitimize them. I wanted to explore the ways in which marginalized people found their own spaces, in both public and private spheres. I chose to center the story around a circus, which is populated with “freaks,” but also markets itself to a mainstream audience, to illustrate what sorts of modifications Tracy, Septimus and

Stan need to make when moving in-and-outside of the conventional world. These characters move in the same way as the circus does, costuming themselves for the mainstream world, and living more authentically in private.

Although Waters embraced his camp characters, quirks and all, watching his movies was kind of like eating marshmallows: delicious on the outside, but nutritionally unsatisfying. The movies seemed to be emotionally bankrupt. Waters writes, “I pride myself on the fact that my work has no socially redeemable value.” While movies don’t need to have a moral, Waters seems to move his characters around in order to achieve some shocking or disgusting ends, but his plots don’t seem to be motivated by his characters’ intentions. I wanted to do something different. In contrast to what I saw in Waters, I thought about characters’ motivations, based on their personalities and their places in the world, and worked out the plot from there. I used some of the same character types that Waters and others interested in camp and trash use—the wimpy, effeminate boy, the drag queen, the quiet, skinny girl—and expanded them from one-dimensionality. How does a fat drag queen feel about falling in love? How does a skinny girl cope with her brother’s death? I then placed my characters into situations of extreme emotion—coping with death—and attempted to write the characters’ real emotions. After that, although most of the characters in these vignettes are “campy” characters, they became real to me. Their unusual lives

added to my interest: marginalized groups are complex, and people are people with real emotion, regardless of whether or not society embraces them.

Thematically, the stories are connected with the idea of fear and overcoming fear. A prominent aspect of my own life and of American culture, I wanted to explore how fear can debilitate people in unexpected ways, as well as to examine why and how these characters chose to overcome fear or to live with it. The scenes of death are often highly dramatic, and the representations of fear are stylized—both Tracy and Septimus have uncontrollable tics whenever something makes a noise similar to the one they heard during a trauma. By using elements of the absurd, I tried to illustrate how fear can play a prominent role in life, and how it can manifest itself in unusual places. I tried to make the situations of death, however unusual, emotionally vital. Although absurdity and other stylized representations of life appeal to me as an aesthetic—calling attention to the artificial nature of all writing, and the often-crazy coincidences of life—I still believe that even stylized writing should have an emotionally relevant component.

Another theme I wanted to explore was that of obligations to family vs. obligations to chosen connections. In “From its top you can see the Eiffel Tower in Paris!” and “Two Stubborn Mules are Parted,” Septimus’ estrangement with his brother illustrated that maintenance of familial relationships is neither always the

healthiest choice, nor the happiest. The latter type of relationship was exemplified by the relationship between Septimus and Tracy, who were drawn to each other because of similar experiences, despite having no blood ties. I emphasized this unexplainable connection by illustrating similarities between their personalities and their lives—both have physical manifestations of fear, both are hoarders—to examine why two people, regardless of age and life situations, are inextricably drawn together. Septimus and Stan, too, are an example of this type of relationship; their relationship is primary in both of their lives. With Stan’s ambiguous gender, I wanted to explore the extremes of a deep connection to see what types of obstacles a connection like Stan’s and Septimus’ could overcome.

When writing a novella that crosses time and familial lines, I found I needed to use much more exposition than I’d used in self-contained short stories. I used to feel that exposition led the reader too much in a specific direction, but with the encouragement of visiting writer Jill McCorkle, who read the first vignette of this collection, I decided to expand the exposition throughout the piece. McCorkle’s short stories, which are longer than typical short stories, use exposition to balance her scenes in order to advance her character development and plot. It was difficult to balance staying in scene with the necessary elaborations of personal and familial histories. I tie these families together in small moments, generally by using objects and mannerisms repeated through characters, place, and time. The two families’ lives

become intertwined very unexpectedly: Tracy's brother Pat climbs a tree because he saw Septimus' circus; Septimus helps Tracy begin to overcome her fear of living. This connection between the families continues to illustrate how chaos in the world can sometimes turn out to be positive. By using similar mannerisms within family members and throughout a population, I wanted to illustrate that mannerisms can be passed on in surprising ways. Physical objects function in the same way; for example, the sequined, blue costumes make their way from Septimus and P.T.'s circus to the curtains in Septimus and Stan's apartment to Colin's swim trunks and the Soaring Seagulls costumes. The recurring objects show how people can be connected in ways they cannot explain, as well as to illustrate how seemingly useless things or ideas can reemerge in unusual ways.

Peter Orner's collection of vignettes, *Esther Stories* guided me in navigating the fissures of time required by a longer work. Two sections of Orner's collection tie together families by creating larger histories extending from vignettes, or very short scenes. Orner takes small things—a day at the beach, initials carved onto a table—and then moves into memories of histories spurred from those small moments. I wanted to do something similar, focusing on smaller moments, but then using them as departures into larger histories or implications to which the incident itself might relate. Similarly, Erin McGraw said, when she spoke to our fiction class this winter, that fissures in texts most accurately recreate the real world. In other words,

significant events are linked together in one's memory, but, implicitly leave out periods that turn out to be unimportant. In the same vein as McGraw's idea, I wanted to create a similar representation of the past on the page. Practically, this decision was necessary because of the novella's time scope, which ranges from the 1960s to the present.

I was particularly inspired by two novels and two collections of short stories to influence the mood, characters, and form of this collection. Two novels are John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* and Gary Shteyngart's *Absurdistan*. The protagonists in both stories—Ignatius Reilly, an obese, New Orleans PhD in love/hate with his beatnik Jewish girlfriend, and Misha Vainberg, an obese Russian diplomat in love with his newly-college educated NYC African American girlfriend are completely over-the-top. Both characters are certainly less-than-pleasant at times. Ignatius is quite self-absorbed, and Misha is often consumed with being the son of the 1,238th richest man in Russia. And yet, both narrators are surprisingly sympathetic, increasingly so because of the fact that they are over-the-top. I wanted to create characters with eccentricities that are judged harshly by society, but also illustrate how endearing these eccentricities can be.

*Wild Nights!* by Joyce Carol Oates was the first short story collection I turned to for inspiration. Oates' collection is unusual in that she takes five famous American



authors, including Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway, and imagines their deaths, generally moving outside of the way they actually died, and placing them in completely fantastic situations. Despite their absurd situations, Oates makes the reader feel emotions at the authors' plight—we sympathize with Poe's heartbreak when the sea monster he loves doesn't love him back and we feel for the robotic Emily Dickinson is taken advantage of by the man who bought her. Oates manages to use outlandish situations, but root them in reality. Oates' writes, "Where we come from in America no longer signifies. It's where we go, and what we do when we get there, that tells us who we are." In other words, birthplace in America no longer always allows a person to find a sense of place within their hometown or family home. I took Oates' practice and her method to heart; I wanted to root the story with a sense of place, as well as to let Tracy and Septimus carve out their own niches, despite feeling like outsiders in the places that they were born.

*The Knife Thrower and Other Stories* by Steven Millhauser was another collection of short stories that influenced my thinking. Millhauser, like Oates, is certainly an author with an aesthetic of the absurd, writing about a girl who dies after a laughing too hard and a town obsessed with the characters in an automaton theater. Millhauser says, "There are essentially two ways of presenting the fantastic in a story. By temperament and conviction, I much prefer the first method, the slow elaboration of a quotidian world that veers towards the unquotidian, the improbable, the

impossible.” Millhauser’s idea is appealing to me in writing because I believe in the idea of the fantastic buried within the day-to-day and the day-to-day implicit in the fantastic. Millhauser’s stories are often morbid; he implies that true joy cannot be achieved without pain. Millhauser says, “The darkness is sure there, but it’s in the service of something else, which I think of as celebratory.” I take Millhauser’s idea to heart in Tracy’s journey to try and cleanse herself of her pain to try and live again. My primary motivation in writing was to explore the mixture of joy and pain in every experience, and to examine the ongoing battle for a balance between the two.

## **#1: From its top you can see the Eiffel Tower in Paris!**

The heyday of circuses was over even then. John Moore's Cirzoosical and Maudlin Menagerie was designed by Mr. Moore in the '30's for barkeeps and waitresses and their scruffy offspring to save on off-brand popcorns and soda pops. Moore's sons, P.T. and Septimus, inherited the sprawling and poorly-managed circus in 1960 when John had enough of walking around on his chronically swollen ankles and decided to put them up once and for all. Now the brothers had to do everything they could to draw in business to their Big Top, sprouting big and red amongst sparsely growing grass, greasy fast food joints, and boys and girls holding cigarettes, in the Chicago outer limits.

"P.T., I absolutely cannot stand for it," said Septimus, a tall, thin young man, still in his magician's top hat and tails. He'd inherited the circus young, while he was still growing, and now his neck sprouted awkwardly from his collar and the pointy bones of his wrists protruded from the ends of his sleeves.

"Come off your high horse, Septimus," said his brother. Well-proportioned in rider's boots, white short pants, and a yellow and brown tweed jacket, P.T. stood on top of the red-painted ringmaster's podium, stamping on top of it and turning it over to bang the side panels for signs of rot. "They're just midgets. Tiny, tiny people don't

have feelings or a need for personal space like we do. They're lacking the screws and levers for it, you know, in the brain."

After they inherited the circus, P.T. and Septimus fought about performer rights. Septimus rarely won their battles, but he had recently. The brothers had agreed to purchase a set of ice packs to apply to Victor the Vicious Viking's bulging neck muscles, muscles so ferocious Septimus feared they would explode from his straining pink flesh and shoot through the circus when he lifted his miniature Nordic dragon ship. Today they were waging a particularly epic battle over whether they could stuff seven or twelve midget clowns into the tiny midget car.

"You don't really know that," said Septimus, sitting down on a little footstool. He had to look up at his brother when he spoke, and that made his neck hurt and his cheeks blush, so he chose instead to stare at the little dunes of dirt and sand on the floor. "They hurt, as well, just like any living thing, like beetles or elephants, you or me."

"Listen, Septimus. I really don't have time to be having this conversation with you. I'm the oldest and I'm going to do what I want to do."

"What about the circus codes act of 1922 which states, and I quote, 'The personage under 4 feet and 11 inches must not be subject to the stuffing into—'" Septimus held his hand out near his abdomen, indicating how tall the personage could be.

“Don’t want to hear it,” P.T. put up his hand with a flourish, silencing Septimus. “I already put it on the posters. Twelve looks more daring than seven.”

“What about—,” said Septimus.

“I don’t care. If you don’t like it, why don’t you leave?” his brother replied.

“Leave?” Septimus stood up and screwed up his face, trying to cover his hurt with a mask of anger.

P.T. had always been their father’s favorite. Their father John inherited his grandfather’s old scrapbook pasted with P.T. Barnum memorabilia—circus bills, stolid photographs of unsmiling men in suit jackets, postcard drawings of illusionists and mediums—and he’d treasured it long after his grandfather had hightailed it off with a waitress from Tucson in the family’s Chevy in 1910. When John’s wife Lily had popped up a skinny and screaming child in 1936, John cracked open the musty book and an uncommon smile and named the boy P.T., a boy who was supposed to love the circus, the one to smile at the clowns, to be scared of the funhouse mirrors, to eat cotton candy until his little stomach bulged. But it was Septimus who loved the circus. John expected Septimus to be the second son, but Septimus smiled at the clowns, was terrified by the funhouse mirrors, ate cotton candy until he had to nap off his illness on the red benches of the big top. His father never noticed. Septimus was his mother’s child, and until she died from pneumonia on one bleak January

afternoon, she rubbed Septimus' sugar-swollen belly as her husband taught his first son how to make a pony jump through a flaming hoop.

"I've never really enjoyed having such an effeminate pansy around the place anyway," P.T. replied, turning his hand around to examine his perfectly filed nails and lotioned skin.

"I'm not a pansy," murmured Septimus, looking at himself in the shiny finish in his black shoes. His pale skin meshed theatrically against the deep black of his eyes and eyebrows, and the pink, rather girlish blush of his cheeks. With his long black moustache, the plumpness of his lips, and the deep cleft in his chin, he was quite unbeknownst to himself a staggeringly attractive man.

"I beg to differ."

"What do you mean?" Septimus stood up now, clenching his fists at his sides, the muscles of his forearms straining against the lining inside his jacket.

"My wittle bwother is kissing the bearded lady," P.T. grabbed Septimus on either side of his face.

Septimus slapped his brother's hand away, and glared into his brother's eyes. "You don't know anything."

"I know everything about it, you little queer," P.T. spit onto the dirt, turning it a deep rust color and making motes of dust rise into the air. "You think that the tightrope walkers don't talk?"

Septimus' face burned, and his head felt like it was spinning off his neck and rising to the top of the circus tent.

“And you behave like nobody knows what the bearded lady has underneath his caftan. How many ladies with full beards do you know hanging around Chicago?” P.T. said, turning away from his brother and tipping over the podium to pound on the unpainted underside. “By any means, it makes me ill.” He turned back to his brother and lowered the corners of mouth, and flaring his nostrils like he was about to vomit. “And I want you to get out.”

“This is my circus, too!” Septimus stood up, the floor becoming looser and looser underneath his feet.

“I can't have my faggoty brother hanging around here,” P.T. strode closer to his brother, put his face next to Septimus', and pushed him.

Septimus staggered back, head drooped. “I'm not a...” Septimus swallowed.

“Faggot?”

Septimus chewed on his bottom lip.

“I hope I don't have to have you arrested for perversion,” P.T. said.

“This is all very convenient for you, isn't it?”

“So you admit it?” P.T. laughed and unzipped the pouch of money he kept around his middle. He pulled out three hundred dollar bills and handed them to Septimus. “Go.”

Septimus lowered his eyebrows, and crossed his arms, and looked at his brother.

P.T. shook the money at Septimus. “Go,” he repeated.

Septimus grabbed the money and strode quickly out of the Big Top, his figure casting long-legged shadows onto the dirt of ring three and into the bleacher's deep corners where peanut shells had been swept into messy stacks. He stamped behind the tent through greenery and dented beer cans to his trailer. He didn't own much of value, but he was a hoarder, and could only fit the necessities in his suitcase. He felt like his soul was being ripped from his chest when he had to leave behind nine years of *Chicago Tribune* back issues, receipts from the last three years of take-out from his favorite burger joint, his dead mother's collection of plastic-eyed fox tails, and his childhood bunny, Mr. Crane. Still, with angry bile seeping into his throat, he threw his trick flowers and a top-hat into his battered suitcase, grabbed his gold cage full of doves, and walked to the trailer next door.

With a heart that beat more and more erratically in his ears as he crossed the small margin between their dwellings, Septimus creaked open the door. A heavy



smell of incense hit him as he pushed aside a purple curtain hiding the main living area of the trailer. He sat at his dressing table, a white ornate number square in the middle of the room, braiding her long beard. Heavy pillows in lush oranges and pinks lined the floor, posters and photographs from his hometown of Akron covered the plastic walls, and an alphabetized collection of gothic novels in heavy leather-bound editions sat on a squat bookshelf in the corner. None of it distracted him from his dark eyes, though, which were lined almost completely around the tear duct in the blackest kohl.

His eyes made Septimus remember when he'd kissed him once behind a tree. Stan had been sitting underneath a scraggly willow in a pink tie-dyed caftan reading *The Castle of Otranto* and dribbling juice from an overripe peach down his beard onto the yellowed pages. Septimus sat next to him, read a few sentences to himself, and knew then he was the smartest person he'd ever known.

"You're the smartest person I've ever known," Septimus said, squinting at him in the sun light that cut through the tree's branches. The afternoon light, Stan's big knuckles, and the illicit glimpse of the thick tendrils of black hair on his tanned leg had made Septimus woozy. Septimus kissed him then, the hairs of Stan's moustache tickling his cheeks. Septimus remembered now how he pushed Stan back against the trunk of the tree, the force of Stan's lips making Septimus' hands disconnect from his body so that he could barely hold onto Stan's fingers. Septimus shook then, and he

began to shake now, his knees bouncing against the smooth fabric on the inside of his slacks. He loved Stan, the bearded lady whose stage name was Sabine the Seductive—part of the fifty-cent Freak Fracas out back.

“Hi Septimus,” Stan said, tying a piece of red cord three times around the end of the beard. Stan’s voice was low, and when he spoke, Septimus thought of the huge bleats of the tugboats ferrying across Lake Michigan. His voice excited Septimus with exotic dreams of leaving Chicago, like when he was a child and he imagined the boats on the river chugging to Peru, the Austro-Hungarian Empire or New Jersey.

“Hi,” Septimus’ voice squeaked. He was still young, and inexperienced with beautiful men. The sweat from his armpits was soaking through his suit jacket. When he was a little boy, he slipped from his family’s trailer and parted the silk curtains of the late night freak show. Brenda the Bewhiskered was singing onstage in a long red dress, her beard curled into swirling ringlets. He’d fallen in love. After that, he loved bearded ladies’ hulking shoulders, their flowing moustaches, their heaving bosoms.

“Uh, ‘scuse me. Hi.” Septimus swallowed hard, the wetness behind his eyes threatening to take over his whole body.

“What’s the matter?” Sabine turned on her stool.

Septimus looked blank, and plucked his lips together. To avoid his eyes, Septimus slammed his cage down onto the floor, making his dove, Jane Fonda, flutter around inside it.

“Did you want something? Or did you just come here for a chat?”

“Hm? Oh. Here. Come. Yes, here I did come,” he stammered.

“Right,” she looked at him, one eyebrow cocked into a spit curl pasted on her forehead. “I know you did here come. You’re here, aren’tcha? Did you want something?”

“Yes. Well,” Septimus cleared his throat and unbuttoned the top of his shirt. “My brother kicked me out of the circus. He found out about us.”

Stan gasped, his mouth gaping. “So you’re leavin’?” he asked, sinking onto one of the large pillows on the floor.

“Yes,” Septimus said. “My brother and I are through, so I’ve gotta leave here. But I came here to ask you,” he held up his hand, “let me tell you that this is as far-fetched and nuts as I get, but I have to ask...”

“Yes?” Stan looked at him still.

“I know you’ve got a great life here and a fantastic act, but do you wanna come with me?” Septimus’ heart beat wildly, and he felt his throat closing up, threatening to leave him here, throttled, in the middle of the living room. “You really don’t have to, but I thought kissing you was great. It’s just that, y’see, I kind of, well, love yo—aw, nev—”

Stan kissed him. Men, Septimus learned that afternoon, are very predictable. He ripped the suitcase from Septimus’ hand, hurled it aside and piled his flesh onto

Septimus' bony frame. We could continue with the scene, but the details of their most epic love would be made paltry by any description laid out on this humble page.

Suffice it to say, whatever happened on those imported pillows made Stan give up scaring children at the freak show for good.

“So, I suppose we should find our way out of this place before my brother comes after us with a shotgun. Which he might,” said Septimus, lacing his shoes back up after they were through.

“Yes,” said Stan, re-tying his Tiki Hawaiian muumuu. “I will only be a minute.”

He packed up her colorful clothes into a tall suitcase on wheels, cocooning a few of his volumes into the voluminous fabric. Septimus took his bearded lady's large hand with its knuckles that protruded outside his own fingers to walk away from the grounds. A trickle of sadness that had been temporarily plugged up with kisses began leaking from the pinprick his brother had poked in his heart. He felt an ancient ache like the one he'd felt when his mother died, right beneath the place where his heart burned when he ate too much Stromboli on Sundays and had to unbutton his slacks. The pair walked away from the circus' dirt lot and found a cheap boarding house to dump their possessions for the night.

Stan wouldn't let Septimus curl his long fingers into each other, hang up his white shirt, and sit, staring at the blank white wall underneath the peeling, floral

wallpaper. Instead, Stan took him to the amusement park. They made strange, and strangely fitting pair—this tall young man in his tuxedo and this plump girl in his flamboyant costume of crazily-printed silk and feathers, his red hair piled onto her head in lopsided, messy bunches. They walked calmly down the street as children on bicycles screeched their feet onto the sidewalk to gawk, and mothers halted with their grey prams to stare.

At the park, the pair found the Ferris wheel immediately, its frame hulking high above the thick growing oak trees and manicured lawns that surrounded it. Septimus took Stan's hand to help him, into his seat, and he settled in next to him, the bar lowering itself over their heads. The pair sat in silence, watching the lights of a nearby carousel flicker and the dim bulbs of the park's old-fashioned streetlights illuminate as the sinking sun shot half-hearted streaks of orange into the darkening sky. Cars honking, vendors shouting the prices of their hotdogs, birds chirping, and cotton-candy-sticky children screaming faded as their compartment floated above the city.

"It's going to be all right, you know," Stan said. His heavily lined eyes with their long, fake lashes turned down at the edges to match Septimus'.

"Sure. But he's my brother. And now it's over," Septimus gulped out over a rising clot of phlegm in his throat.

“I know,” Stan said, smoothing a strand of Septimus’ Brylcreemed hair back into place behind his ear.

“It’s over between us now, forever,” said Septimus, falling onto his chest.

“Perhaps,” Stan said, smoothing his beard contemplatively. “But perhaps he was never supposed to be your family after all.”

The car reached its highest peak. They could see the buildings of the downtown for a moment, all hard angles and glass overtaking the red and brown brick buildings. Stan smiled down at Septimus wrapped in his warmth, and Septimus, huddled underneath the comfortable sway of Stan’s upper arm, smiled up at him. And just like that, they were.

## #2: Tracy and the Hungry Red Dirt

A baby elephant in a blue hat looped its trunk into the tail of a bigger elephant and paraded around the circus' center ring. Dropping her mother's hand, Tracy clapped her sticky, pudgy hands together in glee. Tracy, high on sugar and the noxious odor of sweat and animal filth, felt like a huge balloon was getting blown up in her chest there in bleacher three, pulling her towards the center ring. Tracy's brother Pat, a fifth-grader to Tracy's second grade, was as excited as she was, pumping his fist and whooping like they were at a football game. Their mother, Miranda, held her children back, exasperatedly pushing Tracy down whenever she would stand up and bump the fat man sitting in front of them with their boxes of popcorn. The creases in the centers of Miranda's khakis were wilting and the precise bend in the collar of her shirt was scratching her neck unpleasantly. That day was no exception; Tracy was never able to sit still. Tracy was really a tiny thing, smaller than the tiny girls in her class with her delicate wrists and fragile legs, rather birdlike with her upturned nose and squinty eyes. Because of skidding on the carpet, her legs were permanently scabbed at the knees, and her skin was terribly pale with elderly-looking blue veins and tiny red scratches from running into sticks and bushes. Her mother

worried what people would think of her poor little heathen, and often wished Tracy liked ballet instead.

Miranda sighed. Miranda worried about the mistreatment of the elephants, but was also very concerned about the sanitation of the red painted benches, sticky from years of spilled shaved ices and sodas, on her little girl's behind. She looked over at Tracy, imagining the germs festering on her inadequately covered legs. Rubbing a thumb up and down her fingertips anxiously, Miranda pushed Tracy up from her seat and pulled a package of disinfectant wipes from a sealed plastic bag in her purse and mopped the thickly painted bench beneath Tracy. Tracy didn't notice, and knocked her popcorn into the man's curvaceous back again.

"Ma'am, do you mind controlling your daughter?" the man turned around to glare at Miranda. "Some of us are trying to watch the show."

Miranda finished mopping. "Tracy. Sit down," she hissed. "I'm terribly sorry. She will behave." He turned back to the show. "Tracy, you will behave. Do you understand me?"

Tracy nodded distractedly, not turning away from the show for a moment, her mouth in a wide-open grin. It was times like these when Miranda decided she would never leave the house again.



“Tracy, Pat, please sit still,” whispered Miranda, tugging on her children’s hands. They both brushed their mothers’ hands off.

The lights went down as the elephants finished their act and Tracy and Pat pulled out the light-up toys their mother bought them and waved them along with the other kids. Tracy could feel the balloons in everybody’s chests expanding around her, lifting up their collective excitement. “Whee-heel!” she shouted.

Carrying a paunch too large for his spindly legs, a skinny man, his wrinkles lessened by caked on white make-up and black eyeliner, walked to the center ring. Loosened jowls drooped over the starched collar of his white button-down, and his faded black top hat was punched in at the top. The whole circus was dingy at the corners like that old man and his top hat; piles of old peanuts collected dust and cobwebs at the corners of the bleachers, white sections of the big top tarp had mildewed into brown splotches, pastel band-aids and dirtied circus programs lay half buried underneath the gravel and dirt inside the arena.

“Ladies and gentleman, boys and girls! Welcome to Chicago land’s circus of the 21<sup>st</sup> century!” the ringmaster bellowed from his platform, throwing his hands into the air and splaying his fingers. “I am your ringmaster, Septimus!”

Even from the 20<sup>th</sup> row, patrons could see the reflection of the man’s shaking hands highlighted by a spotlight on the dirt floor. “I’d like to introduce to you to the

high-flyingest birds in the sky! The one, the only Soaring Seagulls!” he shouted, walking slowly away as the spotlight moved from him to two acrobats in sparkly costumes. Both looked young, their white teeth sparkling in the glare of the spotlights. Tracy watched enraptured, young joy in her baby-tooth smile; she decided they were giant people birds, and she knew that they were going to fly around and make everybody gasp. The Soaring Seagulls held their clasped hands high in the air, their arms spread out on either side of them like a balance. Dramatic fanfare brass music began blasting from the speakers as the Seagulls bowed together.

“Mommy,” said Tracy, scooting closer to her mother. “Is that man going to catch that lady?” Her child’s eyes widened in fear as the pair nimbly ascended the shaking rope.

Her mother sighed, nervous that the acrobats’ glamorous costumes would change her daughter’s aspirations away from being a doctor and towards being a floozy dancer. She said in a weary voice, “Yes, sweetheart, he will catch her like the monkeys swinging at the zoo.”

“So she won’t hurt herself like I did when I fell off the monkey bars, will she?” Tracy looked at her mother with a tiny bit of fear on her face.

“No, darling. These people are highly trained trapeze professionals. It’s safe. I promise. Now you just hush and watch,” her mother patted Tracy’s knee, unknowing,

but always conscious that the weight of Tracy's universe was about to swing onto her shoulders.

Tracy nodded and watched the show again. The trapeze set-up consisted of two shaky-looking wooden platforms and a pair of bars on two wires connected from the ceiling. The music intensified with a heavy bass drum beat and a banging timpani as the pair stepped onto the main platform. The man bird sat on the beam and swung in between the two platforms, holding onto the beam with his thighs and stretched out his hands behind his head for the lady bird to grab. She grabbed the other bar and swung out near him, spinning from it into a double somersault that ended with him catching her two hands effortlessly. The audience clapped tepidly, anticipating the pair's next stunt. The man swung the lady bird back to the first platform.

The ringmaster's disembodied voice, sounding like the men who hocked used cars on the radio, rang out over the music. "Miss Seagull will now perform something so fabulous it has never been seen within these walls," he boomed. "A triple back flip with a spinning turn!"

Tracy and the rest of the audience "oohed" and clapped. Pat high-fived and then low-fived his sister.

Miss Seagull preened for the audience, putting her arms up and spreading her fingers out like the ladies Tracy saw on the TV game shows. The music cut to a drum roll as Miss Seagull sat on her bar and began swinging on it, faster and faster to match

his speed, and hanging with her knees over the bar and her arms outstretched in preparation for the leap.

Miss Seagull somersaulted into the air and went round and round and round three times. The audience was deadly silent. The last time around, she turned her body in a ballet-like spin in the air, her fingertips gracefully closed into each other, and held her hand out for her partner to catch it. He grabbed it, and the audience burst out into applause.

But then it happened. Miss Seagull somersaulted into the air and went round and round and round three times. The audience was deadly silent. The last time around, she turned her body in a ballet-like spin in the air, her fingertips closed into each other and graceful. She then held out her arm for her partner to catch it. Their fingertips brushed, but somehow she veered slightly off center and he couldn't get a good grasp of her whole hand. A great gasp—larger than the amphitheater, larger than the city, larger than the universe in Tracy's head—rose up in the crowd as the Seagull fell down and down, through the shoddy safety net, and SPLAT onto the red dirt.

There she lay, crumpled. She looked very small, like a little girl in a tarnished party dress smeared with ice cream, her little bow wilted on her deflated hair, thought Tracy as she stared at the bird on the ground. But this time her party dress was ruined with dirt and blood, not with anything as washable as cake and ice cream.

A great hush that seemed to last three-hundred years huddled onto the auditorium. Miranda grabbed her children's hands and they rushed along with the swarming crowd of crying children and scalded looking adults towards the exits. Snowcones and cotton candies were dropped to be trampled by confused small feet, to be eaten by the red dirt and sawdust along with the Seagull. The other Seagull still sat with his hands on the two wires like a child on a swing set, limply swinging back and forth with the greatest of ease on his flying trapeze.

Tracy was silent as she was dragged from the Big Top, knocking shivering shoulders with her brother.

### # 3: Sabine's Seductive Sponge Cake

"Guido, I'm married," Septimus said, dropping a huge bag of sugar on the counter. It was two years after Stan and Septimus were married, and the honeymoon stage had definitely ended. They were broke and worn out.

"Eh?" Guido cupped his hand around one ear. He was deaf in the other. Guido was thick-shouldered and round-stomached man, and the salamis hanging above his head that disappeared at an alarming frequency weren't helping matters.

"MARRIED," Septimus enunciated the words in Guido's face, leaning his torso closer to him. He gestured towards the cash register to try and speed the process.

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Septimus had been married for two years now. After they'd left the circus together, they'd gone to the clerk's office, Septimus in his long coat and tails with his moustache meticulously combed, and Stan in a white dress with lace-trimmed collars and cuffs. After their marriage, they moved into a little apartment in the Loop of Chicago. It was a crummy place—the margarine-colored paint was chipped off at the corners where the spiders lived, the wood floor was scuffed and worn in places, and the frilly paisley curtains were clogged with so much smog blown from the tugboats on Lake Michigan they hung like dead ducks on the windowsills.

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Guido pulled his buxom daughter away from her task of rearranging cigarette boxes behind the counter, displaying her with his hands on her shoulders. “Stephanie needs a nice American boy, an Illinois boy, a good Chicago hotdog boy,” Guido said. Stephanie looked down at the floor with a little smile lifting her red cheeks. “Eh? She’s a very good Italian cook. Stromboli for you on Sundays. You’ll have to unbutton your pants.”

Septimus sighed and nodded. After losing the stable income of the circus, he and Stan had to run three businesses to make enough money to pay for their little apartment. Stan got out his set of tools and set to work building himself a little wooden cart with a white silk parasol. He painted “Sabine’s Seductive Sponge Cake” on the front of the cart in pink glittery paint, and pushed it onto Michigan Avenue during peak lunch time hours. Secretaries in cat’s eye glasses and low level mailroom employees in poorly tied bowties, all intoxicated by the smell of sugar and the complexities of a woman with a beard, frequented his stand. Stan cut his customers large slices of cake, wrapped them in wax paper, and smelled them languidly, his painted eyes half open with pleasure as he sniffed from the bottom of the slice and worked his way up. That was the seductive part, and it sold a lot of cake. Septimus was in charge of buying all the ingredients at the Italian grocer down the street.

“I’ve got to get home to my WIFE, Guido,” said Septimus. “Can you please ring up the sugar?”

“Suit yourself,” Guido shrugged, and opened the cash register, putting Septimus’ cash and change into the proper compartments. Stephanie dipped her head and pushed her hair behind her ears as Septimus raised a hand in a goodbye, returning to sorting the cigarette packages from a big box at her feet. Septimus pushed open the door and walked out onto the street, the big bag of sugar under his arm. The sweltering heat of the Chicago summer swooped onto him, heaving down onto his forehead and shoulders. The sun dimmed into a hazy hum between the brick buildings and trees of his neighborhood. He nodded to a pair of women in gauzy dresses and sandals pushing strollers next to him on the sidewalk as he got into step a few paces behind them.

Septimus was constantly rushing to keep up with all the businesses, running to buy sugar here, pick up a bird from the veterinarian there, scooting in late to his weekly meetings of the Chicago land Magicians, Mediums, and the Otherwise Inclined. He thought he and Stan were financially stable, and his mental health was deteriorating, so he’d decided he wanted to quit two of the businesses to focus on his magician’s craft. The only problem was he was nervous to tell Stan. He pushed his tongue into a back molar and strummed his fingers on the bag of sugar, making miniscule motes of flour from the storeroom of Guido’s shop swoop into the air. He performed his magic show at bar mitzvahs and weddings and set up a little black tent behind Madame Georgine’s strip club for stripper mothers and show-going fathers to



drop their kids off on Saturday nights. But they also had the dove releasing business at weddings. Stan would pull the dove cages on a little red wagon onto the subway into the wedding reception, recite some chant that he'd made up that sounded vaguely Middle Eastern, and then release the birds into the sky. After he'd leave, and the birds, Rajah and Shivani, would return to the apartment in an hour. It was simple, and occasionally there was a large amount of money. Septimus didn't feel that releasing doves was his life's calling, unlike sawing little people in half, which he thought was.

Today was the day he decided to break the news to Stan. He walked up to their second floor apartment, and put the sugar into the pantry. He set the table with a white embroidered tablecloth and pulled the pork roast he'd been baking all day out of the oven. He placed gleaming candlesticks on the table, and took Stan's favorite triple layer raspberry white cake from the ice box. The way to a man's heart is through his stomach, Septimus knew. He lit the candlesticks and put the pork roast on the table. Three guillotine windows showed a darkened sky, and Stan got up from the table to close them.

"Septimus?" said Stan, opening the entry door and moving into the front hall. He unwrapped a plastic cap from the top of his wig and put his raincoat on a coat rack. "It's started raining." Stan walked closer to the table. "What is all this?"

“Just dinner,” Septimus replied, rushing away from the window to give Stan a quick kiss. “Pork roast and raspberry cake.” Septimus picked up a fork and knife from the table and cut a hearty piece of meat for Stan. He placed the meat on Stan’s plate.

“Lovely,” said Stan, sitting down.

Septimus cut himself a piece of meat and sat across from Stan, and smiled at him.

“How was your day, Septimus?” asked Stan, cutting a piece of dripping meat and putting it into his mouth.

“Fine. I bought the sugar that you needed from Guido.”

“Good. Thank you.”

“Why have you been outside?” asked Septimus.

“I was just walking around and thinking,” said Stan, chewing the meat and fingering the edge of the embroidered tablecloth.

“Oh,” said Septimus. “About what?”

Stan paused. “Well, we have a lot of businesses right now, and I don’t know if having so many is really the best business decision.”

“I agree!” shouted Septimus, leaping from his chair and running across to the other side of the table to kiss Stan. “Oh, my dearest, I don’t know how you always do it. It’s like you read my mind!”

Stan looked surprised, his lips curled into an annoyed smile. “Well, I wish you had let me finish. I don’t know that you’ll be pleased with what I have to say. We need to really work on the sponge cake business,” said Stan firmly, nodding his head after the final syllable.

“We need to really work on The Magic Show,” said Septimus in unison with Stan, nodding his head after the final syllable.

The two men glared at each other.

“I can’t believe that you think that,” shouted Stan. “My sponge cake business is my life.”

“And my magic show is mine,” Septimus yelled back.

“Well, if that’s how you feel, why don’t you go live with your rabbits? They’re obviously more important to you than I am!”

“And your stupid fat secretaries are obviously more important to you than I am.”

“Maybe they are!” Stan screamed, slamming his flat fist on the table, making their fine china shake.

“Fine!” Septimus yelled, storming into their bedroom and throwing some things into a duffel bag. He stomped through the living room, slamming the door on his way out.

That disagreement was what unhinged their partnership. Stan would keep the apartment-- he'd decorated it and what did Septimus know about septic tanks or ruffled curtains anyway? Septimus again was set packing.

Septimus schlepped down the Chicago street that once held his home, looking back only for a second through the sequined curtains. He found a room he could afford on his magician's salary and bumbled up the boardinghouse stairs with the little bunny leading the way. Once inside, he stretched his long, black-trousered legs out on the comforter-less bed and folded his hands and thought about Stan. He looked like he was thinking about Stan while waiting for a bus.

Later that night, he went to Madame Georgine's. People knew him there; he could drink some vodka. Maybe he could bag a real lady this time. He was cloudy about what to do next, so, like many before and after him, he decided to get drunk.

He walked into the windowless joint, smoky and filled with middle-aged, grey suited men staring at the women as if they were watching the laundry tumble dry. Septimus walked into the room and up to the bar. The wooden countertop was covered with vampy, maroon lamps, and the bartender wore black garters on his biceps. It was a good imitation of class. And Septimus was doing a good imitation of calm. He folded his long legs onto the surrounding rung of a maroon swivel chair at the bar and put his elbows on the countertop. With his severe black moustache and

blue feathered fedora, he looked mysterious and slightly sinister like a mobster or an undertaker.

“I’d like a vodka on the rocks,” he said to the bartender, tapping his fingers on the countertop.

“All right sir,” the bartender grabbed a glass.

Septimus was trying to persuade himself into believing it was all very romantic. He swiveled his chair to face the dancers and leaned back against the bar, his arms draped over its side. He watched the ladies in their heavy black eyeliner and manicured curls dance on the stage. He liked a wide-shouldered blonde named Janeane. She would always give him a wink when she dropped her son Jack at his magic show behind the club.

He didn’t remember Jack on his third drink. The room had become very warm, wilting his moustache into a more approachable shape. The smog that polluted the air became like a comforting misty haze. He imagined that Janeane would walk over to him-- ten-feet tall in her high-heeled shoes-- park one foot on the railing of the stool between his legs, push her heaving chest into his face, and let him put his head on her bosom.

On round number four, Septimus began to feel slovenly. Hot, he loosened his tie and the first button of his shirt. He grabbed a pair of wire spectacles from his pocket to try to improve his focus.

Janeane thought he looked irresistible. On her break, she ran backstage and mopped the sweat from her forehead and from underneath her arms. She dabbed perfume behind her ears and on her wrists. Then she, ten-feet tall in her high-heeled shoes, walked over to Septimus. He saw her coming, and re-buttoned the top button on his button down and smoothed the sides of his pants. Her cheeks were flushed from the dancing, and her chin-length hair was frizzing a bit, creating a messy halo around her face against the bright lights of the stage. She continued walking towards him, parking one foot on the railing of the stool between his legs, and pushed her heaving cleavage into his face. He could see a mole rising and falling on top of her clavicle.

“Hey,” she murmured, pulling his face into her cleavage, placing his right ear on her bosom, and stroking his hair, leaving new paths in its grease with the tips of her fingers.

“Hey Janeane,” Septimus mumbled back, his lips buried near her left nipple, tears and mucus clogging most of his throat.

Janeane felt a familiar, but all too infrequent, throbbing at this attractive man’s lips on her breast. She didn’t have a lot of time for men. Jack, her son, was a wild kid, jumping on his bed and getting his damn muddy footprints on his cowboy comforter, demanding that she watch him turn his grill cheese sandwich into a battle-ship that had to fly into the Left Galaxy, his mouth. Her friend Bonnie had given her a couple

of swigs of gin from a metal canister backstage, and, for a woman who rarely drank, the alcohol made her feel powerful and brash and in need of sex. She went up to Bernie the cash man and got her wages for the night, grabbed Septimus and a cab outside to take Septimus back to her place.

Septimus fell asleep on the way home, his head on her chest. He'd needed a mother's comfort since his break-up and he'd found it with somebody who was at least *somebody's* mother, so he curled his lanky body like a four-year old's on Janeane. She figured he was just too pissed drunk and would realize his lucky surprise after a cup of strong coffee and a glass of water.

She said goodnight to the nanny and sat Septimus down at folding table covered with a floral table cloth and made him drink two glasses of water while she heated a pot of coffee on the stovetop. Jack was blissfully sleeping, and she knew that he would be out of bed all too soon. Two mugs down, Janeane led Septimus to the bedroom. The gleam of her breasts drew Septimus along—he wanted to fall asleep on them again—but when she removed her bustier, Septimus knew her intentions did not match his own.

So he obliged her. He owed it to her after all—he knew her kid, he'd fallen asleep on her breasts, she'd paid for his cab fare. Afterwards, he got to sleep on her bosom, and she stroked his soaked hair as he fell asleep to dreams of Stan.

The next day Septimus woke up with the spins and the runs, the hurls. He went back to his little boarding house room and sat sipping black coffee in a little white Styrofoam cup in his high socks, shiny black shoes, and boxers. He felt like he was going to cry, the tears lurking behind his face, and terribly dirty. He wanted to soak in a bath for hours. Alcohol had been his downfall. He sat at the little table by the window, looking out from underneath its pull blinds, missing the shiny duck curtains at his apartment.

He put on his long dark trench coat and pulled the suitcase the blocks back to his apartment. He bought a bouquet of flowers and a Chicago-dog from the vendor on the street. After the first knock, Stan, looking beautiful in his muumuu, pulled Septimus through the threshold and onto the shoddy couch in the living room, strewing flowers, Chicago-dog, trench coat and muumuu on the way.

“I missed you,” Stan whispered as he kissed Septimus.

“I missed you, too,” said Septimus, a lump rising in his throat and threatening to leave him there, throttled, in their living room.

“We can fix this,” said Stan, wrapping his arms around Septimus. And they did. Stan sold his sponge cake at Septimus’ magic shows. Septimus pushed thoughts of Janeane out of his head, burrowing his face into the stubble on Stan’s neck.

A year later, a bundle arrived on the front stoop.



#### #4: Pat and the Biggest Muthafucker in the Forest

“Hey guys,” Tracy and Pat’s father said, his hands jammed into his pockets.

“Hi, Dad,” they replied in unison, pausing with their plastic milk cartons streaked red with long trails of mulberry juice on the inside. Pat felt more electricity between himself and his father when they were alone; they talked about football, built things out of old parts, fished. His father had grown up in a small town in Iowa, where men were men and women were women. Even though Tracy was in the fourth grade, he thought of her as a breakable baby doll, her tiny wrists as fragile as twigs.

“Tracy, one of these days I’m going to have to start keeping the boys off of ya, eh? Yowza,” he punched her playfully in the shoulder.

Tracy looked confused.

“Wha—Dad, c’mon, she’s only seven,” said Pat, blushing.

Pat wrote angsty love poems about his heart being ripped out and stamped upon by a dark haired girl named Susan who sat across from him in 5<sup>th</sup> period English. Pat protected his little sister when he remembered, which was some of the time, and hung out with her when his friends from down the street weren’t building skate ramps from plywood and concrete slabs in the cul-de-sac in front of their houses. He thought it was weird the way she systematically played house with a tight-lipped expression on her face, like a housewife who wound up wanting more, but didn’t

have enough imagination to figure out what more was. Pat liked the kid, though he wouldn't admit to his buddies he liked a girl who was visibly shaken at the sound of the washing machine's rinse cycle. Pat didn't know why she reacted so differently to the Seagull's death than he did. He wanted to be a trapeze artist now; he climbed trees, balanced on high ledges, proved it to himself whenever he could that he was invincible.

"I know. I'm just teasing her," their father said.

"Where'd you get that one, Dad? *Home Improvement*?"

"Oh, I don't know," Dustin defended himself, flinching slightly. "It's just one of my own zingers!" He regained his hearty voice.

"Zingers. Jesus, Dad, who says that?"

"Pat, don't swear," muttered their father. "It's rude. I guess I won't use 'zingers' anymore, if it embarrasses you. I'll leave you kids alone." Pat felt his heart sink. "Have fun camping, Trace."

Pat and Tracy picked up their mulberry containers and small bags full of marshmallows and chocolate, small mess kit for cooking things over the fire, a tent, and their two sleeping bags. They walked in silence, both feeling strange about their father, up the hilly path to their usual campsite, the late summer sun shining through the trees in rays onto them. They reached their campsite—a clearing with a fire pit of big rocks and charcoal, black debris surrounded by a ring of big logs. Tracy gathered

some sticks and leaves and Pat used his dad's jacked lighter to start them on fire. Pat had a natural aptitude for putting stuff together, so he assembled the tent easily. They roasted the weenies and made S'mores and watched the sun start to lower beneath the hills. Tracy became jumpier and jumpier at the squirrels rustling dried leaves in the brush. Birds chirping made her shoulder blades nearly knock together and kids on bicycles ringing their buzzers made her knees quiver in her jeans.

After night fell, Pat decided to freak out his jumpy sister with a ghost story. Their father had told it to him when he was small. Then, once his eyes adjusted, he'd spent the night watching the shadows change on the walls of their tent.

"You see these cigarette butts here, Tracy?" asked Pat, biting the S'more and getting the sticky marshmallow all around his mouth.

"Yeah," Tracy leaned over on the log she sat on to examine the butts on the ground.

"And you see that old blanket and foil over there?"

"Yeah. Mom says they're the bums'. They live up here."

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The night after their father had told him the ghost story, Pat couldn't sleep. He'd tugged on his father's hand until his father had woken up and pulled himself out of the sleeping bag next to his son's. Dustin held his son and stroked the boy's hair, telling him that it wasn't ghosts, but travelling bums riding trains to nowhere who

smoked old cigarettes in these woods, roasting their meager meals wrapped in foil in the flames. The next morning, Pat and his father agreed with their complicit silence that they wouldn't discuss it.

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"That's what she wants you to think Tracy. She knows you're afraid of everything!" Pat said, trying to provoke his sister.

Tracy looked up from drawing a line in the dirt on the ground with her finger, and didn't respond.

"Anyway, it's really a tramper ghost that lives in these woods!"

"Oh," said Tracy, looking up and nodding seriously as if she was being initiated into a big kid secret.

"Legend has it that a long time a homeless man named Big Johnny the Tramp came into these woods with his pack on a stick. Big Johnny the Tramp was a mean, mean man. He would sneak into all the houses in the neighborhood and take the dogs from all the families, and roast them over the fire and eat them!" he leaned in towards the fire, his hands curled into claws, casting shadows of himself into the depths of the woods where only the light from the campfire shone.

"Oh no!" whispered Tracy, huddling into herself and shaking.

"The dogs from Whistling Pines, our neighborhood, were so delicious," he continued. "that he wanted to stay in the neighborhood, venturing out in the night to jump fences. One day, a dad named Dastin--"

"Dastin?"

"Yeah, that was what Dad told me his name was. Whatever." Pat broke out of his thick and deep storyteller's voice to scold Tracy. "Dastin saw Big Johnny the Tramp jump over his neighbor's fence and grab the Fenstersteins' poodle, Lorenzo!"

"No," said Tracy, retrieving her worn stuffed bunny from her backpack and methodically stroking its furless ear.

"Yes. Dastin grabbed his pistol from the back porch and followed Big Johnny right to these very woods. He was very quiet as he walked back to Johnny's camp out, this very spot, and when Johnny pulled out his knife to skin the animal alive then--  
KABOOM!"

Tracy's head met her knee and she fell into a little huddled pile in front of her log.

"Johnny was dead instantly, and Dastin grabbed the poodle. He became the hero of the neighborhood, so people always invited him to barbeques," Pat shrugged.

"But after that, Big Johnny's ghost started haunting this very campsite looking for little dogs or LITTLE GIRLS!"

Tracy started twitching hysterically, her arms flailing and her head spasming on her neck. Pat didn't expect his sister to react this way. He put his arms around Tracy, and stroked her hair until she calmed. He sighed. The year following that day at the circus had completely transformed his sister; she never laughed anymore, she rarely cried. Mostly, she sat, staring.

Long after the story was over, Tracy sat huddled into herself on the log, staring into the fire. Pat sighed again. His sister was pretty boring, and definitely didn't say much. She didn't know anything about skateboarders or long-haired girls named Susan. He could tell Tracy how more than "gettin' wit' her" or "bangin' her," Pat just wanted to hold her hand.

"Hey Trace," said Pat, throwing down the twig he'd tried to whittle, "I'm bored. I think we should climb a goddamn tree."

"I don't really want to. But I'll watch you."

"What's happened to you?" Pat scratched his cheek. "You used to love this stuff."

Tracy shrugged.

"Okay Trace. But, uh," he looked off into the distance, squaring his shoulders. "if you wanna, like, talk, you can, uh, talk to me." He spit.

"Okay," said Tracy, looking up at Pat.

“Cool. Well, if you’re gonna be wuss as usual,” he shoved her over on the log, “I’m gonna climb the biggest muthafuckin’ tree in this whole goddamn forest,” he said, trying out his curse vocabulary and his unusual power to yell it in public. “I will be a trapeze god!”

Tracy giggled. “Okay, Pat.”

Pat started running deeper and deeper into the forest, looking for the biggest tree he could find. His sister followed a few steps behind him. He could hear her breathing grow more labored as they ran deeper into the forest. The trees were becoming blacker and blacker outlines against the streaks of pink and orange in the darkening sky. Pat was alone without his parents, he was in charge of his sister—all his mother’s warnings to not do anything stupid and to set a good example flew out the window along with the good sense of the poetry-writing romantic in him.

Then Pat found it. The huge tree with a trunk as wide as his torso, a tree so tall he couldn’t even see the tips of its branches from the ground.

“This beast is sweet, Tracy!” shouted Pat, rubbing his hands against its bark.

“It’s really tall,” said Tracy, straining her neck backwards to try and see the top.

“I know. Sweet!” said Pat, turning on his flashlight, scanning it up into the dark branches.

“Mom would kill you...so...maybe you shouldn’t go?” Tracy timidly asked.

“Yeah, well. She’s not here and she’s not gonna know,” Pat dismissed her.

Pat handed Tracy his flashlight and instructed her to aim it up into the tree. Using his arms and legs, he shimmed up the girth of the trunk until he reached the lowest branches. He disappeared into the canopy.

Tracy stood on the ground aiming her flashlight as far as she could up into the tree. She leaned into the trunk on her tiptoes trying to give Pat a better view, but the flashlight’s beam only reached the undersides of the tree’s leaves. It was almost completely dark now and Tracy could feel her tics start to intensify with thoughts of tramper ghosts and chattering squirrels.

“Pat,” she yelled, “How are you?”

“Fine,” replied his voice a few seconds later. “It’s dark and I can’t really see much, but it’s sweet up here!”

Up on the high branch, Pat could see the stars and the black sky from in between the shadowed leaves. Shorter trees stood underneath his tree like a canopy and he imagined himself the most famous trapeze artist in the whole world. He let go of the thick trunk of the tree, and kneeling closer to the branch, held out his arms to balance out the heavy weight of his sneakered feet. He walked carefully on the tree branch, but a huge knot, shadowed in the darkness of the night, tripped him up. Before he could even register what happened, he fell from the branch.



A few seconds later, a heavy object only a shade darker than the sky came hurtling down from the sky. It only took a few seconds. At first, Tracy didn't register what the thud was, and jumped back instinctively. Then and only then did she realize the falling, thudding creature was her brother.

"Pat!" she screamed, running to the jumbled-up mass of lanky legs and arms stretched across his face, a foot about his torso, all at angles she had never seen. Tracy rushed over to the place she'd seen him fall. She put her hand on his chest and felt for a temperature at his forehead, like a mother checking her child. She felt an eerie calmness; the world had slowed. Under her flashlight, she saw blood darkening the camouflage of his pants and soaking his hair, the unnatural twist of his ribcage, the little jagged scar you could only see when he twisted his forearm to show you.

"Pat!" she continued to shout. He didn't respond, but instead lay there, the tip of his tongue hanging out the side of his dislocated jaw. Tracy knew she had to get help. "Pat, just stay right there. I'm gonna go get mom."

Tracy ran down the hill at top speed. Her asthma started to make her breath raspy and labored, but she didn't notice. The darkened hills were familiar as she leaped over roots and rocks, a nimble-footed warrior protecting her flock.

She slammed through the back screen porch to the kitchen, where her parents sat eating ice cream and watching the news.

“Tracy? What are you doing here?” her mother asked, her spoon held in mid-air.

“Pat’s hurt,” she wheezed, trying to catch her breath. She needed her inhaler. “Really, really hurt,” she sputtered. “Up the hill, by the fire pit and huge tree. He’s there. With lots of blood,” she managed before falling up the stairs to get her inhaler.

The paramedics came fast and ran the same route, lit with flashlights, up the hill to the place where Pat lay. Tracy’s terrified parents, gripping one another with bloodless hands like claws, flung their middle-aged bodies up the crude board stairs up the hill after the paramedics. Tracy ran behind them, grabbing at the backs of their shirttails and she trailed behind. They put Pat onto a stretcher and latched him in as they heaved his unconscious frame down the stairs.

As they buckled Pat into the ambulance, Tracy’s father picked her up from her bed, one burly arm around her waist, and even though she could walk, she let him so he could feel useful. Men on TV shows could fix up their families with a strongly worded lesson or a punishment in a half hour or less, but all he could do was shoulder his asthmatic daughter to say goodbye to his dying son.

Tracy’s mother sat in the passenger seat in the family’s fast-moving mini-van, tailing the flashing ambulance, and she knew that her son was going to die. Perhaps it was some relief that a mother always knew--at least she could tell him goodbye.

“Mom?” said a small voice from the backseat.

“Yes, Tracy?” said her mother.

“What’s going to happen to Pat?”

Her mother sighed, and sucked in her lip. “I don’t know,” said her mother, a little phlegm in her throat, a little wetness at her eyes.

“Oh,” said an old and wise Tracy, a little phlegm in her throat, a little wetness at her eyes.

## #5: DOCTORS AND OTHER BODY MECHANICS

“So, you’re a doctor. That’s good,” Janeane took a drag on her cigarette, squinting out onto the lake.

“Studying to be,” Clayton replied. “But I still know you shouldn’t smoke.” He grabbed her cigarette from between her fingers and put it out underneath his boot.

“Forceful, like your father,” Janeane looked at him, sitting next to her a bench like just folks, his thin face, his knit scarf, his blonde hair close enough that she could touch it.

“No, he’s not forceful. We’re really not much alike.” Clayton and his father Septimus, who was now in his mid-fifties, hadn’t spoken since Clayton gave up his dream of being a folk singer for a girl. Septimus was sorely disappointed that his son was becoming so practical.

A couple walked by, crunching the red and gold leaves of the path in front Janeane and Clayton’s bench. September had been a cold month, and Clayton pulled his blazer tighter around him. Janeane looked grey next to him, like the wispy ghost of a full-color person in a double exposed photograph. The blonde around her ears faded to white, her red lipstick sunk from the surface of her chapped lips into the deep grooves that cut into and around them. She had called him out of the blue one day, and left a message with his roommate, who, in a marijuana-induced haze, told

him that his mom had called. He'd returned the call after smoking himself, static, time, and an altered state-of-mind making the voice on the other end sound like any woman's.

“Oh. I didn't know him well. He was just always kind to your brother.”

“I'm an only child, actually,” Clayton said quietly, looking at his hands. He'd imagined spitting these words.

“Well, Jack, my son, then,” she said wearily, resigned, continuing to gaze at the lake where choppy and choppy waves bit through the blue of the water and onto the sand. “He's a mechanic. It's a good job. Both my boys tinkering around in body shops, so to speak,” she adjusted the fingers of her mittens.

Clayton gave her another glance. He felt hot suddenly, burning and itching underneath his scarf. Her boys. He unwound the scarf from his neck quickly, and threw it into his bag.

“What's the matter?” she asked, suddenly alarmed.

“I'm hot,” he said uncrossing and re-crossing his legs, his foot resting on the knobby knee in his jeans.

“Oh.”

They sat in silence again, watching the seagulls, an energy radiating between their matching, thin shoulders. He was surprised when he saw her now, so solidly whole. He could only remember pieces of her; the curve of her shoulder as she turned

to leave the apartment, the sweep of her cheek as his father moved to block her from view, the pull of her nyloned-leg as she tried to step in through the doorstep.

“Chicago has changed,” she said, squinting around at the taller buildings, the men in pinstriped suits and women in shoulder pads walking at a breakneck pace to their destinations.

“I bet.”

“Life was slower when I lived here. More friendly. I knew my butcher, my grocer, my—”

“Your clientele? Intimately well, I’d assume.”

She didn’t take the bait, instead nodding in agreement, “Yeah, them too. Now, you don’t even know your neighbors, do ya?”

“You would be right, Ms. Capezia, I don’t.”

“I know I’m right. But, hey, call me Janeane.”

“Janeane.”

Chicago had changed since the 60’s. The lumbering Midwestern town that had always pulled too large from its cornfields and meatpacking plants had become a world class city. Neighborhoods were bursting, old brick buildings sprouting with new transplants to the city, shops with plastic awnings that ate the sidewalks beneath them, specialty groceries with vegan cheese and imported wine.

“And I will never get used to that,” she gestured to a pair of men holding hands and eating off of opposite ends of a hotdog. “If they can’t find a woman, let me tell ya, they can *pay* for one!”

“That’s ridiculous. They don’t want women. I’m used to that by now.”

“Used to it? Oh please don’t tell me—”

“Of course I’m used to it,” he could feel himself gaining the upper hand. “Don’t you know about Dad?”

She turned to face him, her mouth agape and her eyes blank.

“Oh, you didn’t,” he laughed, turning to face her and slapping the bench’s top. “He’s a homosexual.”

“No, Septimus is not like that. I know.”

“Yes, ma’am. You left me to be raised by two heathen homosexuals, a deviant and a cross-dresser.”

“No, stop it,” she pursed her lips.

“There were mad sex parties, boozers and cocaine, and I never even knew what a vagina was until I was in high school,” he stopped and grinned at her. “Shall I continue?”

She faced away from him, “These are lies.”

“Maybe,” he still stared at her with a burning smile. “But you’ll never know. You left.”

"I tried to see you, but your father and that woman—"

"Man."

"Sure," she swallowed, closing her mouth so that the bottom and top lips didn't quite meet, like something vile was in her mouth, and sucked in her cheeks.

"She—he—I don't know what--wouldn't let me see you."

"OK. So it was, 'bye son, I'm off to Tucson'?"

"No, but—"

"Oh, now I think I see. It was 'bye son, off to Tucson, don't call me, I'll call you'?"

"No I—"

"Whatever. I had a wonderful life. Galas, parties, champagne galore. Anyway, thanks for popping by the Windy City. See you in another 25 years?"

He stood up, and pulled his bag onto his shoulder. Clayton didn't usually let his anger show, not since the second grade when he got so mad he leaped onto Billy Finacke's foot when Billy had called Clayton's mother fat. Billy had screamed, his face turning very red and his neck muscles bulging, and their teacher made the two boys stay after school. Sabine had picked him up in their huge Buick. Later, Clayton told him her she was very beautiful. Billy called him a tattle-tale the next day, but Clayton drew a picture of a dog in his math notebook instead. Clayton walked up the hill to



the path that would lead him back to his apartment and away from her. But she followed him.

“Clayton, wait,” she jogged up to where he stood on the hillside. The wind whipped her thin blonde hair into her face, and she unsuccessfully tried to trap it behind her ears as she shuffled through her bag.

“I know I never did right by you.”

He nodded.

“But, I want you to know that when I die, you’re already in my will,” she thrust him an envelope scrawled with his name. She had a weird little smile on her face, looking at the envelope like she had given him her left lung, and all could be forgiven.

“That’s sick.” He ripped the envelope in half and handed it back to her. She took it, holding each of the ripped pieces in her hands, her eyes darting back and forth between them. Clayton felt the urge to rub his hands together, to wipe the remnants of the dirty paper on his pants, but he resisted. She looked so pathetic there, her chest collapsed in between her thin arms, her neck drooping over her breastbone, her blue eyes red-hued and bloodshot with years of tears and booze. He cleared his throat. “Can’t accept this,” he mumbled. “Sorry.” He turned and walked away.

Janeane went back to the bench, her mouth agape again like a dumb animal's. "I'm sorry," she said, the wind whipping the words from her mouth so to him they sounded only like an echo.

Clayton never saw her again after that, but his father printed out her obituary and gave it to him when she died some thirty years later. She gave her Tucson craft store to Jack, her elder son.

## #6: MR. PEEPERS AND THE SWIMMING POOL

Tracy sat with her mother on the side of the pool, holding her cat, Mr. Peepers. Mr. Peepers was not pleased to be at the swimming pool, nor was he pleased to be wearing a pair of Tracy's green goggles. Tracy held the struggling cat as close as her seven-year-old arms in their neon orange water wings could manage.

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Tracy loved the cat. After her brother died, the Cooper house was too quiet. Dustin watched sitcoms after he came home from work, and Miranda cleaned for hours. Tracy had become quiet, too. Miranda wanted the girl to have a pet to keep her company. Tracy didn't have very many friends because the other third graders didn't like it that she cracked her pencil lead on her spelling tests whenever someone took a drink from his water bottle, or knocked her tray off of her table whenever anyone would spill her casserole onto the cafeteria's linoleum floor. She sat alone in the cafeteria, a solitary figure eating applesauce, mashed potatoes and meatloaf from their partitions on her blue lunch tray. She knew whenever she heard something hit the ground, it might be her brother again, hurtling through the sky.

Tracy played alone, as well. Tracy's father, Dustin, tinkered in his work shed in the backyard and would check up on his daughter. He didn't know what to make of her strange little games.

“Hey, Trace,” Dustin came into the front yard one day after sawing away at wood for a bookcase he was making, and his hands were covered in sawdust, with bits of it stuck into his black hair.. The back of the house was his domain, and somehow, behind a neighborhood full of matching houses with blank, staring windows, the developers had left a wild patch of forest. A few years back, Dustin had installed some wooden stairs and a handrail up the hill for his son and daughter, and had built a simple tree house out of unpainted wooden boards in a huge old oak behind the house. Tracy didn’t used them now.

“Hi daddy,” Tracy replied. Dustin saw that usually Tracy was building some sort of land, her cat wearing a garland of daisies next to her. Little people out of sticks and grass, a tiny house-looking thing from an old newspaper. He stood there, rocking back and forth on his heels with his hands in his pockets, quietly examining her as she went back to her play. He wanted to say something more, heck, even join in and build a little person, too, but he’d only fished and delivered the newspaper when he was a kid, so he couldn’t. So, he said goodbye and walked away instead. Tracy was happier with the cat than she had been alone.

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That day at the swimming pool, Tracy’s mother had slathered her thickly with sunscreen so white marks still colored the thin, blond hair on her arms and a spot on her burnt and peeling nose. She wore giant pink sunglasses that matched the

flamingos on her swimming suit. She was on summer break, away from the kids who already could feel that she was different and already could tell that different was bad.

The pool's lifeguard, Colin, stared at himself in the chlorine. He flexed his bicep muscles, making them bulge. He noted his sunglasses, his whistle, his glistening chest, shimmering in the blue reflection of the pool's surface. He worried that if that if he didn't keep checking on his beauty it would slip away and then what would he have? Colin could make out a mark, a brown round lump, forming on his lower calf, near his ankle bone. He examined it, turning his foot right and left, trying to get a better view from the high chair. At this very moment, a struggling Mr. Peepers successfully escaped from Tracy's arms. He bounded from her arms and raced past the kiddie pool and the shallow end towards the deeper depths near the diving board.

Near the deep end, something stopped the cat's momentum—a puddle of water on the side of the pool painted with slick paint or a melted Popsicle—and he fell into the water. The pitiful creature pounded at the water with his paws, reaching his goggled head as far out of the water as he could.

A terrified Tracy gasped and breathed to her mother, "Can Mr. Peeper swim?"

"Yes, honey" said her mother. The cat was clawing at the water frantically, and floating deeper into water. "That lifeguard is a highly trained professional. Nothing will happen to Mr. Peepers"

Tracy began to cry. She was terrified of deep water, she would only go in the kiddie pool, and couldn't swim. She walked to the side near where Mr. Peepers struggled and put her hand in the pool. She swirled it to spin and the water and bring the cat closer to her.

Perhaps the beauty mark was a cancerous cyst. Colin never noticed it before. He could have cancer if he could keep his bulk and have nurses who "helped him out" in the night. But if he became skinny and pale and lost the definition in his arms, then he couldn't go for it.

Tracy's mother, with Tracy clinging to the side of her saddle-bag-correcting swim skirt, walked towards the stand yelling. She would've fished out the cat herself, but she was afraid of the deep end, and the cat was too far in the middle of the water to reach from the side. "Sir! Oh, Mr. Lifeguard, Sir! Excuse me!" But it was to no avail.

Children were pointing at the funny cat in the deep end of the pool. It was rest break, so none of them dove in. Mothers began to put down their lady magazines and peer at the strange sight in the deep end, little smiles on their lips. Mr. Peepers seemed disoriented, he couldn't see through the goggles, and continued to float and paddle deeper and deeper into the water. He was getting tired.

"Sir!" Tracy's mother shouted, getting more and more frantic as her daughter's choking sobs grew louder and louder. She still expected the lifeguard to rush to safety because that was the way it should be.

Colin was finally jerked from his daydreams by Tracy's mother's yelling and he saw the struggling cat, barely staying afloat in the deep end. He leaped into the water, grabbing the lifesaver under his arm and began furiously swimming to reach the animal. By the time Colin reached him, Mr. Peepers slipped under the surface. Colin dove into the pool and fished out the lifeless animal and put him onto the side of the pool. The cat's body was soaked.

Tracy ran to the other side of the pool and stared. The blood rushed from her face and her hands hung at her sides. The world slowed again, like it did when her brother died. She sunk down onto the warm concrete. Colin walked up to her and put his hand on her back, "I'm sorry, there was nothing I could do."

Tracy didn't hear. Her tears were gone and she stared at the water. Mr. Peepers was still alive if she didn't look at him dead. She stared at the water until her mother pulled her away, holding Tracy's hand in one hand and a soaked, plastic bag covered cat in the other. Tracy sighed as the shadows of the trees and the chain link fence around the pool slanted in the late afternoon sun.

## # 7: Tracy and the Battle of the File Cabinet

Tracy folded her hands on the edge of the desk and then unfolded them and laid them on her knees. She shifted in the plastic-coated leather chair, its legs creaking with her weight. Mrs. Crescent's name sat on the front of the desk in a name plate holder, slightly askew. Tracy scooted to the edge of her chair and flicked the nametag with her finger to center it. Tracy flung herself against the back of chair and refolded her hands as the owner of the nameplate, Mrs. Crescent, opened the office door.

"Hello...Tracy!" Mrs. Crescent yodeled, glancing down at the folder in her hands. "And how are we today?" Mrs. Crescent wore a pastel shirt sewn with fabric cut-outs of a rhinestone-lined beach umbrella, suntan lotion, and flip-flops. It was near summer. Mrs. Crescent wanted to get out of the high school, away from these kids who whined about college or shuffled through the halls in their oversized t-shirts; she could already imagine reading romances and sipping margaritas beside her son's inflatable kiddy pool.

"We?" Tracy turned to scan the empty room. "Oh, you mean me. I'm fine."

Mrs. Crescent smiled at her, and sat at her desk, folding her hands and looking at Tracy. "So, what brings you here today?"

"Uh, I want a summer job."



"Ah, showing some initiative are we?" Mrs. Crescent raised her eyebrows and leaned back in her chair. "Frankly, that's really a surprise, Ms. Cooper. Talk to any of the teachers around here, and they've never heard of you," she glanced down at Tracy's folder on her desk again. Tracy imagined that the papers inside must say, "Tracy M. Cooper...Who?" Mrs. Crescent finished checking her notes, and looked at Tracy like she wanted a response.

Tracy stared at the ground and lifted her cheeks like a smile, "Oh."

"Never too late to change," Mrs. Crescent hoisted herself out of her chair and began flipping through stacks of jobs in her file cabinet. "Good for you."

Dr. Phil had given Tracy the idea to get a summer job. She and her mother were sitting perfectly still on their gray sofa with the pink throw blanket on the top, neither of them slouching or touching or talking, but instead watching Dr. Phil like he was the New York Philharmonic. Tracy couldn't abide her mother's stillness, and sometimes she could feel a rage boiling in her throat. Tracy wanted to slap her, to ingrain her fingerprints in her mother's thick cheek mottled with deep pores, remolding it. Instead, she sat on the couch and stared at the television, digging her hands into the bottoms of the pockets of her jeans.

Dr. Phil's guest that day was a woman who had suffered through the death of her husband in a car accident on a mountain path in Montana. The woman was very thin and wore a brown skinny scarf around her pale neck. She'd recovered from the

accident herself. The woman started crying then, gulping on the purple studio couches. It had taken Tracy a long time to cry; the ripped kitty litter ad on the sidewalk on her way home from school had made her sob, holding her father's mittened hand and picking her way over brown-crusting ice patches while she wiped tears so they wouldn't freeze to her face. On the show, the woman was so consumed with her anger and sadness that she was fired from her job and had to take unemployment. The screen flashed to a black woman whose face fell in imitative sympathy. The woman said she had revisited the site her husband died and laid a little stone on the tree to say goodbye to him. Only then could she live again. Dr. Phil clapped her on the back with a look of pride, like she was his daughter.

"That's what I should do," Tracy whispered to herself.

"What Tracy?" her mother asked, not taking her eyes from the screen.

"Nothing."

Tracy ran up to her room to figure out what circus it was she'd seen so many years ago. She had to push pieces of stacked paper away from the keys of her computer and mostly empty cups of coffee in Styrofoam cups onto the floor, the dregs dribbling out onto her carpet. She typed the words "cheap," "circus," and "Chicago" into the search bar, finding a single-screen webpage as her first search item that gave her the name.

Tracy couldn't bring herself to simply ask Mrs. Crescent for the job listing at the circus. She imagined that if she asked her, Mrs. Crescent would become instantly suspicious and pull her chair to knock knees with Tracy and ask, "Ms. Cooper, are we going to exorcise our demons?"

Instead, Mrs. Crescent said, "Ah," pulling out three printed-out job listings. "Here we are."

Tracy looked at the three sheets of paper fanned out on the desk. The first was a store clerk position at the mall, the second was a drive-thru window operator at Burger King, and the last was listed as a circus attendant at "Circus for Peanuts". She picked up the form, unbelieving that through the thousands of job possibilities for cheap teenager labor in the Chicago land area, Mrs. Crescent had pulled out the only one she had any intention of doing. Tracy read the form:

ARE YOU A CLOWNISH LAD, A HAIRY LADY, A PINT-SIZED PERSON??  
IF SO, CIRCUS FOR PENNIES, CHICAGOLAND'S CHEAPEST CIRCUS!!!, IS  
PERFECT FOR YOU. NO TALENT? NO PROBLEM!!! THE OPPORTUNITIES ARE  
LIMITLESS!!!

WARNING: MUST BE EIGHTEEN TO APPLY.

"Thanks. This one looks perfect," Tracy grabbed her backpack from the floor and took the form from the table.

"You're welcome," said Mrs. Crescent, her eyes looking to the large white-and-black clock on the wall. "Do you want to take more than one?"

"No, ma'am. Thank you," Tracy rushed out of the door, crumpling the form into her jeans pocket. She smiled because she rarely had this type of strange luck.

Tracy went home to pack. She opened the door of her bedroom, pushing shoes and oversized sweatshirts, lopsided plates with their moldy sauces pooled to one side, and flying-paged books about ghosts away from the bottom of the door as she did. She didn't believe in ghosts anymore, but the ghosts of her life haunted her memory--returning to her when she saw the sinking light glimmering in a water-filled pothole or an oak tree blooming in somebody's yard--so she hoped that she could find them haunting the world as well. Tracy wasn't much for decorating, but she was a hoarder, so Her walls were completely covered in cut-outs of twirling women from her discarded children's books, little drawings she'd done of cats, trees cut from magazines, and photographs of grinning boys that she collected from antique stores around town. She couldn't live here anymore. She grabbed a small bag, filled it, and went.

## #8: The Meeting

Tracy walks back to the trailer in the twilight. The sun is sinking fast and it leaves dull, half-hearted splotches of orange against graying sky. She can feel her heart pounding in her temples as she walks, dragging the cuffs of her long jeans in the dirt. She comes to the doorway of the trailer, and stops to press her hand to her chest to slow her heart and to wipe her hands before she pulls up the handle.

Inside, a small, withered old man sits behind the curtain at a heavy fake-mahogany desk. File folders bound with string are heaped onto all but two chairs in front of his desk. Taped to the wall behind him, yellowed newspaper notices announce “CIRCUS CARMELIZES CORN” and “MAGIC SHOW MATERIALIZES (Behind Madame’s)” with accompanying photographs depicting faces of people pixilated beyond recognition. A junk graveyard populated with sad lamps with crumpled hoods, a large popcorn popping machine with a smashed glass shield, and an accordion with a rip in its cloth belly create creepy shadows from the single lamp sitting on his table.

The man looks up from an old ledger and puts down his sturdy pen, “Are you looking at these?” he asks, leaning back in his chair and gesturing to the junk, and then settling his long-fingered hands on his thin arms on top of his stomach. His

black-moustache looks severe over his quivering pink lips, and in contrast to the white shocks of hair above his ears.

Tracy shoves her hands into her deep pockets. "No, not really."

"I broke them all," he chuckles at himself.

"I want a job here," she interrupts his laughter. Her voice sounds tiny in her ears. Phlegm drips from her shoddy sinuses down her throat and sweat slicks her forehead. She feels like she is taking up all the room in the trailer, knocking papers with her clumsy hands and tipping over vases and sculptures with her oversized sneakers. She digs her hands deeper in the pockets of her pants, scraping the bottoms with her fingernails. Her grey t-shirt hangs nearly as low as the bottom of the pockets and she stands as still as she can, not meeting his eyes, instead staring at the long torn cuff of her jean trailing onto his Oriental rug.

"Oh, mm hm," the man smacks a mosquito on the back of his neck and smiles at her. His hands shake as he turns the pages in a thick leather-bound ledger book on his desk. Outside the trailer's open windows, one of the circus members dunks something into a pail of water. Tracy gasps, jumping backwards and almost tripping on her long pants. The man's hands shake harder and his left shoulder hits his chin. He loses his grip on his pen and it flies across the floor.

"Damn it," the man mutters as he shoves his chair back from his desk to pick up the pen.

“I’ve got it,” says Tracy, stepping heavily forward in her mud-coated sneaker. She grabs the pen from the floor, her long hair falling to cover her face, and puts it onto his desk.

He smiles at her and nods his thanks.

She wants to remain hidden under her hair, but instead she puts it behind her ears in a quick and practiced flick of her hands. She smiles back at him, her chin still tipped downwards, clasping her hands behind her back. They look at each other for a split second longer than normal.

He breaks their stare and looks down again at his ledger.

“A job, eh?” he says, pulling on a pair of wire-rimmed bifocals of old-fashioned oxidized bronze. “Let me see...do you know any magic tricks?”

“Well, no...”

“Do you have any circus-worthy talents? Juggling, tightrope walking, clownery?”

“No...nah...I mean, not really. I was thinking I could clean up after the elephants and shovel straw and stuff. I’m a good worker and I have, you know, cleaning skills and—”

“Ah, so I see,” said the man. “We’re always in need of those types of people. Excellent,” he says, slamming the book shut, making Tracy jump again. He looks at Tracy, his brows lowered, two lines of concern appearing in his lined face.

“Okay, well good,” says Tracy, nodding.

“But, how old are you? You can’t be more than fifteen.”

She’d dreaded this question. “Eighteen,” she states as confidently as she cans, “I’m eighteen.”

“Well, hopefully you’ll remain as youthful as you look today well into your fifties,” he smiles at her again. He doesn’t believe the tiny thing, but something in him knows she needs this. “Sit,” he says, coming around to sit at the chair next to her the opposite side of the desk. He reminds her of someone then. And why wouldn’t he? A man so important to her unfortunate development, but so buried within the recesses of her shaky consciousness.

He pulls out a crisp sheet of paper with ornate writing detailing her terms of service from a leather folder on his desk. Tracy can hardly see the paper in the muted light, so she scoots her chair closer to the desk and squints at the page.

“Here’s your contract. It’s for one year. We don’t pay much, as you can see, but you’ll get a free room and meals. Take a look at it,” he says.

She glances it over. “Circus for Pennies,” she whispers. This is it. The “Circus” loops around the page in a practiced calligraphy. “Fine,” she says.

“You’re sure you’re eighteen?” he asks. Now that he is closer to her, Septimus can see the fineness of her straight hair, the upward turn of her little nose, the youthful pudginess of her pink cheeks.



“Yeah,” she says, the flush from her cheeks sinking to cover her neck. She can see a rim of eyeliner around his eyes he couldn’t remove completely, a smudge of white stage make-up on his neck underneath his button-down collar that he must have missed with the grease paint. She remembers flashes of a spot-light, of thin shaking fingers reflected in the shadows, of her own excitement at the circus. She remembers him.

“Fine, sign here...and here,” she does.

“And I’ll sign here,” he does. “Welcome, Tracy, to Circus for Peanuts. My name is Septimus. I hope you’ll enjoy it here,” he says, patting her once firmly on the back.

## #9: A Baby on the Welcome Mat

Early one morning in 1966, instead of finding the Sunday edition, Septimus discovered a skinny baby twitching inside a blanket on his welcome mat. The baby's pale skin was gray around his elbows and underneath his nose and his watery eyes were crusty with sleep around the eyelashes. Septimus gasped, and grasped the doorframe as he swung backwards on his heels in response to the unexpected delivery. Pinned to the baby's blanket was a hastily scribbled note on the back of a grocery list. Septimus grabbed it.

"Septimus. This is your baby from that night we spent together. Can't keep him, too much for me to afford with my other son, Jack. I hope you can care for the baby, give him a good life that I could not. My love, Janeane."

"Oh good lord," whispered Septimus, clutching at his collarbone, crumpling the note into the pocket of his robe. He picked up the baby, holding the squirming creature close to his chest with one arm, and awkwardly cradling his head with the tips of the fingers with his other. The baby's hair was blonde and lay plastered to his head. Underneath the hair, his skull was scaly and his red face was pinched and skinny. Still, Septimus's chest welled with pride and he tripped with a bubble of excitement expanding in his chest to present the baby like a medal to Stan.

“Look at what the cat dragged in!” yelled Septimus, spinning the baby up and around himself, like a space ship orbiting the earth. “I found him on the doorstep!”

“What--a baby on the doorstep?” asked Stan, leaving his coffee cup at the tabling and padding over to pick at edges of the baby blanket. He recognized Septimus’ curled up little dingers of ears, and saw his same stupid outie belly button and long flat feet underneath the blanket’s edge. Then he knew. The baby was his.

“Well, dearest—,” said Septimus, stroking the kicking baby’s head.

“There’s no ‘well, dearest’ in this situation! It’s yours, isn’t it?” Stan squinted his eyes, pushing Septimus hard in his clavicle with his two meaty fingers.

Septimus’s pride in the baby abated and he looked down at the squirming thing in his arms. He couldn’t meet Stan’s eyes. He had been so disgusted with himself when he slept with Janeane, he’d blocked it out of his own memory. He hadn’t said a word about it to Stan before now. “Yes,” he whispered.

“Oh god,” said Stan, sinking down onto the couch. “How is that even possible?” He shook his head, his mouth agape, staring at the carpet in the middle of the room.

“Well, that one night when we were fighting—”

“That one night!” Stan spat at him, “It only took you one night to get over me? God, Septimus, if it was a woman you wanted you could have let me know.”

“No! It wasn’t what I wanted. I always wanted you,” Septimus rocked the baby, who was fussing and spitting up onto his robe, and sat down next to Stan.

“I can’t do this right now,” spat Stan, holding up one manicured hand to silence Septimus. “But look, what you need to do is find the mother. I don’t want to see that baby ever again.” He got up from the couch and strode into their bedroom, the feathers around the cuffs of his silk robe hitting Septimus in the face as he brushed past.

So Septimus took the baby to Madame Georgine’s to try and find Janeane. It was still early morning, so the club owners were leaning against the dark brown brick of the building, smoking cigarettes. Bobby and John McGill were two thick men, both dressed in dark pin-striped suits and polished shoes.

“Hello there,” said Septimus, still clutching a now sleeping baby.

“Oh, look who it is Bobby,” said John, elbowing his brother, throwing his cigarette onto the ground.

“Hey, look man,” said Bobby, walking closer to Septimus and clapping a hand on his shoulder. “I know you’re good for a check for your magic show. I know you’ve long been good for a check, but the place has run into hard times, you know. But I promise you’ll get it—“

“No, no,” Septimus said hastily, shaking the baby in the same dismissive way he would wave his own hand. “I’m not here about the check. I need to find Janeane.”

“Janeane, the cute blonde stripper?” asked John, “Whaddya need to find her for?”

“This is her kid!” said Septimus, lifting up the sleeping baby. Both men notice him for the first time.

“Her kid?” asked Bobby, raising his mouth in a questioning grimace. “Why do you have it?”

“Well, I suppose he’s mine, as well. As you know it takes two to make a baby, and once I made a very poor—“

“Septimus, she ain’t here any more. And I don’t ‘spect she’s coming back. She took off, took her last paycheck from us last night. Took her kid, well, her other kid I s’pose. Went to stay with her mother. Don’t know where the mother is though,” he wrinkled up his face and looked at his brother. “You know?”

“Nah. I don’t know either.”

Septimus felt his head begin to spin and he sat down on the curb.

“Hey man, you okay?” asked Johnny.

“I guess I’ve got a kid,” said Septimus. He looked down at the sleeping face in his lap. The baby smelled like a freshly laundered carrot patch, the sweet smells of mild soap and shit mingling in Septimus’ nose. He picked up the baby and squeezed him in a hug, waking him up and starting him on another crying and spitting up jag. Septimus held the baby away from himself at arms length. The baby woke up, looked

at his father, and made a gassy little smile, and soiled his diaper. For the second time in his life, Septimus was in love.

He brought the baby back to the house, putting his fingers to his lips to indicate he wanted quiet and looked hard down at the baby who responded affirmatively by blowing a spit bubble and gurgling.

“Stan?” said Septimus quietly, poking his head out from behind the partition into the kitchen.

“Yeah? Did you find the degenerate who left the baby on the front stoop?” Stan said, his face flushed from the steam coming from a pot of potatoes he was stirring at the front burner.

Septimus began grasping at his collarbone again, leaving a harsh red mark on his chest between the buttons of his shirt.

“Well, no,” gulped Septimus.

“What do you mean ‘no’?” yelled Stan. He looked up at Septimus and saw the baby in Septimus’ hands.

“Goddammit!” he screamed, throwing the pot of potatoes onto the floor. Septimus grasped the baby tightly around his torso and leapt back. The water and the yellow skinned potatoes steamed up from the floor, separating Septimus with his baby and Stan with a boiling ocean. The injured pot lay askew on its side near the breakfast island in the middle of the room.

Septimus pulled one arm of his shirt over his hand and stooped to pick up the pot. "I want to keep him," he mumbled.

Stan shook his head, gnawing his upper lip with his bottom teeth like he wanted to gnaw Septimus' head off. He leaned into the sill of window she stood next to, turning and looking out into the branches of the old oak that grew by the apartment. "I knew you'd say that since the moment you spun that baby around like a goddamn trapeze artist. I have to think about this," he growled, stamping through the puddle of water, soaking her house slippers and slamming the door of their bedroom.

Septimus sighed and sat down with the baby on the couch. The morning had taken its toll on the baby, and now his head lolled back and forth when Septimus sat him on his knee. Septimus braced the baby's head with his fingers and sighed again. Now he, a man who pulled fake flowers from his sleeve for a living and couldn't miss an episode of *I Love Lucy*, was responsible for the care and keeping of a tiny, vegetable-smelling person. It was overwhelming that this morning he could trip around the apartment, the comparatively light weight of Stan and his show on his shoulders, but now he felt the weight of the baby's future pulling creases between his eyebrows and leadening his feet so the dragged weary splotches into wood on the floor.

And he hadn't even bought diapers.

He knew that the baby would need supplies. The baby was getting heavy, and he didn't have any sort of pram, so Septimus took a blanket from the couch and wrapped the baby around his front, Native American-style. He wrapped his arms around the sleeping baby in the blanket and walked to the market on the corner. Septimus picked up diapers and formula and an at-home assembly kit for a baby carriage. He walked home with the sack of supplies in both hands, the baby tied to his middle like an extra stomach.

Back at the apartment, Septimus put his sacks down and fished for his key in the pocket of his pants. He found it, and was about to put it to the lock of the door, when the door opened.

"Hi," Stan breathed, noticing the sacks on the floor and grabbing them.

"Hi," Septimus replied, still standing in the hallway. "Thanks."

"The woman didn't mean anything to you," he said, still holding the sacks.

"No."

" Well, then this child is a divine gift, like baby Jesus."

Septimus didn't understand his logic, but thought it foolish to disagree. "Yes. Basically."

"And who are we to turn away a divine gift?" Stan whispered and took the baby from Septimus' middle very gingerly, cradling the child with one arm. Stan stroked the baby's curled up little dingers of ears, his outie belly button, his long flat



feet. "I want to call him Clayton." Stan looked at the baby in his arms and whispered to Septimus, "I made that while you were out." A wooden cradle decorated with Indian silk curtains and pillows sat in the center of the living room. A hastily constructed mobile of a shiny fork, spoon, and knife twirled in a lazy circle hung above the bed. Dangerous, perhaps, but thoughtful, and indicative of the kind of childhood this baby would have with them.

## #10: Old Friends

Tracy climbed down the bleachers to continue shoveling. For the first time in her life, she felt purposeful. Something about Septimus's presence calmed her immensely. Whenever she'd see his shiny bald head step through the curtains from the outside, the constant jittering in her bones and limbs would ease a bit, like he could hold some of her worries so she didn't have to anymore.

When she finished with the pile of shit on the ground, she grabbed the handlebars of her wheelbarrow to maneuver the pile out to the corral of waste in the back of the tent. Septimus was standing close to the fence on the edge of the circus property, staring off into the distance, periodically sipping a flask that he lifted to his lips with shaking hands.

"Hey Septimus," said Tracy, picking up the shovel leaned against the side of the fence. The stars glittered here in the suburbs more than they did in the city.

"I've always thought 'hey' was a rather vulgar expression," blubbered Septimus, getting closer to the trunk of a thick tree and sliding down into the dirt.

"Yeah, maybe," said Tracy. "I guess it's like horses or something."

"Heeeeeey, giddyup," said Septimus. "That's what someone I used to know used to say. Didn't like it then, either."

“I suppose it’s because you’re a gentleman, you don’t like it,” Tracy smiled.

“You like, ‘Hello, sir, how do you do?’”

Septimus chuckled, “I suppose I do. I guess I was never quite right.” He pulled his legs into his chest, and put his arms, his bony wrists still endearingly childlike, onto his knees. He lay his head on top of them, his back and neck cracking as he did. He began to sob. “I’m never going to be able to get up now,” he moaned.

“Oh. Hey. What’s up? What’s wrong?” Tracy put down the shovel against the fence and moved awkwardly to stand close to Septimus, one hand on her hip and the other hovering in the air, unable to decide to put it around him or into her pocket.

Septimus looked up into her face. The night air was muggy and thick and broken only with the quiet chirping of the crickets. The blackness of the night, cut with the faint glow of stars, shadowed the trees and the fence, hugging Tracy and Septimus together.

“Someone I used to know died on this very day,” he said, clasping his hands together across his knees.

Tracy’s indecisive body made a choice and she sat leaning against the trunk of the tree next to the old man. “Oh. Who was it?”

“Just a guy,” he looked over at her and smiled a small wistful smile.

“If it makes you feel any better, somebody I once knew died today, too,” she smiled back at him.

“I’m sorry as well, then. Who was it?”

“Just a guy,” said Tracy, staring straight ahead at a cliff could only be determined by its relative blackness against the faint stars scattered few and far between behind it.

A car drove by on the country road near them, splattering a puddle of water from a rain shower earlier in the day. Both Tracy and Septimus shook, rocking the trunk of the tree all the way to the tips of the leaves. A single leaf fell in the space between them. Septimus took Tracy's shaking hand and they shook together.

## #11: Bird Boys and Men in Makeup

Stan and Septimus knew their baby was the smartest baby, the fastest baby, the best eater, the best talker, and the tallest baby with the most ideal body mass of any baby they'd ever seen. But really, the only thing that made Baby Clayton extraordinary was his musical talent.

Septimus would take a four-year-old Clayton to the park. Clayton, in his miniature jean jacket lined with lamb's wool, would run underneath the wooden park benches and throw the changing leaves up in the air. His favorite activity, however, was imitating the birds. He could imitate a blue jay, a finch, a pigeon, and a blackbird, matching the timbre, rhythmic variations, and pitches exactly as if he were a recorder.

"Clayton," said Septimus, hoisting the boy onto his knee back in the living room of their apartment, the day he'd first discovered his son's surprising talent, eager for Stan to hear it. "Show daddy the cardinal."

A perfect warble like that of the bird's escaped from the boy's thick pink lips. His sandy blonde hair, which fell in perfect waves like a perm across his pale eyebrows and lashes, made strangers on the street wonder to whom of the two people—the brunette and the red head—he belonged.

Stan raised his eyebrows and clapped his hands together excitedly.

““Hey, giddyup,” said Stan, raising the boy onto his knee, and bouncing him like a cantering pony. “Clayton, do you know what a talent you have?”

“He’s almost good enough to be on one of those kiddy TV talent shows!” said Septimus, laughing along with the other two, moving to sit on Stan’s other side on the couch. Ever since the baby had arrived on their doorstep four years ago, Septimus, Stan and Clayton had insulated themselves within the apartment. They’d make up excuses when their friends would call, and invented spontaneous head colds to skip out on nights out without the baby. Inside where life was stuffy and slow, where dishes and baby socks and bent paperbacks accumulated in disordered stacks, they were protected.

“You know what, I think he is. He is good enough,” said Stan, suddenly serious again.

“Oh, no, I was just talking. Without thinking,” said Septimus, turning to fiddle with a thread that had loosened itself from the couch arm.

“But seriously,” said Stan, turning his knees to bump into Septimus’ on the couch, “He’s got a talent. We just get recordings of all kinds of birds, and, boy, would he be a hoot. Literally.”

Septimus worried about what television audiences would make of them. He had taken to wearing a misshapen pink bowtie and shoving dime store paperbacks into his pockets so his pants sagged around the thighs. Stan’s post-Janeane’s-

pregnancy eating had earned him quite a belly, and there was always the matter of the beard and moustache beneath his penciled eyebrows. Under the harsh lighting of the studio audience, what would people see?

“Septimus?” Stan pulled him back from staring off at the wall.

“Okay, if it would make you happy,” said Septimus.

Stan grinned and squeezed the baby.

And, just as quickly as it had begun, the couple took Clayton to audition for the Chicago-land program *That's My Sonny!* Whenever Septimus would think about the appearance, he would imagine giant hands reaching and probing him and his wife and son for who they were underneath their normal clothes, feeling out their creeping perversity through their TV screens. He began to sweat. He laid out his outfit, a beige ensemble, and packed it into a garment bag two weeks before their scheduled appearance. Stan cut off his long beard, and shaved his stubble, covering his five o'clock shadow with heavy foundation and powder.

The day finally came. Stan, already in full make-up with his hair done up into a fashionable beehive, woke Septimus and Clayton early in the morning. He arranged Clayton's hair into waves on his forehead and tied a miniature bowtie onto his neck. They hailed a cab and drove to the studio. At the stage door, a red-headed woman in a burgundy suit greeted them with a clipboard in her hand.

“Septimus and Sabine, I presume,” she nodded to the two adults.

Septimus stood there, tall and straight, drips of sweat falling down his torso from his armpits, like he was an anxious boy again. He imagined that everyone there was looking at him—the little man with the make-up case dropping his sponges and brushes on the floor, the women in slim-fitting pencil skirts pausing on their high-heels to gape, the announcer with his big teeth guffawing at their audacity. He wanted to throw his arms out and tap dancing, screaming, “Yes ma’am. The fags are here!” but instead he straightened his tie.

“And you must be Clayton,” she said.

Clayton trilled the distinctive sound of a red wing blackbird in response.

“I’m Renae,” she said, shaking hands with the two men. “Welcome to Studio 14.”

They walked into a tall room. On one side was the set, overstuffed chairs and fuzzy rugs in pastels along with a stool for the kids to perform their talents. On the wall hung a huge sign in pink block letters stating *That’s My Sonny*. The chairs for the studio audience were already lined up in rows of bleachers.

Renae led them through the studio to a room with mirrors surrounded with rows of bulbs. The host, Bob Watson, was sitting in a black chair getting dark orange makeup caked over his face and down underneath his white collar by a balding round man in an artists’ smock.



“This is the hair and make-up room,” said Renae, spreading her hands out like and pivoting her torso around. “If you’ll all have a seat.”

Stan had already primed and powdered himself, along with Septimus and Clayton, but the hair and makeup man came and put another round of rouge on the three of them, dark red lipstick on Stan, and pale pink lipstick on Septimus and Clayton.

After hair and makeup they were ushered out onto the set and seated in a row on one of the couches.

Clayton got nervous as audience members in their Sunday clothes filed into the rows of seats. He thought they looked like a sea of heads floating on a mossy bed of black and grays. He held his daddies’ hands and, like he was nervous the first time he’d slid down the big boy slide at the park, felt something in his chest hit hard against his ribcage.

Bob the announcer walked out onto the set and took a seat in the middle of the chairs.

“We’re gonna be on soon, everybody,” he looked meaningfully around at each of the contestants—a little girl with a ventriloquist dummy and her parents who, in their matching round glasses, looked a bit like the doll that sat on her lap, and another little boy in black clothes and a white painted mime face. “You all just look at the camera there,” he pointed to a large black machine with a red flashing light. “And be

your wonderful, talented selves, okay?" All of the kids and their parents nodded, hypnotized by his soothing voice. "Alright, we're on in 5-4-3-2-1."

The audience clapped. Bob Watson quieted them down, "Hello and welcome!" The audience clapped again. "We have an amazing show for you today!" The audience clapped. "These Chicagoland kids really have some amazing talents!" The audience clapped. Clayton was getting very tired of the clapping, so he kicked his feet and shoved each shoulder over and over again into the back of the couch cushions.

"Settle down," Stan leaned down and whispered in Clayton's ear.

"Hmph," Clayton pouted, sticking out his lower lip and crossing his arms, but sitting still.

"First up today we have little Suzie Dinwitty. Suzie lives in Evanston and attends Jackson Elementary school," Bob read from a little note card he kept in his pocket. Suzie walked to the front of the stage and sat on the stool with her doll, "Along with ventriloquism, Suzie enjoys baking with Mommy, playing house, and milk and cookies after school! Take it away Suzie!"

Suzie, an unfortunate student of ventriloquism because of her heavy lisp, stumbled her way through playing house with the mannequin. Clayton was scared of the doll. He could only see its arms and legs moving, but he couldn't see its eyes. He burrowed his head into Stan's arm so he didn't have to see the doll when Suzie finished her act.

Next up came Danny Taylor, a little mime, and Clayton got even more nervous. Danny made a box for himself with his little gloved hands, but couldn't escape. Clayton didn't like the little boy trapped in the box, so he burrowed further into Stan's shoulder.

"Next up," said Bob. "We have a little man with an amazing talent. The four-year-old son of Sabine and Stan, little Clayton can imitate any bird call." The audience gasped. Clayton felt like if he stood up to do his birdcalls, he would throw up. "Clayton enjoys steak and cheese roll-ups, Scrabble, and pony rides. Clayton, would you like to take a seat up here?"

Clayton burrowed further into Stan, pulling Stan's arm over himself on his lap, trying to squeeze himself between the layers of fabric and fat in his belly.

"Clayton, it's time to get up now and show them what you can do," whispered Septimus, leaning over Stan to his little boy's ear, patting Clayton on the back.

"Clayton, come on, all these nice people came all the way here to see you!" whispered Stan.

"Clayton," Bob had walked over to him and held out his big, warm hand, its underside the color of a perfectly cooked turkey leg. It looked ever so inviting with its thick knuckles and comforting sprouts of dark hair on the finger joints. Clayton took it. "Ah, here he comes ladies and gentleman." The little boy in the plaid shorts followed Bob to the stool, and Bob picked him up and plopped him down on the high

swivel top. Clayton kicked his feet in their shiny oxfords and looked at the rows of white faces on top bobbing sightlessly on a rolling sea of black. He clasped the metallic edge of the chair's top. Then he saw the red flashing light of the camera. Its constant beep beep beeping mesmerized him, so he stared at it, his mouth hanging open and his feet hanging limply in midair.

“Okay, Clayton,” said Bob, pulling out another flashcard. “Why don’t you do a blue jay?”

The lights above his head were hot. He wondered why the lights kept beep beep beeping. Clayton still stared at the light and the people. Where are the eyeballs on those people? Did the camera machine pluck them out to go on TV? He gasped a little bit and protected his own eyes from the monster, fanning out his fingers and pressing them over his eyes.

“Clayton?” said Bob again, coming over to lay a hand on his shoulder. “A blue jay?”

Clayton didn’t remove his hands from his eyes, instead folding his torso onto his legs to protect himself from the camera and the faceless people.

Septimus sprung off of the couch and ran over to his son and took his hand. “Clayton, you can do this. Show the people what you’re here to do.”

“I’m scared,” mumbled Clayton, spit dripping from his open mouth in a wet spot on his pants.

“You can do it, son. Remember how good it felt to go down the slide? You were scared then, too,” Septimus squeezed his hand and held it.

“Yep,” Clayton’s chest tightened with pride in himself. “I did it.”

“And you can do this too.”

“Okay.”

His father ran hunchbacked back to his seat. Clayton sat up again on the seat and put his hands at his sides. He looked past the blinking light of the camera, and into the bright directly above it. He had to squint his eyes and scrunch his face, but he didn't have to look at the light or the audience.

“Clayton? The blue jay?” asked Bob Watson comfortingly.

Clayton imitated the bird’s distinctive harsh cry.

“Wow!” yelled Bob to the audience’s clapping.

Clayton imitated the cardinal, the goldfinch, and the black bird, grinning his three-tooth grin at the audience when they clapped for him. After he was through, Bob picked him up and they took a bow together for the faceless heads and their clapping. Clayton knew Bob was strong, so the camera monster wouldn’t dare mess with them.

After the show, Bob clapped Septimus on the back as he just had put a complimentary croissant into his mouth, saying, “Your kid’s really something.” Bob grinned and walked to his dressing table.

Septimus smiled at Bob. They had passed the test. They had been on TV.

Septimus and Stan hugged Clayton over and over again, and told him what an amazing talent he had. As they were about to leave the studio, a small, flushed woman in a messy outfit and hastily applied lipstick ran up to them, blocking their exit to the street.

“Septimus,” the name rushed out of the woman’s lips, and it hung awkwardly in the air as if she wanted to suck it back up into her mouth. She dug her hands into her pockets. “I came as fast as I could when I saw you all on the TV screen. I see, uh, Clayton here is getting big.”

She looked at Clayton with a wan tiredness pulling at the smile of her lips. Her face was very white and her hands were stuck into the pockets of her beat-up trench coat like a pair of weights. She didn’t look exotic anymore, out here underneath the bright, cloudy sky, and could benefit from the mood lighting of her old strip club.

“He is, Janeane. What are you doing in town?” asked Septimus, trying to maneuver his body in between Janeane’s and his family’s to shield them. “I thought you moved to Milwaukee.” Beads of sweat had sprung out of his forehead, but in the chill of the impending winter, immediately grew cold and made him feel like he had the flu.

“Yeah, I did. I’m back in town to get Jack’s dead-beat dad to try and pay some damn child support. You know how much he owes me?”

“No, I don't. And, unfortunately, we must be going. Lovely seeing you, really,” Septimus tried to maneuver down the stairs leading away from the building, but Janeane blocked their way.

“I see he's got a new mommy,” said Janeane. “You don't really know how to pick 'em, do ya Septimus?” she said, bold and brash now, her hands on her hips, her legs thrown out into a wide stance.

“What a rude thing to say!” said Stan. He hoisted Clayton, who was sucking his thumb and watching the whole scene with little interest, higher up his torso.

“I wanted to find you all for a really long time,” said Janeane. “I'm better now, got a real job as a secretary in a meat packing plant and all, and I, just wondered if, I could, not keep him or anything, but at least, have my son come visit me sometimes? I'll drive up to get him. Would you like that, buddy?” she grabbed his shoe and bounced it.

“Absolutely not. You left him on our doorstep! He doesn't need someone like you in his life,” Septimus said firmly, shoving a now gaping Janeane from their path, and grabbed Stan's hand to storm down the street where a few cabs were parked.

"I'll sue you!" Janeane hollered as Septimus threw up his hand to signal for a cab. "That's the thing to do these days, and what if they give him back to me?"

"Dream on, honey," Stan turned around this time. "You left the child on a stranger's doorstep. Remember that?"

“Please Septimus!” yelled Janeane, running after them with her low heels clicking on the pavement.

A cab drove over, and Septimus opened the door for Stan and Clayton. “No Janeane,” he grabbed her arm firmly and looked into her eyes before lowering himself next to his family in the backseat. Janeane followed them and banged on the window, looking defeated and insane in her fallen curls, until the car drove away.

Janeane came to the house whenever she had a reason or excuse to be in Chicago, several times when Clayton was growing up, usually bearing a note, a bunch of flowers or a cake. Septimus turned her away every time, and every time her shoulders began to droop more and more, and a new wrinkle would etch itself into the corner of her eyes.



## #12: Two Stubborn Mules are Parted

The room was too hotel-like and non-specific to be believably homey. A lace doily sat on a mounted television set, a reproduction of a watercolor painting hung in a pastel frame on the wall, and a mock quilt was screen-printed onto a down comforter. Horribly juxtaposed with these elements of someone's country life were the instruments of illness—a pink bedpan on the chair in the corner, a swinging tabletop for meals in bed, a grabber stick for picking up water-ruffled magazines on the bureau.

In the bed, the man was in the last stages of the most non-specific event in life, his death. His face was sucked of all its color and his skin was falling from his skull and sinking from his cheeks into his mouth and onto collar of the fine silk bathrobe he wore. He was asleep and his head lolled to one side on his upright bed, his fingers still clutching the remote control. He could have been anyone.

Septimus walked quietly into the room. His hastily purchased bouquet of daisies from the gift store downstairs seemed too bright and impersonal to add to the dreary and already impersonal room, so he stuffed them quickly and quietly onto the table at the edge of the room. This dying man could be him. The little ears, the balding black head, the big fingernails, the thin eyebrows—they were so like his own. It wasn't him, though, but his brother, a man he hadn't seen in nearly thirty years.

“P.T.” Septimus spoke quietly, and stroked his brother’s shoulder.

P.T. woke with a throttled gurgle. He looked up at the blurry figure standing above him and grabbed his glasses from his bedside table. He raised his eyebrows and said, “Lord Septimus, you look terrible since I saw you last.”

“You too,” said Septimus, laughing, though his eyes were filling with tears and his throat was clogging with all the memories they could have had of holidays and Mondays, of the beers and obligatory family dinners he could have shared with the damn fool. “The nurses tell me that its lung cancer,” Septimus put his hand to his breast to sympathize with his brother's condition. “If I could take back the years of fighting, all the time we spent estrange--”

P.T. put a hand up to silence Septimus, “Can it, Septimus.” He hacked into a handkerchief. “I didn't call you here for a last minute reconciliation. I lived my life, you lived yours. How is that queer wife of yours anyway?”

“He’s fine,” Septimus looked at his brother, a question on his eyebrows. “Oh, but P.T., I always found it so unfortunate, our parting.”

“Wah, wah. Tell your sob story to the fat nurse on the way out.”

Septimus slumped into the low chair in the corner of the room, and started massaging his forehead with his fingers. “This is all quite sad. But I can't say that I'll miss you when you're gone. I haven't seen you for thirty years anyhow.”

"Good. Glad you've finally stopped being so sentimental. Hand me that briefcase from that counter, will ya?"

Septimus grabbed for the worn-in leather satchel. He recognized the cut-up silver twist at the front of the bag and the long, smooth straps at the top of the briefcase. It had been their father's.

"I'm giving you the circus because I'm almost dead. It's been in the family the long time, and even off in your little world, you're some part of the family. I want you to have it. Back," P.T. pulled out a manila folder with the circus bylines written in their mother's ornate calligraphy handwriting. "You've just got to sign."

"Oh, P.T.," Septimus stammered, waving his hands in protest, "I couldn't."

"You don't want to see dad's hard work down the tube," he hacked again. With his thick-lensed glasses and prematurely balding salt-and-pepper hair, Septimus felt like he was very young and being scolded by his father again.

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P.T. and Septimus' father had passed away ten years before. He'd gotten bored very quickly, sitting as he did with his feet on an ottoman and his television tuned to golf, and his mind became slower. When the man who did the ledger books for the circus for forty years couldn't add together simple arithmetic, the brothers came together to put him into a nursing home. He didn't last long there, babbling on about two headed children and goats that could spout poetry, and died. The brothers

scraped together enough cash for a modest funeral. A motley crew of tramp clowns, tattooed men, and other oddities attended the funeral. Septimus arrived in his old black tuxedo, now faded at the knees, holding the hands of Stan and a seven-year-old Clayton. Clayton had gone to meet Septimus' father a few times at the nursing home, and sat very patiently on his grandfather's lap as he told stories about lobster boys and three-legged men. Stan tried to tell Clayton that these stories were made up as they walked out of the antiseptic and urine smelling hallway to their car, but Septimus stopped him to let him know that yes, these stories were true. Septimus and P.T. stood on either sides of the burial plot, eying each other from behind his parents' joint gravestone. P.T. stood alone, his thinning black hair glinting in the sunlight, his dark eyes telling Septimus nothing as he looked at his brother as if he were eying the price of grapes at the grocery. Even when they went back to the funeral parlor for pastry puffs and miniature weenies to be consoled by women in leotards, Septimus and P.T. didn't speak.

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"I-I-well, maybe I will," Septimus lowered his eyes from P.T., somehow feeling ashamed, like the time he couldn't meet his father's eyes after breaking his neighbor's window with a flower pot trying to give little Suzy's daisy plant more sunlight. He could feel P.T.'s eyes boring into his face, and he couldn't make himself look up.

"A dying man's last wish!" P.T. said as heartily as he could.

"Why is this so important to you?" asked Septimus, studying the gray streaks in the linoleum on the hospital floor.

"I'm not a sentimental guy, but, if the circus goes under, it's like Dad's life and my life were nothing. This circus was all either of us did."

Septimus looked up and nodded. He was right. Septimus was quiet for minute. They needed the money. And, after all, Septimus loved the circus. "Fine, I'll do it."

P.T. packed the materials into his father's briefcase. "Everything's in here. Mom did all the performer contracts, everything in that wacky writing of hers."

"Okay," Septimus took the briefcase into his hand, and bobbed it up and down a few times so that he'd have something to do. His brother still stared at him, and Septimus had to resist the urge to run from the room without even a wave. "Well, I guess this is goodbye then. I feel like I should do something."

"You brought me flowers," P.T. nudged his chin in the direction of Septimus' daisies.

"But I'm your family."

"Maybe by blood," P.T. fished for a piece of leftover food in a back molar. "But those circus freaks have really been my family. Go figure."

"Yeah," Septimus began to cry despite himself, and wiped underneath his eyelashes to keep any liquid from spilling out from over his lower lid.

"I liked it," P.T. stopped looking at Septimus and let his eyes wander around the room.

"Good."

"Good."

"Well, I guess this is goodbye then," Septimus felt the odd urge to salute, but instead he shook his brother's hand firmly. "Goodbye," he let go of his brother's hand and walked backwards out the door, still staring at the man in the bed.

P.T. lifted his arm in a goodbye and went back to flicked on the TV. "See you in hell!" he barked nonchalantly as Septimus walked into the hallway.

### #13: The Physician and the Folk Singer

Clayton told his father that he was getting married over a double-decker hamburger and fries at his father's favorite greasy spoon diner, Pat's Diner. Despite himself, Clayton had become something of a snob in medical school and now the ripped booths covered with duct tap and the heavy hamburger platters coated with grease around their rims made him rather queasy. He straightened his collar and cracked his neck from side-to-side, pulling a napkin from the dispenser on the table to mop up the last patron's crumb remnants from the fake wood table.

Clayton looked at his father across the table. His father, a gap revealing his white undershirt between the second and third buttons of his button-down, held a fry poised in mid-air. Clayton and his father ate fries identically—both men cradled the fry between their thumb and pointer finger and balanced the weight by holding out their pinkies. Since his partner's demise nearly fifteen years ago, Septimus had steadily put on weight. The fat underneath his chin fell onto the now in his tie and his belly overhung the belt of his pants. Food had been their way of communicating, and Clayton supposed his father still hosted three or four séances a day.

“Dad?” said Clayton, a feeling of anxiety higher in his chest, a little wooziness in his head. He didn't know if his news would make his father happier or officially obese.

His father looked up at him. “Yes Clay?” asked his father, the French fry dangling so delicately from his fingertips.

“Y’know Melanie?” he asked, his ringer t-shirt feeling suddenly and itchy around his neck.

“The girl you’ve brought home many a time? Hm, let me think—this onslaught of lady visitors has got me spinning!—but, yes, I think I can place her.”

Clayton rolled his eyes to the ceiling. His father didn’t like Melanie. When Clayton told his father that he was quitting his life as folk singer to do something more practical, his father was furious. Practicality was a characteristic his father buried underneath spontaneity, impulsiveness, creativity, and had never valued highly.

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When they'd started getting serious, Melanie came to one of Clayton’s shows in a shabby coffee place downtown. The stage consisted of an old piano with the enamel peeled off of some of the keys, an Oriental rug scraped to the weave in places, and a stool all in the middle of the floor. Mismatched folding chairs and a couple of threadbare sofas were scattered throughout the place, peopled with boys with long hair and girls with perms in tight t-shirts staring books of poetry with their fingers at their temples.



Melanie sat down in a floral print armchair--Clayton thought his father had a similar one at home--and huddled herself into it, cradling her mug for protection from the rest of the crowd. Clayton could see that she felt out of place here, despite her jeans and politically-pinned bag. She probably was.

Clayton settled himself onto the stool onstage and strummed a couple of chords on his guitar to tune it. He always thought the instrument sounded in tune, but he fiddled with the strings anyway. He would never tell Melanie this, but he fantasized about himself becoming a new Bob Dylan—a forecaster of things to come, a bringer of change, man! He'd grown his hair long, practiced new and interesting progressions of his favorite three chords, and written political ballads about oppression. He kept his dream alive. His dad was his biggest supporter, and would hold lighters in both hands, sipping cappuccinos in the back of dark clubs. After he was through tuning, he breathed in close to the microphone, "Hey, I'm Clay. I'm gonna play some jams for you folks tonight."

Melanie fidgeted in her seat and ran her hand up and down the cup. Nobody in the room acknowledged him. He decided to play for the plant in the back of the room. "This one's called 'His Reaganomics Don't Follow My Ergonomics.'"

"Reagan, he makes me uncomfortable," Clay crooned, bouncing his knee in time with the music. "I can't get my work done. None too efficiently. Too much control of the dollar, man, makes my back get all out of whack...."

He glanced at Melanie and could tell she was looking past him to the posters behind his head, clutching the mug's handle so hard that her knuckles were turning white.

"...Oh, oh, his Reagonomics don't help my ergonomics, my office productivity. Now my back's out of whack and there goes my shopping spree. Whee-hee, who are you helping, Ron?" he always rasped this last phrase menacingly close to the microphone.

After the song was over, Melanie set her cup down on the floor and clapped for him. Her slapping hands sounded bare against the high-ceilings of the otherwise silent room. "Thank you," he spoke low and mellowly into the microphone. He'd gotten a taste for celebrity when he was a little boy, but now he couldn't even hold the attention of a single room.

After the show, Clayton undid his guitar strap and put it and the guitar back into his case. He wished he had some labor intensive take-down process so everyone could see what a real musician they had just missed.

"Hey," said Melanie, squeezing his shoulder, guitar case in hand. "Great show."

"Yeah. How could I help it with such a good crowd?" he looked around at all of the patrons again, most of whom, he could see now, had put on their Walk-Man headphones while he'd been playing.

"They don't know what they're missing." She put a strand of his long hair behind his ear. "Want a drink? I'm buying."

"Sure."

She took his hand and he ordered a latte. They sat at a little table near a window.

"How do you feel like tonight went?" she asked.

"Fine. 'Daddy's Keeper' was nice."

"That's a sad song," she said.

"Yeah. Wrote it for Stan."

"I know."

"Yeah, but hey, I saw you during one of the songs and you didn't look that into it," he twitched his head down to stare at the foam on top of his drink.

"No?" she blushed and looked out the window to the people walking by.

"No."

"Let me tell you something," she looked at him again. She sighed. "It's embarrassing for me."

Clayton lowered his eyebrows and jerked his head back on his neck, tucking in his chin. "What?"

"At first it was fun being a counterculture groupie or what have you, but now that I'm entering medical school and being serious, and you're not..." she fiddled with her earring, turning the stud round and round as she talked.

"Wow."

"I've been thinking about this a lot, Clayton. And I think it would be best if this was an extracurricular," she put her hand on his arm. "I mean, nobody even listens to you."

"Yeah," his eyebrows stayed up as he stared at the bubbles in the latte's foam.

"So think about it."

"Yeah."

"Do you want a muffin?"

"Sure."

Clayton leaned back in his chair and watched the people in their jackets and bags hustle by the window. He slung his arm over the chair's back and scrunched up his face, his eyes losing focus as he watched the mass of people pass until they all turned into blurs of color. Melanie brought the muffin back to the table, and he tore a piece of the top with his long fingers.

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At the restaurant, Clayton ran his hand nervously over his head, still not used to feeling the grooves in his skull, now only covered with a thin buzz cut. He

laughed, a shaky guffaw escaping his throat like a hiccup. “Well, yeah, I’m gonna marry her. Soon. Soon enough, but not too soon. We’re not eloping. Now. Or anything.” He swallowed.

Septimus picked up his knife and sliced his meaty burger into halves and then into fourths and then into eighths. Agonizingly slowly, he picked up each decimated section and brought it to his lips. He savored each bite, staring down at the plate all the while. Clayton wondered if his father was furious. But Clayton didn’t dare say a word.

After he’d eaten the last section, Septimus looked up at his son. Clayton could see his father’s eyes were filled with tears, his heavy cheeks flushed with pink. “That’s wonderful, son,” Septimus said. “An engagement. I’m proud. I’ve missed you, son.”

“Missed you, too, dad,” he squeezed his father’s hand across the table.

Father and son sat a long time in that red pleather booth looking at each other and eating their fries, all the while communing with the dead.

## #14: The Hardest Trick in the Book

For twenty-five years, through thrown pots and little boys, growing stacks of crap and expanding businesses, Stan and Septimus continued together. They were older now, both in the early years of their fifties, Stan with swinging skin underneath his arms and Septimus with a leaking face. He was beginning to look more and more like his dead brother now, with sinking cheeks and a jawbone with flesh dripping from the bottom. The pair decided to celebrate their anniversary with a trip to Seattle. Their son was entering his senior year of college, and occasionally, when Stan would see a wild-haired young man in a t-shirt, he felt a pinprick of sadness for his empty nest. He and Septimus were getting old.

After exploring Seattle for the day, Stan and Septimus went back to Pike's Place Market for dinner. They sat outside on a huge wooden porch distressed by the rages of the rain and sea. Septimus and Stan ordered a big bucket of oysters on the half-shell, and a couple of glasses of champagne to toast their time together. The flame of a tiny candle in the center of their table fought a mighty battle against the wind off the sea, as did Stan's hair, still a long red wig, but in the end, the hearty Chicagoans stayed outside. The sun set behind the mountains in a brilliant orange ball that finally succeeded in its quest to appear in front of the clouds. There they were, the two still together. But as the sun began to sink below the mountains, their

reflected faces blurred more into each other's in the reflection of their finger-printed glasses.

"I'd like to propose a toast," said Septimus, raising his flimsy wine glass into the sky. Men in thick-knit cable sweaters sitting behind mugs of beers looked amused at such an out-of-place vessel at their favorite establishment. "To us."

Despite their many years in Chicago, Septimus and Stan had managed to scoop out a comfortable niche for their eccentricities. It was rare that anyone yelled at Stan, especially since he'd shaved his beard down to a goatee. Most often, women gave him pitying looks and whispered to their friends about hair removal kits. Men would look him up and down, troubled in connecting the goatee with the full bosom. But, the WASP-y Midwesterners, silenced by decorum, Sunday services, and intemperate weather, were hesitant about yelling to strangers on the street. Instead, they whispered about him behind closed doors. Here, although girls had spiked blue Mohawks and boys wore shiny spandex body suits, they were sure that every eye was on them.

"To us," said Stan, "For twenty-five miserable years with you."

"To twenty-five years filled with dread, misery, inedible food, spotty housework..."

"Late hours, arguments, stupid magic shows, idiotic escapades..."

"I couldn't have spent it with anyone other than you."

Septimus leaned forward across his plate, dragging his tie into oyster juice, and kissed Stan.

After they'd finished eating, Septimus was moved by the spirit of classic romance and old movies. He sent Stan away down the boardwalk underneath a drooped light fixture to look at the choppy sea. Septimus dodged into a bakery and bought a piece of chocolate cake and grabbed two plastic forks, and then to a street vendor for a bouquet of Gerber daisies wrapped in a piece of green tissue. He walked down the boardwalk with a spring in his step, imagining himself debonair, hopelessly romantic, his feet hitting in time with the waves slapping the pillars of the boardwalk. He straightened the paper on the bouquet of flowers.

The night was cold, and the waves were getting wilder and wilder. A storm was coming, so, as he got nearer to the edge of the boardwalk, no one was around. The boardwalk's lights were losing a battle to the night. They lit parts of the wooden floor, but aside from the pools of light on the ground beneath them, huge patches of the boardwalk were left in blackness. He couldn't see Stan anywhere.

Then, near the corner of the boardwalk, Septimus saw some shadowy figures repeatedly kicking something that looked like a large bag of trash or some kind of animal. He could barely make them out, but when he remembered this night later, he couldn't stop thinking about their balled fists, their lolling tongues, their sharp eyes. The fingers of his hands went numb, and his blood began running thick, like syrup



was pulsing through his arms and legs. Septimus looked around for help, and, finding no one, strode forward on his long legs. As he hurried toward the object on the ground, he recognized a familiar floral print, dark and muted underneath the faint glow of the light. He saw the jaw he slept under every night, pushed back in a gray outline against the black of the sea. The three shadowy men were nearly unrecognizable, hidden in a deeper black against the darkness of the sky. Their kicking into Stan's body had become rhythmic now, a noticeable *swishthud*. A hard noise against a soft target.

"No," whispered Septimus as the breath from his body whooshed from his mouth. He clutched at his neck, his esophagus rising, threatening to crumple him there, throttled, on the ground. He couldn't move, or he would have rolled himself underneath the hard toes of their boots, pushing Stan into the water so that he could float away to safety.

"Hey, you punks, get the hell away from there!" shouted a large voice from behind him. A policeman had come and was now blowing his whistles at the abusers. Septimus saw snatches of youthful stubble on their cheeks, still full with baby fat against with the hard collars of their leather jackets. The boys were pink as they ran away, pushing Septimus aside as they hurried down the boardwalk. The policeman chased after them, blowing his whistle, but the boys were faster. The policeman radioed for back-up, as he continued running after the boys, who were quick in youth

and tennis shoes. The sounds of the boys' heavy breathing, the police man's radio and yelling, the sound of the waves, the pounding in his ears all faded as Septimus sunk down next to Stan. Stan's chest was rising and falling slowly, very slowly, Septimus could tell as he put his hand on Stan's stomach. The sides of Stan's dress were darker than the rest of the fabric, and stained the cuffs of Septimus' light jacket a bright red. His lip was bloody, and a trail of it ran down the side of his mouth, as if he had become careless in his lipstick application. His bruises, coupled with the pale beams made Stan's whole face float in pale pieces, disconnected gashes of light against the darkness of the dock.

“Oh, Stan, oh no,” said Septimus, stroking the side of his face. Septimus felt some of his teeth had become disconnected from his gums, jabbing into the soft flesh of his cheek.

Stan couldn't open his crusted eyes.

Septimus' throat closed and opened several times. He could barely breathe. He folded onto Stan's collarbone, lightly, lightly, lightly, as not break him. Septimus began muttering, “Help,” over and over very quietly, like a chant, like a mantra, as the tears that mixed with the blood came, pooling into the beautiful space that once was Stan's neck.

A week later, a broken man who shook with a violent force, boarded a plane back to Chicago to tell his son that his father was dead.

## #15: Tracy and the Dark Thing

After the circus was over, Tracy swept up peanuts families had cracked in half and trod into powder from the bleachers. She was alone in the amphitheater, sweeping, a rhythmic *dropswish* that Tracy found soothing, when she heard the thick rustle of the heavy plastic used for the tent flap open, followed by high-heels gingerly picking their way through clumped dirt on the floor of the circus.

“Tracy?” a voice called out in the dimness of the amphitheater, sucked up by the ceilings and the dusty ground.

It was her mother. Wobbling over the little stones on the ground and holding a handkerchief over her mouth, Miranda found her daughter covered in dirt and shadows, the hollows underneath her eyes and the insides of her elbows gray in the faded light.

“Mom?” said Tracy, putting down the broom and letting her hands hang awkwardly at her sides. “What’s this?”

“The man outside in the trailer told me you’d be in here,” said Miranda. The paleness of her mother’s hair and the hollowness of her mother’s cheeks were more pronounced than Tracy remembered. She wore a pastel knit cardigan and a long wool skirt even in the summer heat, and with her nylons, the dark tan ones she always

wore, she looked out of time and fragile. Tracy felt a sinking tenderness in her throat and deep in her stomach for her mother.

“Your father and I want you to come home, Tracy,” Miranda said quietly, covering her mouth with a handkerchief to keep the dirt from flying into her face.

“Oh. I’ve still got these peanut shells to sweep up,” said Tracy, she turned back to the handle of the broom. The big room echoed with a resonant *dropswish* as Tracy’s mother stood silent, shifting her weight from foot to foot.

“Tracy, this is silly,” her mother stomped her foot a little bit, and walked over to her daughter. She took the broom handle, softly, gently, making Tracy halt her sweeping. The two met eyes for the first time in a month.

“No, it’s not,” said Tracy, grabbing the broom back from her mother’s hands.

“It is, Tracy. Truly,” her mother sighed, falling back onto the bleacher near where her daughter worked. She dragged her forefinger across her forehead, and smoothed the fly-away hairs around her hairline. “What are you doing here?”

Tracy sucked in her lip and wiped sweat that had begun dripping down the side of face on the collar of her t-shirt. “Dunno. Just coming back to the place it all began, I guess. Like on *Doctor Phil*.”

“Oh. Yes, well. That’s what you’ve told me thus far on the phone,” her mother’s jaws were clenched near the tight pull of her bun.

“I know,” said Tracy.

“Tracy, I know we don’t really talk,” Miranda smoothed her skirt. “And that’s probably my fault. But I have to know. Is this about me?”

Tracy paused and leaned the broom against the side of the bleachers. She sat down on the bench next to her mother and ran her tongue over her teeth, staring at the wood protecting the front row audience from wayward circus members. “I don’t know,” Tracy said, looking down at her shoe. The plastic side had begun to separate from the canvas of the shoe, and she could see the arch of her foot in its white sock between them.

Mrs. Cooper touched Tracy’s hair. Tracy looked at her mother like a deer caught in the headlights, and Mrs. Cooper retracted her hand, letting her hand hang in midair. “I only wanted to protect you, but I couldn’t even do that.” Her mother sighed again, and she looked away, putting her fingertip beneath the rim of her eye.

“I know you tried,” Tracy stammered, furrowing her eyebrows and putting a hand on her mother’s shoulder. She’d rarely seen her mother cry. Tracy wanted to cry, too, but couldn’t. She tried to think of airplane crashes, of puppies getting run over. It was no good. Instead, she felt like she was floating outside of her body and looking down at a girl with brown hair with her arm on her mother’s back.

“So you don’t think I’ve ruined your life?” her mother looked at her through mascara-stained eyes, thick globs of mascara resting on the ends of her lashes, blackness smeared around her eyelids. The tears had streaked through the peach

blush she always wore too high on her cheekbones, making her look like one of the clowns.

“No. It’s not ruined. I just think that you, and life and stuff, made me very afraid.”

Her mother nodded slowly. “Well, I am that. If anything, I am that,” she sighed, pulling a packet of tissues from the soft leather of her purse. “I brought these for you, but now I’m going to use them,” she put the tissue to her eye, pulling at the eyelid with the force of her tug. Tracy put a hand on her mother’s forearm because it looked like she was going to pull her eye clear out. “If there’s anything I taught you, Tracy, it’s that.”

Tracy looked at her feet.

“But doing this, Tracy, coming out here to this circus, for God knows what reason,” Miranda looked around the place, shaking her head like she’d never seen a dimly lit patch of dirt. “That’s brave. Perhaps there’s hope for you yet,” Miranda stood up and looked at Tracy, putting a strand of hair around her ear and looking at her daughter’s face, the small nose, the blue eyes. She could no longer see the unstoppable motion of the little girl in her teenager who seemed so rooted and still, like she’d sprouted from the tree these benches were cut from, and they’d just left her there, whole.

“I suppose I should leave you here for your soul searching or what have you. I’ll have to tell your father that you threw a screaming tantrum to stay.”

“See if he believes that,” said Tracy.

“Well, he very well may. Goodbye, dear.” Her mother picked her way across the dust, balancing herself with her hands as she walked. The dim lights cast monstrous shadows of her mother on the wall. She stopped and turned to wave goodbye to Tracy again.

After she had gone, Septimus walked out to Tracy and stood with his hands on his hips next to her.

“Who was that—mother, father, teacher, or lover?”

Tracy scowled playfully at Septimus, and grinned. She stopped sweeping for a minute and looked at him. “Mother, obviously,” she laughed. She then bent her head and returned to the task.

“Aha, the rarest of all species,” said Septimus, still standing there, looking at Tracy. “I have leftover peanuts if you’re interested.” He offered a white and red striped bag.

“Yeah, so tempting. I’ll be the one who has to sweep up the shells.”

“Exactly,” Septimus smiled at her, steadying himself on one of the railings and hoisting himself up to aisle between the bleachers. “Sit with me.”

Tracy sat. They looked at each other and smiled. He offered the bag and she

took it, cracking open a peanut and tossing a shell on the ground with exaggerated abandon.

"That's the way to do it."

Tracy laughed. They sat silently for a minute, lost in their own thoughts.

"Hey, Septimus, I was thinking, can you tell me about that guy, that guy that died that day?"

"He was my wife."

Tracy looked at Septimus, with a little smile. "That sounds nice." She nodded, put one hand on his back, and let it sit there.



## #16: What you can see from the top

Ten years to the day of the Seagull's death, Tracy and Septimus go to lay flowers on the spot she died. Septimus parks the truck and the pair walks back along the edges of the houses, their long frames stretched into long, slanted shadows against the grass fighting to live in the dry ground. The red dirt fairground has been turned into condominiums and much of it has been paved over with cement. The wind whips through the thin spaces between the houses. Septimus' hands shake and his arthritic knees crack with every labored motion. Sweat pours down his bald head, soaking his old-fashioned detachable collar. They walk to the spot where Trina died, past some heat-scorched bushes, near the edge of a bluff. The bright sky is made even more brilliant against the red of the bluff. A well-worn picnic table and a grill stuffed with long burnt-out charcoal stands overlooking the forest below. Tracy sighs. She sees small cars, a black street, the blue sky, the white clouds, so vivid she could live inside the brightness. There is nothing to even say the acrobat had existed. There isn't even a marker.

"So. Here we are," whispers Tracy to herself. Septimus stands behind her, his hand on her shoulder. Tracy throws her bouquet of flowers onto the ground. The petals on the heads of the daisies dance in the air.

“Yes. Here we are,” Septimus replies. His hands shake very badly, holding onto his own bouquet wrapped in clear cellophane. He kneels down slowly and put his flowers on the ground. His hair is very thin, Tracy notices, and the sun shines through the strips of grey hair onto his shiny skull. Tracy wants to protect his skull with her fingertips; she wants to pad the place where his knees ache on the ground with her body. The wind blows up small pieces of rock and dirt onto the tissue packaging of their bouquets.

The pair is silent, staring at the spot they think that Trina died. It’s a spot of no life. But now, two bouquets of daisies twist into each other there, their heads blowing together with the force of the wind. Setpimus’ shadow looms behind Tracy, his head cutting a dark silhouette against the bright sky. Her own shadow blends into his, making the dead land alive with a bulbous silhouette that doesn’t look like two people anymore, but instead like one.

Interrupting their silence, Tracy and Septimus hear a loud falling sound coming from the cul-de-sac of the white houses. It doesn’t stop. Instead, the noise continues over and over, rhythmic, as the pair stand there. Shaking, Tracy breathes deeply and takes off, trailed by a pale and shaking Septimus.

Images of ladies falling from the sky flash through Tracy’s mind as her Keds take her to the noise. A little boy covered head to toe in mud sits in his family’s once-pristine yard. He’s turned on the hose, and the water has flattened the blades of grass

in the lawn with a river that ends in a small lake where he's dug into the mud. With exact precision, he makes the mud into little patties and throws them onto the concrete in symmetrical orbs.

Tracy laughs when she sees what the noise meant. It could have been nothing. It could have been something.

She sits down on the curb next to the little boy.

"Hey," she says to him.

He looks at her for a second before returning to his task.

"Whatcha doing?" she asks, looking at the pies on the ground.

"Making mud pies. Duh," he says, continuing with his methodical mud pie creation.

"Okay," says Tracy. She sits down by the little boy.

"What are you doing, little guy?" asks Septimus as he sits heavily down on the other side of the boy.

"Mud pies!" The boy is annoyed now. "Is that okay with you, you guys?" he looks at both of them, squinting his eyes in the bright light of the day.

Septimus and Tracy nod.

They sit there for a long time. The little boy makes mud pies and throws them. They land on the hard concrete.

