2014

Great America: Stories

Ben Sandman

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Stories

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Senior Composition
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

While workshopping my stories, one classmate of mine made a good observation. In many of them, she said, a character obsesses over something—person, project, or bodily tic—as a way of avoiding their actual problems.

Of course, her comment made me think of this project. I've used it to avoid all sorts of things: chores, people, my plans for the future. For a while, I obsessed over setting and scene, in an attempt to avoid writing actual stories. I owe Amitava Kumar for his unique ability to be both patient and forceful. Once, while attempting to describe the way that I write, Ami sketched out an incomplete circle. He then waved the paper around in the air. Here, I've pushed to fill the gap in that circle.

To everyone in our workshop—thank you. Your critiques—and our discussions—helped my writing to grow.

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MIDWAY

I tell them about the mist that came off the river. How it flattened the grass, then wet my face. Now I mention the meowing: how I figured the sound blew in from a yard on the opposite bank.

I tell them I couldn't see any cats.

I try to explain how these sorts of sounds—dog whimpering, baby howling, parent sobbing—are at their worst when you can't see the source. Dog behind fence, baby upstairs. Parent on cellphone with sketchy connection. That awful yowling coming out of the darkness, plus the shushing of the river coming in through the trees.

—You know the spot, I say. I know you all do.

First you head to the store, thinking tea, thinking Snickers. The clerk will see your red eyes. You're not worried about any kind of brush with the law, even in a town that's as tiny as yours. You made sure not to take the Ziploc out with you—it's got a bunch of holes where the stems have poked through—and you didn't leave it sitting there on top of your dresser. The usual measures had been taken: the folding of the bag into a film canister—because, unlike friends who prefer using pill bottles, you value opacity, have come to depend on it—then the placement of the thing in your bottom drawer, under letters, envelopes, photos and post-its, all of which somehow still smell like perfume.

3AM says the sign by the bank.

64 degrees blink the bright yellow bulbs.

Gas pumps glow in the distance. The lot looks empty, and you're happy to see it. You look down, for a second, at the wet slate shining in the light of the street lamps. Water condenses on streets and sidewalks, but you don't remember anyone calling it dew.

Out on the gas station curb is a girl. In high school, you ran cross country together. She doesn't look pregnant, but you've seen the ultrasound she posted on Facebook.

—Hey, you say, How's it going, how are you?

—Not bad.

The door's too heavy and dings as you enter. You go down the first aisle, away from the counter. A turn executed with such visible purpose that you feel you should inspect all the shit on the racks: motor oil, Advil, antacids, condoms. Nothing you'd buy. Head at a tilt, cradling your chin between forefinger and thumb, you linger, taking unit prices into account. You wait for the right amount of time to elapse. Then you hit the cooler and grab what you came for.

The woman at the counter is hunched over, wrinkled. She smells like a couch that's been out in the rain. You could swear that she chuckles as she hands you your change and you leave the store with her laugh in your ears.

Outside again, you remember the shortcut: the path snaking in back of the building, the gap in the hedge, the five-foot jump from the ledge to the lot. You tell yourself the detour is due to the weed. To be honest, something more innocent drives you: a memory of what shortcuts meant as a kid, the comfort of something you could learn and repeat. It goes back to a game you used to play in the car with a friend. You named someplace from around your hometown—store, office, friend's house, backyard—and tried to find a place the other hadn't set foot.

—Have you pissed in the bathroom over the diner?

—Yep. You seen the storeroom, behind Paint and Paper?

—Of course.

Friend punches your thigh across Nissan's back seat.

—Ouch.

—Sorry.

—I've got one: County Offices, basement level.

—With the vending machines?

—Yeah.

—We went there together. I got Beef 'n Cheese and you made fun of me for it.

Cars slide past that you know by their headlights. Dad cranks down the window, then holds out an apple core, waiting to toss it.

You're leaving the gas station.

Circling mosquitos. Bright roof over pumps.

Dropping to the lot, you hit your feet hard. Mom's voice in your head says try buying shoes with a bit more support. You're near the courts, shoes crunching gravel.

It's at this moment that you hear the cats.

You move toward the sound. Soon you're on grass. Your steps become quiet. The ground is uneven, dew soaks through your shoes. The meowing grows louder and so does the river. Water flows black in the gaps between trees. You stop at the shore. To the left, you see something: a man standing out on a half-submerged stone, a sack at his side jostling like microwave popcorn. The meows are coming from inside the sack.

The guy doesn't move. It's like he can't hear all the fear at his side.

He swings the sack gently, forward, then back, and you flinch each time it looks like he'll throw it.

You want to speak. Even more, you want him to.

I'm sorry little guys, but this has to be done.

I don't have a choice.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

He leans down and places the sack in the current. Twenty yards apart, you both watch its progress. You'd think cats might sink, with a trail of bubbles rising up to the surface. Instead they float, the bag drifting toward the center, a pocket of air trapped inside. You lean on a willow. You on the shore and the sack in the water, the slow current bringing it closer.

Then it passes, all full and alive.

TYVEK

Gary's wife Joan said he needed a project. Something to keep him busy while he stayed home on furlough, since he sure as hell couldn't spend all day on the couch. You could start with the magazines, she said, looking up and down the length of the trailer. Every horizontal surface was covered: counter, coffee table, sofa, the carpet. It made her feel claustrophobic. She thought of the padded cell at the end of a horror movie. The only other place she'd seen this much paper was the archive in the police station basement, one floor down from where she worked as a dispatcher.

—You're right, said Gary. I could clean up the magazines.

—You'll toss them?

—No. I'm not gonna toss them.

He'd explained it before. The reason he kept them. His favorite aunt used to save every issue of *National Geographic*, piling neat stacks all over her house, leaving alleys for walking. Most people were bothered, but not Gary. When he asked his aunt if she'd read them someday, she said, I don't know.

—I'll tidy them up, sighed Gary.

—Fine, just find a place you can put them.

—OK.

—OK.

—OK.

The job was quick once he set his mind to it. He found magazines in unusual places: jammed between couch cushions, hidden in the fronds of a large potted plant, curling in the gap between the stove and the radiator. Once the magazines were piled on the floor in the bedroom, Gary alphabetized them. *Maxim*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Popular Mechanics.* He sorted out the issues by month and year, feeling optimistic: they'd be here—weeks from now, months, even years!—ready and waiting when he got time to read. He stacked them in a crawlspace under the bed. For a second, he thought about climbing in with them. Then the thought passed. He clicked the door shut.

The furlough got extended for the rest of the summer. The unusual word, which to Gary sounded vaguely nautical, made its way into the local vocabulary. The plant employed half the town.

—Ouch, said Chet, when Gary told him the news.

They'd been friends since high school. Now Chet lived down the road in a prefab and made good money at the Highway Department.

—I'm sorry buddy, what a fucking tough break.

—I can't take it personal.

—You can't. Absolutely you can't.

They were sitting outside, gnawing sunflower seeds, and spitting the shells. It was late afternoon. Cars roared by on the county route, all, Gary thought, on their way home from work.

—What you need is a project, said Chet. To keep your mind off it.

—Joan says the same thing.

—Smart woman.

Gary didn't like how he said it.

—I have been thinking of re-doing the siding.

—That's great. I'll lend you a hand.

—I'll strip the old stuff, see what's underneath. Order siding and take it from there.

Chet smiled. The sun was low. Goldenrod glowed on the banks of the river, and, past the water, a hill scarred by ski trails cut through the clouds.

—Gary, my friend, you've got nothing to lose.

The cedar shingles came off easy. Slipping his fingers beneath the lip of the wood, Gary pried upward. Rusted staples flew off, and Gary got down on his knees to collect them, since he didn't want some neighbor's kid to get tetanus. He started with the shingles at eye-level. He stripped off one row, stepping to his right until a single white line circled the trailer. He got an image in his head of a trailer with stripes: a sort of zebra. The thought made him chuckle. He thought of Joan laughing. Once she started, she always kept going—she'd beg him, please Gary, stop, please *stop*!

A few hours later, the trailer was striped. Gary looked around the alleys and yards and saw no one. He went inside, cracked a Miller and stabbed a screwdriver through the top of the can. It poured quicker this way.

Gary sat on the steps. The beer tasted good.

When Joan got home and pulled in the driveway, Gary couldn't see her face through the windshield. The engine cut out. She reached toward the center console, grasping at something in the passenger seat. Taking forever. Gary was pretty sure she had nothing to reach for. He'd

done this before, usually in parking lots, when people a space over were climbing into their car. He'd stall and twiddle the knobs on the dashboard.

When Joan got out, her hands were empty. Gary threw his arms up to show off the stripes. Joan didn't look up.

—A little help?

Gary walked over. He swung a tote bag out of the back.

—How about it? he said, waving up at the siding.

—They fucked with my shift.

—What?

—Three years, and this is how they repay me—midnight to seven, for the foreseeable future.

—It's OK. We'll get through it.

—*OK?* I'll be a zombie—I don't know how I'll eat, I don't know how I'll sleep, and I don't know how I'll do the job they pay me to do.

—It's OK. Believe me, OK?

The sun hit her hair. She gazed at the stripes, smiled, then laughed. Gary laughed, too. Porch lights with sensors clicked on around them as bats flitted out from the eaves of the trailers. A muddy smell blew in on the breeze. Gary thought, Maybe summer is over. There's always one night that feels like the last. Joan went inside. Into the belly of the zebra. On the inside, at least, Gary found he was laughing.

*

At night, Joan came and went in his sleep. When Gary woke, she was there in the bed: head under pillow, snores leaking out. For the first couple days he tried staying there, sleeping. Putting his arm around her, closing his eyes. It only made her feel further away. He dreamed of Joan often, which made things confusing. He dreamed up whole conversations in bed—town gossip or news stories that never checked out when he asked other sources, like Chet, for example, or Linda who worked behind the counter at Citgo.

Gary tried pushing on with his project. Tearing off the stripes of old siding, he revealed a skin of white insulation. The sheets of Tyvek were unevenly stapled. Inch-wide seams showed between all the squares. Sunlight shot off them like sand in a desert, so that drivers going by had to swat down their visors. Gary liked the sight of the shining white stuff. It seemed like a start, a step in the direction he'd been meaning to go.

One morning, Gary drove to the hardware store.

—I want to get to know the lay of the land, he said.

The clerk looked blank.

—In terms of siding, I mean.

Gary left the store with a brick of a catalogue. Back at home, he flipped through it. The pages had a bracing, chemical smell. Somewhere he'd heard that fluorescent light distorts colors, so he took the book out onto the steps. Whites, creams, beiges—they'd get way too dusty. The reds and greens looked too much like barns. He circled a light blue shade with his pen; in his head he saw shallow, tropical water. He dog-eared the page and left it out on the

table. Not the side where he ate, but the one full of newspapers, junk mail and post-its. He wanted to keep the thing out where he'd see it.

All fall it sat there. All fall Joan slept.

When she left for her mom's, Gary thought he was dreaming. He woke up one day and she wasn't beside him. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, she still wasn't there.

—It's not working, said Joan, when he managed to reach her. He was certain her mom was giving advice.

—What's not working? There's nothing not working, there's nothing at all. Isn't the problem that you don't ever see me?

—It's more than that, Gary. Let's give it a rest. Try again, if things ever line up.

Line up, Gary thought, and saw magazine spines, perfectly flush, the siding he'd buy, how the pieces would fit.

—OK, he said.

—*OK, OK, OK*. Is that all you can say?

When they got off the phone, Gary flipped through the catalog. He noted the materials, colors, and prices. He went outside. Then, sheet by sheet, he tore down the Tyvek. He didn't bother to gather the staples. The foam scraps looked like flakes of dry skin.

Gary tried calling Chet, but it went straight to voicemail.

It was 7pm.

He climbed into bed. Wind cut through the walls, from the west, down the valley.

*

The flatbed arrived early, squeezing past trailers, everything white in the fog and the snow. Double checking his clipboard, the driver backed the truck in and positioned the mechanism that'd do the lifting. There was no doubt in his mind that he had the right trailer. It had planks for sides, which looked badly damaged. The thing was an eyesore, the landlord had told him, it was scaring off renters, plus the guy who once lived there had stopped paying rent.

Once the trailer was secure on the flatbed, the driver stuck flags on the corners and hung yellow banners that said WIDE LOAD. When he steered out of the trailer park and onto the road, two pickup trucks with blinking lights joined him. One in front, one behind. The convoy drove into town. The stoplight was tricky. Making the turn, they nearly brought down a lamp post. Through the village, over the river, and into the country. The junkyard came quick. The flatbed pulled in and both pickups drove off.

The driver hopped out and rushed from the cold into the garage.

—Where would you like it? he asked the proprietor.

The old man said something about plot #49, explaining he'd instituted a grid system of sorts, marked off by stakes, but which, as of late, had grown hard to follow, since the snow was deep and the stakes were too short.

—How about anywhere I find some space?

—Sure, said the proprietor. Do what you can.

The driver dumped it away from the road. Nearby were mounds of snow the driver took to be cars. The flatbed drove off. The junkyard grew quiet.

Inside the trailer, a cupboard clicked open. Gary rolled out and magazines followed.

—Fuck.

He padded through the hall to the door. He pushed it open and took in the view. A stand of pines. White ripples over trash, looking something like dunes. The sky was streaked pink. Up above the trees there was just so much light. He went to the bedroom, picked out a magazine and lay down to read. Flipping through photos of Siberian fur-trappers, Gary thought of heading out into the woods. Then he got drowsy.

Gary woke cold. He got off the floor and looked out the window.

Joan. He'd been dreaming of the time she dyed her hair pink. This was in the winter, the year after high school. Her hair stuck out. Shining as though she had plugged something in. It might help your seasonal depression, she joked, and Gary laughed and thought it might happen. Right around Christmas, Joan traveled downstate. She went with her cousins to a show in the city. Afterward they walked through the park, and the lights, she told him, the lights were just gorgeous. She told him she was honestly thinking of staying. Joan's aunt had offered—how could she refuse? Back upstate, alone at his mom's, he hardly knew what to do with himself.

Gary was sure that she wouldn't come back. Then Joan called one night to say she'd fought with her aunt, she could no longer stay there, she was getting on a train and could he please pick her up? Of course Gary did. Of course he drove out of the hills toward the Hudson and pulled into the station just before sunset. From the short term lot, he saw Joan's pink hair over top of the cars. It had faded some but still looked so bright. Before Joan saw him, Gary took in her face, the way her eyes darted. He was happy to see she was looking for him.

Now it was dark out. The pink in the sky had turned to purple then black. It was snowing. Gary opened his cell phone. It beeped three times as he dialed the number.

—911, what's your emergency?

—Joan. I just want to hear you.

—Gary?

—Joan, do you remember the time you dyed your hair pink?

—Gary. You need to get off the phone. This could lose me my job.

The line was crackling.

—I heard you got evicted, whispered Joan. Where are you?

—I'm on the bedroom floor. Been doing some reading.

—You're scaring me Gary. We need to talk, but you need to hang up.

—OK, I'll be here.

—*Where?*

—I'm in the trailer.

—Please. Hang up, now, OK?

—OK. I'll do it, OK.

Gary shut the phone. Snowflakes were falling past the plexiglass windows. He imagined them coating the planks of the trailer. Painting it white, a mound in the snow. That sort of insulation might work, Gary thought. That sort of insulation might do the trick.

SHERMAN

The man-about-town was no longer around. Not walking the hospital loop, not flopped out, catching sun on a bench, and not at the courthouse in his usual spot. The diner was quiet. I looked through the glass. And the picnic table by the basketball courts—from which Sherman often hurled elaborate instructions, tips on how to run an effective zone defense—was occupied by two women sharing a lunchbox. I asked if they'd seen him: tall, gaunt, Jesus hair, Jesus sandals. Possibly homeless. Haven't seen him, they said. Carrots swooped into a container of ranch. They asked if this was a project for school. I told them, No, I work for *The Times*. *The Delaware County Times*. I said I was doing a story on Sherman.

—Best of luck.

—Thanks.

DCT HQ was on the south end of Main Street. Permanent scaffolding—covered in caution tape—leaned on the front wall, looking precarious. For tax reasons, Donald said on my first day of work. If the door was ajar, the office was open. On weekends—as well as on lunch breaks, or days that Barb or Karen chose to stay home—the door sported a padlock. What this meant was simple. The office was closed.

I passed through the foyer, saw Karen upstairs. I liked Karen. People said, she's spirited, but meant, she's a bitch. I could say, objectively: she bitched a lot. She bitched about the weather. She bitched about the cheap cigarettes that she smoked. Most of all, she bitched about work at the paper: Donald's scent (citrus), the sound of PCs (a chorus of washboards), and the

office's stink (from Chinese food she'd bought). She said, I hate Chinese food, then called in an order.

When I reached the landing, Karen was smoking. She asked if I'd found him, and I said I was trying. I said I'd looked in all the obvious places. I had no reason—no reason at all—to doubt my investigation's integrity. She laughed.

—Quiet here?

—Yeah.

—No Donald?

—No Donald.

The ceiling fan rattled. Karen coughed.

—My car's fucked, she said.

—That sucks. I'm sorry.

—Barb drove me.

—She here?

—Nope.

Karen flicked her cigarette. Below—packed in cardboard—were magazines, papers. I thought to myself: I should probably say something. I really should speak.

—Don't worry, said Karen. I've got a ride back.

—You sure?

—Ron will get me.

We entered the office. It was more like an attic; the lights were switched off, a box fan was blowing. I worked on mailings. I tri-folded letters, stuffed envelopes, and licked all the

seals. The going was slow. Karen pecked at her keyboard. She commented on the goddamn humidity. I said it was bad.

—Not like Alaska.

—Alaska?

—I lived there.

She pointed to a poster over her desk. A tourism spread from *The Anchorage News*, with a bright illustration: triangular pines, a sliver of sky. VISIT ALASKA, it said in a sans serif font. The poster would've fit in on the walls of a bookstore.

—So what was it like?

—Great in the summer. Not too hot and not humid, either. The air was dry and there was plenty of sun.

I asked what, other than the weather, stuck out.

—Crab. King crab with butter.

When the noon whistle blew, Karen said, I'm out to lunch, if Donald happens to ask. She left, and I made coffee and paced. I ran my hands over smooth, wooden desks. I sat back down. Then Donald arrived. Donald Covington Bishop III.

—Hey, kid, he said, striding straight to the fax.

Our esteemed publisher wore sandals and shorts. Since I'd last seen him, the beard had grown out, but his ponytail was the same length as ever. Donald's siblings ran a charitable foundation, and the paper, too, was sort of a charity. Published weekly, *The Delaware County Times* graced the racks of four area gas stations. For the most part, its writers couldn't stick to one tense. Donald paid by column inch, and didn't proof-read or edit, so that stories on pancake

dinners or barbecues often stretched to two thousand words. In winter, Donald lived in Florida, tending an orange grove. I bought his citrus at the co-op on Main Street.

—Kid, any luck finding Sherman?

—I'm getting there.

—It's a pet project, thanks for taking it on.

I lifted an envelope. I extended my tongue.

—Kid, why're you licking?

—They need to be sealed—

—Didn't Karen tell you? We've got a machine.

—I guess she forgot.

—Where is she?

—On lunch.

—Jesus, I've got to run, kid. Tell her to show you.

Donald trotted off. I heard the door scrape sidewalk behind him. He cared about Sherman, but I wasn't sure why. Maybe the eccentrics in town had a club—like the Masons or Elks—and they wore sashes, said *yea* or *nay,* and shot pool. Maybe this club was how Donald met Sherman.

I folded more letters. I thought about Karen and tried to decide whether I should be mad. Rain started falling. On the tin roof, it sounded like thunder. I went to the window. I watched the water pummel flowers in planters. Saplings—ringed by chicken wire—bent over, flexed. Drops of rain tapped the fire escape. An editor had hung himself from the rail. Really, Karen said. No bullshit, I swear.

*

On Wednesday, I started my search at the diner. Debbie asked what I wanted. I ordered two eggs, toast, and coffee. Debbie disappeared. I looked at Sherman's stool. The laminate cushion was covered in duct tape. When Debbie brought my food, I asked what she thought could have happened to Sherman.

—He might've gone home.

—Home?

—He's not from here, originally.

—I assumed—

—He's from downstate. Out on the island.

I wrote: "Sherman." Then: "Long Island."

Debbie told me to check all the benches. The one by the bridge, with flowers in front. The ones by the bank. She said Sherman sits on every last bench.

—OK. I'll check benches.

—And Jim, talk to Jim.

—Jim?

—Lawyer Jim. Him and Sherman are friendly.

Lawyer Jim led me into his office. Lawyer Jim insisted: Sherman's got a great legal mind, he's been watching trials for ten years, at least, he's up in the balcony three times a week. He listens and learns. That's how he gets by. He knows the loopholes, knows the rifts between county and state, knows how to use them to get what he needs.

A rider mower roared past the window. The man on the seat appeared to be floating. Then he was gone.

—He's brilliant, said Lawyer Jim. Totally brilliant.

The kid at the farmer's market weighed out tomatoes. The farmer was shouting: Fresh corn, fresh corn, I picked it this morning, fresh off the stalk.

—Yeah, the kid said, Sherman comes by. Not lately, I guess, but most of the time.

—What's he buy?

—Everything he can. We take food stamps, that's why Sherman comes here.

I jotted this down. The kid's name was Phil. I took my tomatoes.

I tried visualizing. Sherman: the tree. Sherman, the web. Sherman the series of Venn diagrams. What I knew was: he wasn't like the other eccentrics. He wasn't like the guy in the bucket hat who looked like a skeleton, or the short, fat woman who eavesdropped from her stool in the diner, waddled up to tables—sweater shedding lint—then recited back facts, said "I'm a psychic!" and whipped out her card. He wasn't like the Russian, who once sketched in a notebook outside my house and said, I am artist. We said: Could you show us your notebook? His eyes grew sad. I am artist, he said. We said, leave, or we're calling the police. Then—as often happens, as you come to expect—we were saved by a neighbor. This time: Tom. He said, I own a gun, I swear that I'll use it.

What I knew was—with Sherman—I didn't have stories, at least not like this. No one had stories. People asked Sherman: What've you been up to? How was your Christmas? And,

at the diner, if he'd ordered soup: how does it taste? From this, they learned that (1) Sherman liked to walk the hospital loop, the 5K which went past the falls, and then back (which I knew from driving, biking and kayaking past him), (2) he spent Christmas—and most holidays—in Queens with his son, and (3) no matter the day—or the flavor—the soup tasted good.

What I knew was: Sherman had long hair, a beard. Possibly, I could paint him as some sort of prophet. His homelessness—if that was the word for it, even—could be framed in terms of the recession. *Despite Legal Knowledge, Sherman on Street. Sherman Asks: "What Stimulus?"* Or, beside a photo of Sherman clutching two plastic bags: *Man on Street says: "Things Looking Up!"*

What I knew was: no one would check all my facts. I could get creative. Maybe, Sherman grew up on the tip of Long Island. Ten years late, he hitchhiked to Woodstock. There, perhaps, he worked on a farm, where the pigs all died before a trip to the slaughterhouse. It was tragic, thought Sherman. Tragic in a way that was deeply confusing. Maybe this was why he fled farther upstate. Maybe he boarded a bus, sat in front. Saw headlights shining on the windows of houses.

The office phone rang.

—Alex?

—Hey, Karen.

—My piece of shit car. I can't make it in.

—OK.

—Tomorrow. I'll come in tomorrow.

—Of course.

—Is Donald there?

—Nope.

—If he asks, fill him in.

—Alright.

—One more thing. Look for Sherman at the Office for Aging.

—OK, will do.

—See you.

—Bye.

I opened my notebook, found a blank page. On top, I wrote "Karen." I wrote about how her swearing was shocking. How she managed this by swearing past the peaks of her rants. *Fucking paper. Fucking Donald. Fucking Bullshit.* Each "fucking" was quiet. I wrote about the snort she made when she laughed. Her Transitions lenses, which failed to transition. I wrote about how, when I'd applied for the job—or, more accurately, asked my dad to send Donald an email, since they knew each other from a community group—I'd said, There's so much I could learn. So far, Karen hadn't taught me a thing. Each new task was prefaced by phrases like: anyone can do it, not rocket science, a complete piece of cake. I wanted her to think she was teaching me something.

On Friday, the Office for Aging was open. The name made me think of men in white lab coats. Men inventing creams that did more than fix wrinkles; they restored drivers' licenses, fortified hipbones. I went inside. I made that mistake. The building had been a church, but someone must've made off with the stained glass, the pews. Each way I turned, I saw walls,

partitions. Combined with incense, the scent of wet soil from a row of poinsettias, the darkness might have been a thing I could take. As it was, the air smelled like a crockpot. One that'd been bubbling in a corner for years.

In the dining room, seniors heaped food onto trays. They sat in groups and talked to each other. Faces gleamed on freshly bleached tables. I saw a banner with a smiling car. Food left this room in styrofoam towers, and plastic utensils got tossed in the bag. Cars left town, turned onto dirt; food slid, so that main and side became one.

—Sherman's in the corner.

I turned, saw a woman wearing an apron.

—Thank you, OK.

He was sitting alone. I recognized the black tangle of hair. His shirt had stripes of four or five different colors, and a twitching leg caused his gym shorts to shimmer. I walked across the room. I tapped his shoulder.

—Excuse me?

When he turned, his hair and beard were so full of dandruff, it looked as though he'd just come in from a snowstorm. His mustache was coated in french onion soup.

—What's up?

—I'm from *The Times*. I'm hoping I could possibly ask you some questions.

—Yeah?

—If you could tell me about yourself, that'd be great.

He talked about his youth. It was unremarkable.

—When'd you come here?

—Twenty years ago, maybe.

—And what made you do it?

—I just decided.

For the most part, Sherman kept to the present. The meals at the Office for Aging were great. His favorite bench was the one near the bridge. Except for the one on the hill by the school. Like my grandpa, Sherman knew his routine, but didn't seem to know how or why it had started.

—Where've you been for the past few weeks?

—Around.

I wrote this down and knew it meant nothing.

—This might be rude, but where do you sleep?

Sherman laughed—high-pitched, like a giggle—but with such force that his whole body shook.

—*Rude!* It's the only good question you've asked. One I think about often.

He looked at his soup, which now had a yellow film floating on top. He stuck in his spoon and stirred it around.

—Great question. One second, excuse me.

He got up and slipped into the hall. I looked at my notes. I read them over. Then I read them again. When ten minutes had passed, I went to the bathroom and knocked on the door. There was no one inside. I found apron woman and asked where he'd gone.

—I'm sure he's around.

As I was leaving, Karen called and said she needed a ride.

*

When Karen got in, she said thank you, thank you, this is so much to ask, I'll pay you or something. I said that was silly. She said, Nice ride, and I told her it belonged to my parents. I drove to the school. Karen asked what we were listening to, and I said, Sonic Youth, then felt self-conscious. I said I was trying to get into them. I wasn't into them yet.

The team was sprinting when we got to the fields. We parked, watched.

—Sean's #75.

—Solid number.

I knew that numbers corresponded with size, that those over fifty were assigned to the fat kids. The team finished sprinting and got in a circle. Words were shouted. Karen got out and waved Sean over. They got in the car.

—Launt Hollow Road, here we come.

We passed Ultra Dairy, and the air smelled like milk. It made me feel sick. I saw a mound of earth shaped like a tear-drop.

—That's a drumlin, I said.

—What?

—That hill got left behind by a glacier.

—Cool!

—Huh.

At the inn, Karen said to turn right. I turned under trees. Oil and loose stone coated the road. At a wooden mailbox, Sean said, Here we are. The driveway was long. What at first appeared to be cheap, plastic flags in the branches—the sort you see at a race's finish line—

turned out to be rectangular, Buddhist. Stacked wood leaned on trees for support. Karen's blue house was single-story, with a rickety carport off to one side. I parked beside a truck. It had tinted windows.

—Can Alex stay for dinner?

—Honey, he has to go home.

—Yeah, Sean, sorry. Some other time.

Sean got out. He lumbered onto the porch, then sat on the steps to take off his cleats.

—What happened with Sherman?

—I didn't get much. He decided to vanish.

Karen laughed.

—I really don't know what to write.

—Come on, you take so many notes.

—Yeah, yeah—

—Just make something up!

Karen took out her wallet.

—Please, you don't have to.

—I know I don't have to.

Karen placed a ten in the cup holder, said, Thanks again, and got out of the car.

The story was published on a Thursday in August. In her chair at the office, Karen opened the paper and turned to page four. S*herman: The Man-About-Town*. She read about his youth. It was unremarkable. He's got a great legal mind, she read, it was a quote from Jim, and

she liked to see quotes from people she knew. She read about a stint Sherman had in Alaska. He'd seen a poster with triangular pines, then decided to go. He liked the idea of a landscape with edges. When he got there, it wasn't like he'd imagined. The Anchorage suburbs were like other suburbs. There were mountains in the distance, but he didn't hike up them. Once, he followed signs for a glacier. The road ended at a visitor center. They said, You've got to take a boat, if you want to see something. On the way back to Anchorage, he bought cigarettes. Then he went to a restaurant on the water. He ordered king crab. The air was dry and there was plenty of sun.

SIGH

I let my sighs out in the house when it's empty. I pace from den to kitchen to hall, pausing, now and then, to lean on a doorframe. I've gotten good. Gulping air until something snaps—lungs, ribs, maybe cartilage—then pushing it out, pressure draining from the crown of my skull, through the sinuses and out of the nostrils.

I'm home for the summer. Sighing's by far the best pastime I've found. Better than jacking off on the couch, perfecting my method of brewing drip coffee, or spending hours standing under the shower. Talking to myself, even laughing and singing—I've tried all this, but it makes me feel anxious, like Dad might walk in or the postman might hear me when he comes by at 3 to slip bills and catalogs in the box on the door. The house must be empty. The acoustics, when Mom and Dad are at work, remind me of the village streets late at night: the way what I let out bounces back at me, how other sounds deaden. Dishwasher humming, air whooshing through vents—these sounds are there, but I don't really hear them.

I'm past the phase where the house made me feel things.

When I first came back, crying was easy. All it took was waking up in my bed. I've had the extra-long twin since grade school. It feels weirdly sacred, which might explain why, in high school, Lauren and I had sex on the floor. We piled up bunches of pillows and blankets. Moving back and forth on top of the carpet stirred up a storm of static electricity; when I remember her riding me, her light brown hair stands up on its ends.

The night she brought up a pact, I stared at lint balls under the dresser.

—Look at me, she said. If we're not married to anyone else in ten years. . .

She started crying.

—Fifteen, she said.

I sighed into her neck.

I broke up with her on the phone one year later. I told friends: it's mutual, we've drifted apart. They backed me up. Said: it's inevitable, we all saw it coming, you guys weren't in love. John said, It showed when we drank. She joked around and you interrupted. You told us a story.

I told them about my flight home from London. Lauren was there, so I visited her, and the return flight I'd booked left early on Sunday. The tube wasn't running. She called a cab. Outside her dorm, the lawns were quiet, and the British sirens I'd heard in movies—*wee-ooh, wee-ooh*—whined off-campus, deep in the suburbs. The sky was lit. We kissed, said goodbye. Kissed once more. Goodbye. Bye. The plane was half-full. A bunch of Welsh couples were sitting nearby, taking their first trip to America. One flight attendant was also from Wales. She brought out wine, then sat with the couples, laughed and got drunk. Somewhere, I'd read that Welsh is unique; actions come first. Flies the pilot plane. Close I my eyes. Leave I Lauren. These people had accents. They weren't speaking Welsh.

Finally, the flight attendant, asked, Red or white? Both, I replied. She laughed and pulled out four tiny bottles. I drank, thought: oh my god, booze helps, it's true. I thought to myself, I will never not drink.

When I told the story, we were sitting outside. Our camp chairs had two cup holders each. The lawn smelled like puke.

—You should write that, said Lauren, You really, really should write that.

—You've got to!

—Yeah man, for real.

Lauren thought it was all about kindness. The nice flight attendant, the happy young couples. She was a visual person, and the image she saw was of a smiling plane. I saw something different. I saw scraps of paper on a bottle of wine. Lauren receding. Me going forward.

Lauren's family lives on a farm by a lake. One day, I go there with Mom and Dad and flop on an inner tube and float in a circle. The lake's soft, mucky floor makes me grimace, and I tiptoe out into deeper water.

—Come on, says mom.

—I'm coming. Give me a break.

Going to the swimming hole isn't something I'm good at. There's the squeamishness, of course, plus the fact that I'm skinny and get chilled easy. Luckily, there's nobody else here to see me. The village owns the land on this side of the lake; whether we're trespassing or not isn't clear.

—You're from the country, Mom says. Get in touch with your roots!

She scissor kicks and sends up a splash. I shiver and clutch at my ribs.

Once I'm swimming, things get marginally better. With my head down it's good: slicing through the water with the side of my hand, spewing bubbles from my half-open mouth. Below a certain threshold—five feet, maybe six—is a layer of water where sunlight can't reach. Some spots are icy, right over the springs. I feel stabs of cold on my toes as I kick.

Coming up for air, I gasp, chest stinging, and see that my path has been hopelessly crooked. Near where I float—treading water, sucking in what air that I can—there's a field overgrown with bushes and thickets and a couple steel frames that used to be lawn chairs. Lauren's yard—I breathe in, pressure builds on my ribs—where she took my photo, dozens of times, hundreds, even, why not say hundreds, and I hated posing but they came out so well. I don't have copies. They all got taken down from her website. Worse, I can't see any photos of her. She blocked me on Facebook; I can't see her, she can't see me. I've explained to my counselor how important this is, how there're two things I want: to see she exists and for her to see me and see that I'm happy, since proof is there, if she'd bother to look: pictures of me grilling and sipping a beer, me on the Maine coast, watching a sunset, me sitting next to pretty girls on a couch. She might just *think*.

—Hey! shouts Mom.

Down the shore, bells jangle and clank. A pack of cows are chomping on grass. They're brown, not the normal black-and-white Holsteins. Most likely of the meat variety. A few stop chewing and look up at me. Hushed and still and framed by the sky—there are big, puffy clouds and they look full of rain, but I know it's an illusion, I know it won't happen—the cows look beautiful and stupid and tough.

Back home, I press my cheek to the cool kitchen window. I try to imagine having skin to sigh into.

Sighing again. So much time on my hands.

—Free time! Dad says and looks back at his book. He's completely absorbed in John Cheever's journals.

My dad sighs, too. In this way, I guess, the habit's genetic. He has his own gesture, a hand on the forehead, a brushing of hair. The simultaneous sighing is Mom's biggest pet peeve: she feels cornered, she says, with sighs coming at her from every direction. It's difficult to trace the trait back any further. Inspecting the photos hung in the stairwell, I try to imagine the clenched smiles opening. Grandpa, in particular, appears to hate pictures. The smile on his face is close to a grimace. Post-*CHEESE!,* post-shutter, it's easy to imagine the muscles relaxing, the stress and anxiety turned to a sigh.

Over lunch, I tell a friend how much I like sighing.

—Yeah, it feels good, she says.

I don't think she gets it. The thing, I say, is that it's paralinguistic, neglecting to mention I looked this word up. The sigh conveys emotion, we know what it means, but a *pure* sigh comes straight from the lungs. Air's all it is. Sure, I say, often there's a sound to go with it, a low note that comes from the back of the throat, but the reason it feels good doesn't have a thing to do with the vocal chords. It has everything to do with the ribcage, the chest, the way the act mirrors the emotion we're feeling; the sigh is a wish, I say, to suck in every last thing in the air, the good and the bad, the sublime and the shitty—a wish to suck it in, feel it, then send it all back out into the world. To do with the chest what we can't with the brain.

My friend is nodding. I'm out of breath, light-headed.

I ask about Lauren.

—You *still* haven't talked?

—No, we haven't. It's insane that we haven't.

—So you want to?

—I don't know, I don't want us not to.

—I saw her, I say, in her car at the store. I didn't pull in.

In: the space fills, I can hold it, I think, of course I can hold it, there's way more in here than I thought I could hold: socks shushing on floorboards, brown hair gleaming in the glare of a lamp, french bread, blue cheese and sun-dried tomatoes, fingers tickling an itch on my scalp.

Out: my head's light, my lungs are a bellows, the room a hot air balloon that's no longer tethered.

NEAR HERE

The first sign was found by an old hunting cabin. Rushing to make the lake before dark, a fisherman decided to try out a shortcut. He stomped off the trail through low, twiggy plants, water soaking his jeans.

Waders. He should've worn waders.

Maples turned to willows, willows to pines. Weaving between them, he grabbed one for balance, then drew back his hand—all covered in sap. Ahead he saw some kind of shape on a tree. Looked like a towel. Possibly someone had gone for a swim. Now he saw it was a big slab of metal. A historical marker, by the look of the thing. Setting down his load, moving closer, he read:

JESS
NEAR HERE, MY GIRLFRIEND PULLED
ME DOWN TO THE DIRT. "YOUR SKIRT,"
I SAID. "IT'LL GET ALL MESSED UP."
SHE SAID IT WAS OLD.
HER GOOD CLOTHES WERE PACKED.

*

—So you say you like history?

—Yes, said Jason.

—What is needed is for you to put two things together.

Dimitri flapped the job application.

—Here, it says you studied welding in high school.

—I took a welding class, yeah.

—There you go, said Dimitri. That I like hearing! The historical marker, it consists of two pieces: the plaque of names, dates and places, and the pole that gets screwed on and stuck in the ground.

Jason nodded. His entire life, he'd seen the blue and gold signs. By dirt roads and highways, on the lawns of churches, houses and schools, near engineering marvels like bridges and tunnels.

—Plaque and pole, said Dimitri. These two pieces you'll be fitting together.

—So I've got it?

—You have it. Tomorrow at nine.

Jason got up to go.

—Your father, said Dimitri. Make sure to thank him.

The New York seal smacked onto the plaque, branding two robed women, an eagle, a sun. Jason's head hurt. The night before, he'd gotten too drunk. The foundry was dark. Across the floor, Dad was bent over, working, his creased face lit by the glare of the welding torch. The two could have talked, if it weren't for the machinery, the shrieks of noise: could've talked about Mom, how, in terms of her leaving, she'd timed it just right. How Jason's sister, Elizabeth, had been promised a puppy and was happy to follow. Jason could've used the opportunity to make certain truths a bit more explicit: Dad, he could've said, I've really got to move out, I'm twenty-three, it's been long enough. Once I have cash, I need to try something new. You've got to accept that.

A plaque stopped in front of him on the conveyer belt. Jason hefted a pole from the container, jammed it into its cylindrical slot, then spun it around until the screw-holes lined up. He slid two screws in place. Then, with a screw gun, he drove the things home. Jason turned the sign over. He read:

TOWN OF HAMDEN
FIRST SETTLEMENT 1799 BY
DAVID HARROWER AND WIFE, THEIR
SONS, DAVID AND DUGAL. THESE
PIONEERS ARE BURIED NEAR HERE.

He saw a shaggy-lawned cemetery, a granite headstone split down the middle. A covered bridge bending over the river. Hamden was nearby. He pictured the marker placed out in a field, drivers pulling over to read what it said. He'd never thought of pioneers so close to home. Jason punched a button, and the marker sped off—heading toward the loading dock, the back of a truck.

They churned history out so fast, it amazed him. Stopping to read every sign that he could, Jason let the fragments fly through his head: UNDER-SHERIFF STEELE SLAIN BY ANTI-RENTERS; FARM AND GRAVE; MOHAWK INDIANS ON HUNTING EXCURSIONS; DELAWARE RIVER, NAMED FOR LORD DELAWARE; SETTLED IN 1819, BY OX-TEAM; FIRST CHURCH; KINGSTON TO JERICHO.

Jason asked a coworker if he read the signs, ever.

—Not really. In one ear, out the other, you know?

Jason laughed. Pretty soon they stopped talking.

Calling it history, that's what intrigued him. That some shitty house, some overgrown graveyard, some field full of junk—this stuff got called history, because the house was the place where James Garfield was born, the graveyard contained a famous soldier's remains, or the

junkyard was the site of some pivotal battle. Jason assumed there was a plan out there, somewhere. A brainiac behind a mahogany desk, surrounded by reference books and archival photos. This man—a former professor, or retired historian—wore a jacket and tie out of habit, even though lately he'd been working from home. A map of New York State hung across from his desk. Each time the man chose a place for a marker, he rose, hobbled over, and stuck in a pin. Maybe there were signs out there no one had seen: stuck on a mountain, deep in the forest, like someone had hurled them out the door of a plane.

On his lunch break, Jason asked Dimitri to explain the whole process.

—We get orders, he said. These orders, we fill.

—That part I get, but—

—From *where* do the orders come?

—Yeah. I guess that's my question.

—Orders come from all over. Anyone can buy marker!

Dimitri said it had been a Tea Party thing. Spending cuts, private money, all that.

Jason thought about this. There was no historian. No wall-sized map.

Dad was dying to see the Yankees. It began before Mom left. Dad bought Broadway tickets, and Mom said, That was nice of you, so Dad made more plans: a Springsteen concert here, an AMA Motocross Championship there. Things escalated. Not only did he start looking further ahead—Memorial Day, July Fourth, Columbus Day Weekend—but the plans themselves also grew more ambitious: a weekend on the Eerie Canal (Rent-Your-Own-Barge), backpacking (Catskills), and a Rangers game (even though no one liked hockey). It was as if Dad thought this

would force Mom to stay. That by filling their Beagle-themed kitchen calendar—and writing in Sharpie—he could keep her busy, make her forget.

Dad collected refunds, at least in most cases. But the Yankees were different.

—Come on, Dad said, waving at the game on TV.

—I don't know. What about the two extras?

—That's what scalping is for.

Jason thought back to the time his Sunday school class held a Seder. Pastor Mark had said, The goal is to teach you kids tolerance, but what he remembered was the one empty seat. The chair they kept open, on the off-chance Elijah decided to show.

—Seventh inning stretch, Dad said, standing up. I'm going to bed.

—You know, I am down, let's go to the game.

When Dad fell asleep, Jason flipped through the bookshelf. He wanted to try and read something for real. *Of Mice and Men* looked ideal: both thin and important. In high school, he'd just read summaries online. He brewed tea, put on sweatpants, and sat in the good chair. Then rose from the good chair to mess with the lamp. A blanket was needed. Also: a pillow. In the good chair, again, he started to read. The description of the Salinas River was nice. The words were smooth. George and Lennie appeared. He remembered the ending.

Jason set the book down and opened his laptop. Once he'd made it to the New York State website, the form was easy to find, and there were boxes for his credit card, name, and address. He checked his savings: $1,700. Each historical marker cost $525.

He'd write one, for kicks. To see how it works. The character limit would make it a challenge. First, a campfire came into his head—green twigs of kindling giving off smoke,

Parade burning purple because of the ink, and Dave always threw on the big logs too soon; black clouds shot up, like someone stepped on a puffball. And Jess was there. Coughing and protecting her mouth with her shirt. Her stomach so pale, Jason couldn't stop looking; tan a year later, sunburned in August the last time he saw her, and they followed a snowmobile trail to the lake, lay on the roots and took off their clothes.

Jason typed it out. He entered his card number. Then he hit send.

On the way to the Bronx, Jason ate jerky. Car rides were the only time that he ate it. They'd printed directions, figuring it was best to be safe, but the print-out was useless, too faint to read. An hour late, they got to the stadium. Then, for thirty minutes, they circled the neighborhood and searched for cheap parking. The lots were all full. Dad said, Let's splurge. They parked in the Official New York Yankees Lot.

Other stragglers milled through the plaza out front. Two big guys shouted, Anyone have tickets? Dad approached them. Jason hung back.

—I paid eighty—

—We'll pay fifty.

—I need to break even.

—It's the fourth. We're paying to see half a game.

—OK. Alright.

Jason looked on. Dad gave a thumb's up.

When they reached the turnstile, the ticket guy apologized and said they were out of the door prize. He pointed at a poster, which showed a plastic dish in the shape of a ball cap.

—We've got a bunch at home, said Dad. It's OK.

The Yankees were winning. From their seats in the upper deck, the field looked like a canyon, and the players—still, shirts full of wind—looked like stubborn trees sprouted from rock. Big beers in hand, the big guys arrived. Squeezing past Jason, they said, Sorry, excuse us, then spilled on his jeans. They clunked into their seats. They started yelling, Go Yankees, even though the Blue Jays were the ones up to bat.

—I'm gonna get a beer, said Jason. You want one?

—Sure, said Dad.

The first place was pricey, so Jason kept walking. Heading down the third-base line, toward left field, he saw signs for Monument Park, the collection of plaques and shrines for past Yankees. Jason followed the signs. The concrete ceiling turned into sky. When he'd reached the park—beyond the left field fence—the sun was gone and the wind had picked up. The park was a dirt crescent. No one was there. Around a flagpole were five blocks of granite, smooth like gravestones. He went up and read one:

BABE RUTH
A GREAT MAN
A GREAT BALL PLAYER
A GREAT AMERICAN

Overt. Lazy. This was what immortality looked like.

*

The second sign was found in the reservoir park. A group of high schoolers were burning wood in a barrel and drinking whiskey-Cokes out of two-liter bottles. Two kids stood apart. They stared at an oak.

—Probably a prank, said a girl with green hair.

—How come it's not funny?

Staring down the scrawny kid in the hood, the girl sighed, then coughed. The firewood was coated in varnish and paint.

—Maybe who made it didn't want to be funny.

—I don't get the point.

—It's pretty, she said. Not the sign, but the words.

The girl read them again:

CALEB & ZEKE
THERE USED TO BE WATER:
A RESERVOIR, HERE, AT THE END
OF THE LOGGING ROAD.
I BURIED TWO DOGS
ON WHAT USED TO BE BANKS.

*

Ten minutes on break. Two days till the weekend. Six-hundred and fifty dollars in his account. One more sign. He had enough for one more. Jason sank into the couch and shut his eyes. He saw the quarry he and friends had snuck into on Sundays, where hills of sand and gravel begged to be climbed, cars, after school, speeding to the old veal plant—the open side door, carpet scattered with brochures and bills and posters dividing cows into rump, chuck and brisket—then words stacked up: DOOR PROPPED, THIN SLICE / OF SUNLIGHT SPILLS ON CEMENT—

—Son, you awake?

Dad's face. Drowning in the curls of his beard.

—Yeah, what's up?

—Weird signs are popping up, don't know if you've heard.

—What?

—Signs that don't have history on them.

—Huh.

—Dimitri's worried it'll hurt our reputation. He wants everyone to keep their eyes open.

—Yeah, for sure.

—To be honest, I don't think it's that big a deal. If some whacko wants to write us checks, I say, go for it.

—Yeah.

—I'm curious, of course. To know what they say.

*

SKIP
I PICK UP A STONE & REMEMBER
THE MOTION, WRIST SNAPPING
SIDE-ARMED. MOM BROUGHT
STRAWBERRIES. DAD DRANK
A BEER. HAT FLOATING OFF
IN THE CURRENT, I CRIED.

*

The silt path was wet. Boots sank in, left troughs, a logo, circles in circles. A faint scent of onions. Wild leeks, Mom had told him at one point. Jason stopped, listened. Water always sounded best over stones. There was such a difference between a sandy-bottomed river—soft, shifting—and the slush and cluck of the Delaware on bluestone and slate. The sound of the river has always stayed with him. Maybe since the good times—coming here with Mom, Dad and

Elizabeth—were marked by silence, a complete lack of screaming. After fighting in the car, and on the path to the water, they sat in the sun. Of this place, Jason had thought: there's something to it. Something special that will always be here.

The river was brown. Stones were all over, the size of large coins. Jason made a hammock out of his shirt, put rocks in the hammock, then chucked them upstream. They skittered on top. He threw harder and put his legs into it. He wanted to skip all the stones he could find, throw in so many that they dammed up the river, stopped it from moving. Before that could happen, his elbow got sore.

A sign was near here. He didn't go see it. He knew what it said.

GREAT AMERICA

Kate's bed breaks. Not while she and Jake fuck, but after, when they're quiet and both breathing heavy. At least with the bed, the problem is clear: the wooden slats beneath the mattress have bent, so that now they slip from their slots in the frame. The first time it broke, Jake thought he was guilty. That he'd gained too much weight, or, alternatively, had been fucking too hard.

—Nope, said Kate, it's a cheap piece of shit.

—Should we try to fix it?

—Let's wait until morning.

The bed screws with his sleep. Waking early, the room at a tilt, his arm gone numb beneath Kate's back, it feels like all his insides have shifted. Blood thumps on one side of his head. The contents of his stomach or intestines—he's not sure which—gather together and press on his skin. They seem to want out. The desire for Kate that comes in the morning—the impulse to run a hand up her back and draw patterns, nuzzle her hair, lay a kiss on her neck—all of this compresses to a clump in his chest. He can't unravel it, tease it apart. He frees his arm. Then he gets up for work.

Outside, the sky is a big, frosted window. It's gusty and cold. The walk to the store takes ten minutes, time enough for a couple of songs. Jake unzips his pack and searches for headphones. Sweatshirt, granola bars, black, clunky shoes.

—Shit.

The Great American's a temple, or a painting of one. Then Jake gets closer. Cream-colored walls are scarred by loose stucco. Built before an era of sleek glass and skylights, the building has signs where windows should be, which advertise deals that aren't really deals: two bucks for eggs, two-fifty for milk. This way, the ads don't need to be changed. The sign on the roof is missing an "N." Great America, locals are starting to say.

Twin doors slip open. A blast of warm air.

Sarah waves, says: Jake! The news—have you heard the big news? Jake stops, thinks. Sarah says: Stop 'n Shop is taking over the store! Jake asks, Is she sure? Have they seen this shit hole? Sarah looks hurt. Dwayne will tell you, she says. Jake goes to the office. Dwayne says: Yes, the store has been sold. Yes—like a crossing guard, he holds up his hand—your position is safe, don't worry, now clock in, please, coolers don't stock themselves.

Jake takes his time walking down Aisle Five. He's worked here for years. Shopped here as long as he can remember. Now things will change. The bottle return may stop smelling like shit. The ceiling's so low it skims the top of the shelves; Stop 'n Shop might raise it, open things up. They'll fix the signs: block letters say BOTTLE DEPOSIT above an alcove holding peanut butter and jam, and it's been ages since Aisle Six held RICE on its shelves. The BUTCHER—a freezer stacked with London broil, sirloin tips, and ground beef—and the DELI—a rack of Oscar Mayer meats—may transform into departments demanding more manpower. Then there's the produce. All the vegetables are packaged in-store. Lettuce, carrots and grapefruits sit on slabs of foam restrained by Saran wrap. Shoppers are reluctant to buy it. They'd prefer to touch the stuff. Accordingly, Jake has less work to do. He doesn't bother keeping produce in stock.

On break, Jake says, Bullshit, absolute bullshit. Sarah lets out two lungs of smoke, which fail to cover the stink of the dumpster. Jake's on a railing. He looks off the loading dock, out toward the river.

—Bullshit, he says. Some vest, a tag with *Hi, My Name Is*—

—Jake, we've *got* uniforms. And they look like shit.

Jake enumerates the evils of a national chain. Stop 'n Shop is a big corporation, pretty much a machine, and he and Sarah, lowly employees, making minimum wage—they'll be mere cogs.

Sarah laughs.

—You gonna write a protest song?

—Alright, alright—

—The store might improve.

—It's fine how it is.

—All you do is complain!

—It's out of love that I do.

Sarah stubs her cigarette out in a can.

—How's Kate?

—Fine.

—I mean, how're things with you guys?

—Things are good. Solid. We like the same things.

He hops off the rail, feeling like sprinting.

—Alright, he says. Back to the cooler.

Jake hefts the milk crate onto a hand truck. The cold iron groans. He tries wheeling it to the front of the fridge, but steering's a struggle—as bad as with the worst shopping carts in the store, which list to one side and crash into shelves. He backs up. Then he arcs the thing toward the tunnels of light at the front: two low-fat racks that need to be filled.

When he shoves the first carton into its slot, a hand appears and snatches it up. Then the hand turns into a face.

—Jake, man, it's Fred!

—Shit, what're you doing here?

—I'm upstate for a bit. Want to step out of the cooler a sec?

Jake steps out and moves into the warmth. He gives Fred a hug. Asks where he's been, what he's been up to. Fred's been in the city, like everyone else—Astoria, since the rent is so cheap. He's waiting tables a few days per week, working on sculptures as much as he can. Installations, he calls them. Jake says he'd love to see Fred's work sometime, but Fred says that's tricky—it's all temporary. Swift decay, atrophy is kind of the point. He could maybe send photos? Fred holds out a small, brown notebook; Jake writes his email.

—Still think you'll move to the city?

—I'd like to.

—A friend of mine wants to sublet.

—Yeah?

Fred tears out a page, scrawls a number.

—Thanks, I'll call him.

—You still hear from Scott?

—Yeah. He's in Harlem, making music.

—I'll keep an eye out.

They hug again and Fred walks away.

When Jake gets home, Kate's painting a splotchy blue canvas.

—Hey, he says. How's it going?

—Great.

Jake walks over, touches her shoulder. Kate doesn't second guess herself, it's amazing. If Jake painted—which he can barely imagine, seeing as he never got beyond stick figures—he'd stick to one canvas until it was perfect: slather on one layer after the next, so that under each painting were hundreds of others hidden from sight.

—It's done! says Kate.

He looks it over. It doesn't look finished.

They make dinner together. Fajitas and rice from a kit. Jake's not sure which part he likes more: cooking for her, or watching her float from sink to stovetop to oven. He cracks a beer. He says, You'll never guess who I saw. Kate looks up from stirring the rice. Fred, Jake says. Fred Wagner, from high school.

—He does sculptures, yeah?

—Installations. He lives in Astoria now.

—Man, everyone's moving.

Jake looks around. A metallic lamp gives off harsh light, which makes the chairs and the carpet look cheaper. Milk crates—not stolen, but not borrowed either—hold the records he and Kate have collected. Framed canvases lean in the corner.

—Yeah, says Jake. We're good where we are.

After dinner, they drink. Put on *Astral Weeks*. They talk about friends: Dwayne, Sarah, Melissa, Scott. For example, Kate says, my friend Jaime—–you know her? And Jake does, of course, so now she's just Jaime, minus *my friend,* as in, Jaime's studying nursing online, she's living with Amber—you remember her, right? They go on like this. It feels good to know the names in her life. Jammed on the couch, they start making out, and Jake takes charge, gets forceful for once: grabbing Kate in his arms—she lets out an *oop*—Jake files past coffee table, bean bag and sofa. The bedroom is orange. A streetlight glows six feet from the window. Jake would pull the shade if he weren't holding Kate.

The bed. He's forgotten the bed. If he tosses her down, she might plummet through the frame to the floor.

—Sorry, says Jake.

—We should fix it.

—I know.

Then—going slow—they climb into bed.

Kate paints. Scott makes music. Dwayne takes photos—overt diptychs, mostly: abandoned thresher/X-ray of rib cage, rotting shed/rotting carcass, loose stone wall/bright human cells—and even Jason puts together signs at the foundry. Jake doesn't make things. He can't fix

the bed. And at the store, prepping the Grand Re-Opening Bash, he only gets urges to break things apart: to tip a handcart, to knife the Saran-wrapped lettuce and carrots.

Sure enough, the roof has been raised; the low ceiling, apparently, violated certain regulatory statutes having to do with ventilation and fires. They've hired the retired police chief as butcher. Trucks flow in daily with produce from California and Spain.

Jake goes down Aisle Four. Checking prices, doing math in his head.

—Is Kate coming to the party?

Sarah's in her new vest. Jake sighs.

—I told her not to bother. It's gonna be crowded.

—True.

—Let's get some air, before things start up.

They walk to the strip of grass by the river. Jake calls it the midway. He can't recall where he first heard the name; sometimes, he wonders if he made it up. The carnival associations seem apt. The path by the river is a good place to see freaks or score drugs.

No one's around. They sit on a bench. Up on the hill, the lights of the college—like a parking garage, or a storage facility—stain the sky yellow, suggesting a city.

—It's dark, he says.

—It's nice, says Sarah.

When her leg touches his, he can't move. He stares ahead. He and Kate laugh at Sarah—her bubbly excitement, her devotion to a genre called contemporary country—but Jake always adds, She's a really good person. She's happy, and Jake respects her for that.

—I hear music, he says.

—I don't.

—The party's started.

—I'm not in a rush.

—We should probably head back.

The band rips into "Brown Eyed Girl" by the cooler. The bassist is shivering. Their frontman's going for a man in black sort of look, if you don't take his red Converse into account. Before singing the verse, he hops around the mic stand, circling, stomping like his leg is asleep.

—They could've at least done "Caravan," says Jake.

Sarah rolls her eyes and dances off. Jake sips his free Pepsi.

The whole town is here: teachers and coaches, parents of kids who Jake knew in high school, county workers, bureaucrats, a handful of lawyers, guys dressed like farmers who probably aren't. There're more free samples than anyone's dreamed of, motivating people to circulate, mingle.

A stout man and wife start *Sha la la la-ing*.

When the song ends, there's commotion. The crowd parts—by the lobsters—and the local plumber stumbles onstage, gold harmonica clutched in his fist. Oh, says the singer, looking to Dwayne, who's standing offstage. The plumber lets loose some light, playful jabs. The band is vamping.

—Have we got a treat, a local legend: Cliff 'Lead Pipe' Leddy!

Cliff is dressed like he just got off work. Navy blue coveralls, complete with a tool belt. He strides up to the mic—judging by how the singer's face scrunches up, it's likely Cliff hasn't

showered since draining septics that afternoon—and raises his harmonica up like a trophy. His eyes close. Then he brings the thing to his lips.

This whole time, the audience has been whispering, chuckling. Once Cliff starts playing the whole place shuts up. The notes spiral up to the newly raised rafters, bounce around up there—separate from the band, the song that they're playing, which Jake thinks is either Tom Petty or Eagles—and the harmonica sounds human and mechanical and pure. Jake recalls his own harmonica at home, in a drawer. His parents had stuffed the thing in a stocking—not something he asked for, but something he wanted as soon as he saw it: the blue-and-orange box made an alluring snap when it opened and closed. Jake tried playing it with Scott in his band. They were all encouraging. There's a learning curve, they said, you'll get the hang of it soon. It kept sounding bad. He could only play one clear note at a time. Whenever he moved—up or down the scale, in either direction—it sounded like shit.

Cliff's song ends with improvised pyrotechnics. The plumber lights a sparkler, waves it around. A move which prompts Dwayne to corral him off stage. The lights go up. Sarah comes over and says, That was great. Jake agrees. An announcement comes on, wishing everyone well, thanking the community for its faith and support, saying good night, all, thank you, good night.

Jake and Kate undress with the lights off. Kate's first to climb under the covers, moving like she's boarding a shaky canoe. She prefers the outside, so Jake vaults over, careful, soft. He feels self-conscious in his loose-fitting boxers. Warm air pours from a vent in the ceiling. The down comforter is making him sweat. Kate turns over, pushes against him. He gathers her in. He knows he should kiss her, but he's on his back; he'd therefore need to turn his whole body.

Her breathing's so even she could be asleep. When Jake kisses her, it's clear she's awake. Her mouth tenses, moves against his. She keeps her lips closed; such distrust of the tongue. She's tender. He wants to stretches things out, take his time—let her mouth hold his for more than a second. He moves over her. She claws at his boxers. They stay horizontal, restraining themselves so the bed doesn't break. They stay in place long after they're done.

Kate goes and pees. Then Jake does, too.

They hold each other.

—You missed some great music.

—Yeah?

—Cliff Leddy wailed on harmonica. He called it a blues harp.

Kate laughs.

—I mean it, though. The guy sounded great.

—Good for him.

The fire whistle blows across town. Three piercing sirens, one after the next.

—It made me want to play.

—Harmonica?

—What, no good?

—I think you could do better.

She slips her fingers into his hair.

—I'm kidding. Do whatever you want.

Her voice is full of sympathy. It hurts to hear it.

—I will, I do. I love you.

—I love you.

No *too.* Like her love is objective, unaffected by his. He pinches her arm, then turns to the window. The room is quiet. And the bed doesn't break.