

Bunny Town, U.S.A.

Vern pumped dollars into the juke box until his cash depleted to the point he felt the need to make conversation. And even if he didn't like George too much—who did?—the guy was always good for a joke. George called them stories, but everyone else called them jokes.

“What was her name again, George?” asked Vern. “The redhead with the Tuff Hedeman tattoo?” It was an old story but a favorite.

“If I knew her name, I'd find her,” said George, and he hung his head in the way he thought people hung their heads when telling stories of lost love.

“Ah, go one now, you must remember something about her,” said Vern. He and the bartender, Deb, made eye contact, then covered their smiles with their beers.

“Know what I remember?” asked George. “I remember her legs. Legs so long I had to stand on the edge of the bed to get my dick up in her.” Deb and Vern met eyes again.

“Maybe it wasn't her legs,” said Deb.

“Maybe it's your dick,” finished Vern. George gave a fake laugh and flipped them off before ordering another beer.

“You don't know half what I know,” George said. “I've been out there, ya know, *in the world*. I've seen things.”

“You sure you ain't got that the other way around, there George?” asked Vern. “Looks to me like you see about half what I see.”

George adjusted his eye-patch and gave another fake laugh, but this one died before it finished. Vern felt a little guilty. Usually he never even mentioned the eye, no matter how much of an asshole George was being, but it had been a rough day at work, and Vern was a little short on the cash it required to make him genial. Vern signaled to Deb that he would cover George's beer. This seemed to bring George back to good humor.

“Hell, I don't even need it, ya know? Not really. I just wear it for the ladies,” said George. He adjusted the patch, though he did not remove it. Neither Deb nor Vern asked George to name a woman impressed with an eyepatch. Instead, Deb took a few dollars from the till and played a string of George Strait singles, as this was sure to keep the stories going.

“I was named after him, ya know,” said George. Deb and Vern nodded their heads. When there was nothing else to talk about, you could always get George going on his name. Most of the stories they’d heard, but every now and then he brought a new one. There was an agreement between him and the rest that he could lie as much as he wanted as long as it didn’t hurt anyone and as long as he made it entertaining.

“Yep, my Mom insisted on the name. She said she’d been staring at a poster of George when I was conceived, and as far as she was concerned, that made the baby at least a little his,” he said. This was enough of a variation on the older stories that people laughed, and George, always one to know when to take his bow, downed the last of his drink and walked out into the sucking heat of the July evening.

It took a few times to get the keys in the ignition, but he managed it. When George stopped at the lone street light, a Fish and Wildlife truck pulled opposite him at the intersection. George gunned through the red light and swerved towards it before pulling away at the last moment. He did not notice that he clipped the truck’s side mirror, and if he had noticed, he would not have given a shit.

Ruth waited until George was past her sight line before she retrieved the broken side mirror from the street. Someone pulled behind her and honked. It took a great deal to wave instead of flipping them off before she slid back in and drove through the brief remainder of town, where Vote Trump signs papered over the faded and forgotten storefronts and community buildings. Jackie’s Alibi and the Texaco gas station were the only things still hanging on. Ruth had thought the place was dead when she was kid. She knew now it had been dying.

About ten miles outside of town she pulled onto a dirt road and rolled past mail boxes with the names of people she called neighbors, though some were more neighborly than others. Mostly it depended on when they’d come to town. The folks who’d been there when she was a kid kept to themselves, with the exception of Teddy, who boarded the dog Ruth had brought with her down from Alaska since Ruth couldn’t keep Lynx in the house. The folks who’d showed-up after Ruth had been sent away were nice enough. She wasn’t sure if they didn’t know she was gay or didn’t care. Maybe if she had planned on sticking around, she would have made an effort to find out, but since she didn’t, she let it be.

Ruth studied the house as she pulled into the yard. Things seemed okay. No fires, at least. And the door was shut and the lights were on. These were all good signs. Ruth pulled the rifle from the rack and checked the safety, then carried it past the small gate and up the porch steps. She removed her boots and socks by the door, then knocked a warning before she opened it.

“Momma? Lucas?” she called. There was no answer and Ruth paused and listened. When she didn’t hear anything, she walked to the gun cabinet and secured the rifle inside. The cabinet had been her father’s, and the key had been lost when he’d left, so Ruth had added a combination lock. Not that Marie or Lucas would have had an interest in the gun. Marie would consider such a thing unladylike, and Lucas only liked digital versions of life. Still, Ruth felt better with the lock in place. She knew enough about her mother’s childhood to know that if the dementia ever took her mother that far back, she might well reach for a gun.

Rifle secured, Ruth walked through the living room and into the kitchen. Breakfast dishes were drying on a towel on the counter above the dishwasher, so she knew it had been her mother who had taken care of them. She walked to the dining room where her mother was set-up to make sand art bottles, a tool Ruth’s sister Sarah had used to keep the woman occupied. When Ruth did not find Marie there either, she called out again, then heard something and walked to the back of the house where she saw Marie in the back yard holding her hand against her chest. Ruth ran to her, not caring if her bare feet got eaten by stickers.

“What happened?” she asked, taking her mother’s hand to examine it.

“Nothing, it was nothing, I—” Ruth looked up and saw the familiar struggle on her mother’s face. It was always worse in the evenings.

“Looks like you have a pretty good blister on its way,” said Ruth, her finger circling the welt on her mother’s palm. She didn’t ask why Marie hadn’t been wearing gloves or how long she had been out there. She knew these were probably not questions her mother could answer.

“I guess so,” said Marie.

“Let’s go take care of this,” said Ruth, and her mother followed her back into the house without protest, which was as much as Ruth could hope for.

In the bathroom, Ruth helped Marie rinse her hand, then she dabbed antibiotic cream on the welt and wrapped a bandage around it.

“Is Sarah home yet?” Marie asked as Ruth secured the gauze with tape.

Ruth shook her head. “Just you, me, and Lucas tonight,” she said.

“That girl works too hard,” said Marie, and Ruth agreed, even though Sarah was dead. Ruth knew she was supposed to correct her mother, but she did not have the strength. Maybe it was cruel to allow the confusion, but so was forcing an old woman to relive the death of her daughter.

“Tell you what,” said Ruth. “Why don’t you finish getting cleaned-up while I find Lucas and get dinner ready?”

“You can cook?” asked Marie, because her notion that cooking was woman’s work and that Ruth was more man than woman still held strong, even with the dementia.

“Sure can,” said Ruth, and she steered her mother towards her bedroom. “You get cleaned-up and we’ll have dinner and watch NCIS.” At this, Marie perked-up, and Ruth left her to change clothes and went downstairs to the kitchen to start heating the microwave meals. She couldn’t say why, at the age of forty-three, she still wanted to impress the mother who had pretended she didn’t exist for more than twenty years, but she did.

While the first meal heated, Ruth went out to what was once a tack shed, but had been converted to an office when Sarah’s husband decided he would start his own business breeding quarter horses... and then llamas, and then emus. Ruth knocked on the door, but there was no answer. She opened the door, but Lucas did not turn away from the computer where he was typing furiously. Even with the window unit on full blast, the funk of teenage boy was still overpowering. She wondered when he’d last showered. It was the kind of thing a mother wouldn’t hesitate to ask, but as his aunt, one he’d never even met until she became his guardian, Ruth didn’t know exactly how.

“Hey,” she said, and Lucas jumped and minimized the screen. They’d had the conversation about internet predators. She didn’t believe he was in danger. He didn’t seem interested in sex at all. 4-Chan was the only site she’d found other than his email account before he started clearing his history. She didn’t want to invade his privacy. She’d learned from her group meetings for single parents that it was important for teenagers to feel they have their own

space so they can experiment with who they are and will be. When Ruth was Lucas's age, the place to do this had been the trees. She guessed for Lucas it was online.

"Found Grandma outside," she said. Lucas crossed his arms and shrugged.

"I can't watch her literally every second of the day," he said.

"I'm not asking you to," said Ruth. "But the deal was, you keep an eye on her, I'd pay you to be her caretaker, so you have to at least check-in, otherwise I've gotta hire Mickey again, and you've gotta find a summer job. If the sand art isn't working, put some NCIS on. You know she'll stay put for that."

"Yeah, okay," he said. Ruth told Lucas to finish up what he was doing and then get cleaned-up for dinner. "And afterwards, you and I are going to weed the flowerbeds so Grandma doesn't hurt herself again trying to do it," she said. She didn't add the old 'it will be good for you to get some fresh air and move around a little.' That argument had worn thin in the first month after she'd arrived. 'Trying to make me like nature is like trying to make you like dick,' he'd said on their first and last fishing trip.

"Fine," he said. She didn't like his tone, but she went ahead and left. You have to pick your battles, the group therapist had said. And don't try to win too many at once.

Ruth had the dinners plated and the table set by the time Marie and Lucas entered the dining room. With the help of the sleeping pills in Marie's drink, there was maybe an hour before she was asleep on the couch in front of the television. The doctors said not to do this either, that Marie should wake-up in her own bed every morning. They didn't listen when Ruth told them Marie had been falling asleep in front of the television since her husband had left, so this was her routine.

Marie held her hands out so that they could join together and say prayer. Lucas didn't fight this. He seemed even more religious than his parents and grandparents had been. He was the one to take Marie to church on Sundays and Wednesday nights and he led the prayers over their meals. Ruth wondered if this was just something kids around there went through the way other kids went Goth or punk for a while. She'd been there herself, after all, youth group leader and president of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. It was a better option than getting alcohol poisoning and date raped, which seemed to be the only other social pastimes in that town.

Of course, her religious phase had ended when she'd fallen in love with Kendal, though unlike Kendal, she'd kept her faith. Another on the long list of things that had eventually driven them apart. She wondered what would end Lucas's religious phase, or if it would end. There were some who held on. She hoped he wouldn't. Maybe she could never be a mother to him, but she hoped someday he would feel he could turn to her, rely on her. That wasn't going to happen if he bought in to the version of God people peddled around there.

Like most of their dinners, the meal consisted of Marie chastising Ruth for everything from her job to the way she dressed to 'that other matter of which I will not speak,' then asking Lucas about his parents as if they were still alive. Lucas mumbled generic answers as he shoveled food as fast as possible into his face. Ruth couldn't blame him. Maybe not reminding Marie of her daughter's death was a kindness, but it was also a cruelty for him. He'd said it was okay, but he said that about most things. Like Ruth, he was just trying to get by until he graduated.

When Lucas asked if he could be excused until it was time to pull weeds, Ruth didn't have a reason for him not to be, so she agreed. She remembered how eager she had been at his age to escape her family and be with her friends, with Kendal. If she had met Kendal on the internet, or even if cell phones had existed, maybe none of what had happened would have. Or maybe it all would have happened, just in a different way. We only get to live the times we do.

Satisfied that her mother had eaten as much as she was likely to, Ruth told Marie that NCIS was about to start. Marie cleared the table almost as quickly as Lucas had. She set the dishes near the dishwasher, a post-Sarah's death addition to be avoided, and walked into the living room, the appliance's appearance not nearly as important as her nightly commune with Detective Leroy Jethro Gibbs, the box set of which Sarah had purchased just a few months before her death. There were small things like this that made Ruth wonder if Sarah had known what was coming. Or maybe when you lived with a violent man, you always planned on the day he ended you.

Ruth played the DVD and settled her mother onto the couch with a blanket and house socks. Ruth wanted nothing more than to sink into the couch herself, but she had told Lucas they would be weeding flower beds and so they would weed the flower beds. No matter that her back

and shoulders were already sore from an afternoon spent collecting and tagging catfish the size of dogs. The noodling craze was affecting the population faster than anyone had anticipated. She could only imagine how popular Fish and Wildlife were going to be if they proposed a limit and a season on them.

Ruth groaned as she rose from the couch and Marie shushed her. Ruth smiled. She thought the show was patriarchal trash, but she would be forever grateful to it. To Ruth's surprise, Lucas was waiting by the garden when she went to find him.

"Was the bandage on Grandma's hand new?" he asked as they gathered gloves and hats from the mud room.

"It was," said Ruth.

"I'm sorry," said Lucas. "I should be a better protector."

It was an odd way to say it, but Ruth was proud of him for admitting his mistake and acknowledging that changes in his behavior were needed. She wanted to hug him, or at least put her arm around his shoulders, but he was not one for physical engagement of any kind. Maybe just from her, or maybe from everyone. She didn't know. There weren't any friends who came by the house. As far as she could tell, all of his relationships were through his phone and the computer. His teachers said he was fine, but they were mostly the same ones she'd had, and they'd been negligent then. She was pretty sure age hadn't heightened their giving a shit.

"It's okay," she said. "But yes, you do need to pay more attention to her. Especially when I'm not here." Lucas nodded and accepted the gardening gloves with such solemnity she felt as if she were knighting him.

After they'd cleared the flower beds, Ruth told Lucas he could have the first shower. He headed upstairs without further complaint or comment. She thought maybe she should start scheduling little activities like this every few days as a way to track hygiene. She would ask her group about the strategy tomorrow.

While Lucas was upstairs, Ruth went out to the shed and checked her email. It was mostly SPAM, with one message from the single parents' group reminding everyone of the meeting time and who was expected to bring snacks. There was nothing from Kendal. Ruth

didn't know why she kept hoping. She knew the silence was better for both of them, would help them both 'move forward' as Kendal's new partner had said. It still hurt, though.

There was an email from her roller derby captain in Alaska, asking if she was going to be back in time for the new season. She hit reply, but couldn't bring herself to say no. She exited the email account and sat back. It was the first person she'd heard from in how long? Three months? Six? It wasn't the fault of her friends. They'd called and texted and written when she'd moved back, but every time she'd started to answer she'd felt like everything she could say would have been sad. She didn't want to burden them, so she decided she would tell them about it when it was over. It had seemed straight-forward when she had left. Burry her sister and the piece of shit she'd married. Put her mom in a care home. Stay with Lucas until he graduated. Just a few years. She could get through a few years.

But the debts her brother-in-law had wracked-up had taken almost all of her savings to rectify, which meant she couldn't afford to put her mother in a home. Instead she had to care for a woman who had never cared for her. And now, even after Lucas graduated, she didn't have a clear way out. Even if she managed to sell the home acreage, she didn't know if there would be enough to put Marie in care. Would she take her with her to Alaska? Try to teach a woman with dementia how to not die in the cold? Would the doctors even let her? The law? She felt like she had been captured by the Okwa Naholo, The White People of the Water, who the Choctaw said lived like trout in deep pools and could capture a person by the foot, drag them to the bottom, and convert them into one of their own. She felt like the place had taken hold of her, pulled her under, and would not let go again.

As Ruth walked back to the house, her phone pinged a text message. She wanted to tell Carol that she was far too exhausted, but that wasn't how things worked between them. She sent an ETA. Lucas came downstairs as she entered the kitchen. Was he wearing the same clothes as before the shower or were all of his clothes the same? He smelled clean, and that was all that really mattered.

"Gonna go visit Lynx," she said as he passed through. She did go see Lynx every night, so it was only a half lie.

“Okay,” Lucas said, his shoulder to the door.

“Lights out by eleven,” she said, but he was already outside.

Ruth showered and dressed in lightweight hiking gear. Carol always teased that Ruth looked like she'd climbed Kilimanjaro by the time she got to her house. But the ticks were brutal in the hay field between their homes, so it was look like this or be so eaten up she couldn't stand to be touched, not to mention the risk of disease. Not that Carol thought or cared to learn about any of that. The walk from her car to mayor's office door was about as much 'outdoors' as she cared to experience, no matter the photo shoots she did for her campaigns where she dressed in camo and held shotguns.

Ruth walked quiet past her mother and stopped the DVD player, but kept the television on, leaving a still of Mark Harmon's face on the screen. The sleeping pills usually did their work, but she figured if Marie did wake up while Ruth was away, Mark's face was the equivalent of a night light.

Outside, Ruth grabbed the headlamp from the truck before slipping between barbed wire and heading across the hay field, one more piece she'd had to sell to cover her brother-in-law's debts. Their father never would have allowed it, had he been around. He considered the land a family legacy, more important, really, than the family itself. He would have found a way to keep the piece of shit's name off the deeds. He might have found a way to keep Sarah from marrying him altogether. But he'd died young. And, to hear Sarah tell it, a week after the funeral, she'd stopped by the home place and it was as if Frank had never lived there. Everything that marked his life in the house had vanished, clothes, toiletries, photographs. Marie had been hanging laundry and acted like it was the most natural thing in the world to have erased the man from the house.

“She didn't even seem upset,” said Sarah. “I mean, they hadn't gotten along in years, so I didn't expect her to be an emotional wreck, but I still didn't expect her to be happy. Like, happier than I'd seen her in a long while.”

Ruth understood. Their dad had ruled their home like an old testament king. It must have been the first time since Marie was twenty that she felt free. Marie had only been granted a few years of that freedom before the dementia began to take its toll. Or maybe the dementia had

extended it. Maybe she got to live in that time until the end now. Maybe all her years of praying and reading God's word had worked, and he'd given her this final gift.

Carol opened the door as Ruth stepped onto the screened-in porch.

"Thought maybe you weren't coming tonight," Carol said as Ruth stripped off her headlamp and placed it on the table by the door.

"Long day," said Ruth, and she curved her hands over Carol's hips and kissed her, but pulled back when Carol began to unbutton Ruth's shirt. "Tea?"

Carol blew a little air out of her lips in frustration, but walked inside. Ruth followed her to the kitchen. She had made it clear that she didn't need anything serious, and she sure didn't need anything public, but she needed some connection other than sex. Maybe it was growing-up in the church or maybe it was natural to need more. She didn't know. There wasn't any way to separate all the pieces of the need to their origins. Or at least she didn't have the energy or the time to do so.

"Mint or Chamomile?" asked Carol as she set the kettle on the stove and pulled a few jars down from a cabinet. No boxed tea for this woman. Carol's husband had inherited some property where the fracking companies had discovered natural gas. He'd been elected mayor unopposed soon after. He'd died part way through his second term, leaving Carol to inherit the money and the mayor seat, which she'd kept through three elections since, a first for any woman.

"Chamomile," said Ruth. She slid onto one of the barstools at the kitchen island and watched Carol measure the tea leaves into the pot and select mugs. They'd met when Ruth had been asked to estimate the raccoon population within the city limits. Ruth hadn't realized Carol had taken an interest in her as much as the animals until Carol had basically jumped her during an "information session" in the mayor's office one night. Had Ruth been attracted to the woman? It would be difficult not to be. Would she have dated her were there other options? Probably not. Carol was a Republican. And even if she was more in the Rockefeller line than the Trump one, it still left Ruth uneasy. But there was enough good in Carol to overcome that unease. Or maybe there was just enough lonely in Ruth.

“So, what made your day so long?” Carol asked. Ruth knew Carol didn’t really want to hear about removing animal carcasses from traps people set and then forgot about, leaving the animals to starve and the meat to rot. Or picking-up the carcasses of those they gut shot and were too lazy or too drunk to follow and retrieve. And Ruth didn’t want to tell Carol about George knocking her side mirror off of her truck because of some ancient and convoluted family feud. She didn’t want to talk about her mother’s rotting brain and lying to her about her dead daughter. She didn’t want to talk about how sad Lucas made her every time she spoke to him. For as much as she was the one to demand they talk, there wasn’t much she ever wanted to say, which was fine, since Carol could talk enough for both of them.

“Usual,” said Ruth. “How was yours?” The intricacies of small town politics and grift weren’t all that fascinating, but she liked Carol’s voice and she liked having someone alive and alert to be around. Maybe her politics were off, but she was passionate and engaged and there weren’t all that many people like that around.

While the women had their tea, Carol used a potholder and a few utensils to demonstrate the bargaining impasse between the city and the county regarding bridge repair. Then she explained how the city needed to cut taxes in order to entice businesses to move there. Ruth knew it would take more than a low tax rate to make a business choose Peekolah, but she didn’t say anything. It was like listening to a teenager talk about becoming a famous actress. The fantasy of reviving the town enlivened Carol, gave her a purpose, and there wasn’t much harm she could do to a corpse. Ruth let Carol’s voice wash over her. It was not, and would never be love, but what they could give each other was enough, at least for a time.

Ruth was massaging her wrist and hand when the house started shaking. It wasn’t the first tremor they had ever felt, but this one was stronger than usual, and it lasted long enough that Ruth got to her feet and asked if they should get into a doorway.

“This house is California earthquake certified,” said Carol. “No Oklahoma tremor is gonna shake it loose.” The shaking stopped and Ruth sat back on the bed, her heartrate in her ears. There was the earthquake in Fairbanks that had collapsed a friend’s cabin, pinned her

partner, taken her left arm. New to them, the people in Oklahoma treated earthquakes like quirks, especially the people like Carol who profited from the fracking that caused them.

“You sure are cute when you’re worried,” said Carol. She began kissing Ruth’s neck. Ruth pulled away. The phone rang.

“Lovejoy residence, Mayor Carol Lovejoy speaking,” said Carol, then she stood so fast she almost pulled the phone base off of the nightstand. Ruth reached-out and steadied it. “Holy shit. Yeah. Okay. Ya know what, call me on my cell.” She hung up and jogged out of the room. Ruth got dressed, made the bed, and gathered Carol’s clothes from the floor. She found her in the master bedroom pulling on nylons, her cell phone on the dresser.

“Is Cuthbertson on his way?” she asked, naming the local man who ran against Carol every race and who had an in with the police and fire departments, which he used to beat Carol to the scenes of accidents and fires. The whole thing seemed absurd to Ruth, but she guessed people would fight over whatever scraps of power they could scrounge.

“You can get there first if you leave now,” said a voice Ruth knew was Greg, Carol’s long-time assistant, who Ruth was pretty sure suspected them.

“I’ll be there in twenty,” said Carol. She pulled on a skirt, then rushed to her vanity and began slapping on makeup and pinning up her hair. She caught sight of Ruth standing in the doorway with the clothes in her hands.

“Hand me my phone?” she asked, and gestured towards it over her shoulder. Ruth retrieved it as Carol rose and slipped into a pair of heels.

“What’s up?” asked Ruth. She would have just left, but whatever it was, it seemed urgent and she was as curious as anything else.

“Sink hole swallowed the Dulaney place,” she said. “Vern was at the Alibi, but the wife and kids were inside. Whole house, bam, down.”

“The earthquake,” said Ruth. Carol ignored her.

“Rescue team is on its way from Poteau. Volunteers are down there now. Greg’s gonna call Liz at the paper, get a shot of me helping. I hope I get to pull out one of the kids,” said Carol.

“You mean because you hope the kids are okay,” said Ruth.

“Of course that’s what I mean,” said Carol, but she had paused long enough for Ruth to know that was not what she had meant. In the last few months, Carol had begun setting her sights on a higher position. Maybe a state house seat. Maybe the senate. Maybe even governor. Ever since, Ruth had watched her become less focused on policy and people and more on social media engagement and ‘name recognition.’ Ruth had no doubt Carol was imagining the ‘boost’ a photo like that might give to her ‘brand.’ Ruth hated herself for even knowing those terms.

“Don’t you think you should wear boots or something if you’re going to be pulling someone out of a sinkhole?” asked Ruth.

“I look like I was up late working when I got the call,” said Carol. “It looks less calculated this way.” Ruth didn’t guess the irony of that statement registered.

“I’m gonna head back,” said Ruth. Carol nodded as she slipped into a blazer. There was no kiss goodbye or plan for when next to meet. There would just be a text from a burner phone and the expectation that Ruth would answer. After what she’d just seen, she wasn’t so sure she would.

On her way to see Lynx, Ruth prayed the Dulaney kids were okay. The Dulaney place was in what was once known as Lootie, a community built on top of old coal mine shafts. There had been sinkholes off and on as long as Ruth could remember, but since they’d started fracking the area, it seemed like there was one every few weeks. And yet even now, with a woman and kids sucked down into a hole, no one would think to stop or even put tighter restrictions on where the fracking could take place. Maybe if Carol got her hands down in the mud and held the bleeding hands of children she would be persuaded. Then again, she hadn’t softened her view on guns after Sandyhook, or even after the same happened just thirty miles east of where they stood, the school her own children had once attended. At least she hadn’t thrown her support behind Trump. There was only so much even lonely could make her swallow.

The worst part of Ruth’s day was leaving Lynx. The dog was happy and well cared for at Teddy’s place, but Ruth was still her mamma, and she cried for Ruth’s entire walk home. Ruth wanted to take her with her, let her into the house while Marie was asleep, cuddle with her in the

bed, but Marie's fear wasn't a small one. She'd been raised by a man who bred fighting dogs and had fallen into a pen when she was young and nearly died. Even the sight of dog hair in the house could send her screaming. So Lynx, who had only ever given Ruth unconditional love, stayed with Teddy, while Marie, who had done Ruth irreparable and unapologetic harm, stayed in the house. Ruth understood that this was right and good and how things should be, but she also resented it.

The shed lights were out and the house was quiet as Ruth walked up. Whether this had been the case at eleven, Ruth didn't know, but at least it was the case now. Marie was still on the couch, the glow of Mark Harmon lighting her face. Ruth adjusted the blanket and turned the television off. If Marie had slept through that tremor, she was definitely down for the night.

Ruth walked through the house righting picture frames and returning her mother's sand jar art to the windowsills. Nothing broken, at least. She went out to the shed. All was in its place, though the computer was still warm. She guessed it was easy enough to know when Ruth was on her way back with Lynx's howling. Ruth picked-up some random piece of equipment. Lucas was such a smart kid. So good with technology. He had already taken all the professional certificates he could from the community college in Wilburton. Could probably get a better job than hers straight out of high school. Sarah would be so proud of him. What kind of man made the choice to leave his kid an orphan? The kind he'd been, she guessed, was the answer.

Ruth locked the shed and followed the Christmas lights Sarah had strung back to the house. She secured the doors and windows, then went upstairs to what had once been her parents' room, even though she could already tell rest would be pointless. Ever since the good Christians at Coming Home had tried to shock the gay out of her, she'd had insomnia and migraines. After so many years, she could feel when either was approaching. She almost welcomed the insomnia, which left her tired and hazy, but did not leave her in bed, every sound a drill at her skull, only a circle of light on the periphery of her vision, the way, in an Alaskan winter, the sun would touch the horizon without ever rising.

That morning, Ruth had a site visit to Robber's Cave Park. Her supervisor, Kyle, took all of the site visits he could, but the Robber's Cave one coincided with Beaver's Bend, and she

couldn't blame him for taking the latter. On her way past the tent sites, Ruth saw a little girl in a Minnie mouse swimsuit holding part of a hot dog bun towards a rabbit. Something about the girl's dirty face and scabby arms made her slow and lower her window. "You need to keep your pets on a leash. It's as much for their safety as anything," she said. The girl didn't look up.

"She's not my pet," said the girl. "I found her."

"Well, that's not a wild rabbit," said Ruth. "So she's someone's pet. Would you do me a favor and tell them what I said when they come find it?"

"She's not a pet," said the girl. "She's wild. She's wild and I'm taming her."

Ruth thought of all the animals she had tried to tame and keep—opossums and squirrels and raccoons. It was an urge she understood. This, however, was not a wild rabbit. It was clearly some kind of pet breed, though Ruth didn't know enough about domesticated rabbits to say for sure what species. She told the little girl she had to take some photos in case someone came looking for it, then she took the camera off the passenger seat. The images would be useful when someone reported their pet missing, if nothing else.

Just as Ruth was taking a close-up of the rabbit's face, the girl moved and the rabbit sprinted away. The girl made a lunge for it, but it disappeared into the trees. Ruth hoped it would stay close to the campsites. It would be hawk food in no time if it didn't. Might be anyway.

"Rabbits like vegetables," said Ruth, putting the camera back into its bag. "Lettuce and carrots."

"I know," said the girl. "But we don't have any of that."

"I can show you where some things grow wild," said Ruth. She pulled a map and a pamphlet on edible and poisonous plants of the park from the armrest box and the pen from her pocket.

"I'm not going anywhere with a stranger," said the little girl. Ruth bit back a grin and marked the areas on the map where watercress and clover could be found. She handed the map and the pamphlet out the window.

"Good," said Ruth. "Never go with strangers. Even ones in uniforms. I meant I could show you on this map. Take this too. It'll help you identify the right plants. Don't want to end-up in a patch of poison ivy."

“I can have this?” asked the girl approaching the truck as if Ruth were holding a bag of gold towards her. “All of this?”

“Absolutely,” said Ruth. The girl crept towards her, then snatched the items from her hand and drew back a few feet. Smart, thought Ruth.

“I can have this,” said the girl again, turning it over in her hands.

“It’s yours to keep,” said Ruth.

“Kyrie!” called a voice and the girl jerked and looked over her shoulder in the direction of a camper van.

“Thanks,” she said, and she slid the map and the pamphlet beneath a fillet knife in the bottom of her tackle box. Ruth was surprised when she then turned back and held her hand out for Ruth to shake. Ruth took the small, rough hand in her own. This was a girl with her own tackle box. A girl who tried to tame wild things.

“Kyrie!” the voice called again, and this time a woman appeared in the doorway of a camper trailer with her hands on her hips. The girl grabbed her box and sprinted away. Ruth watched the mother, or whomever the woman was, take Kyrie rough by the arm and drag her inside. But Ruth wasn’t allowed to have kids because it would be bad for them.

Ruth drove to the office on auto-pilot. Kids were the final thing that had driven she and Kendal apart. She’d always wanted them, but Kendal had kept saying they should wait a little longer until Ruth had realized the “someday” was never. She was in her late thirties by then and probably couldn’t get pregnant without spending more money than she had. Now she was worried it was too late to even adopt. And that was if she ever got back to a place where she could. She wouldn’t bring one up in that place. She wouldn’t spark a life just to watch it drown.

As Ruth pulled into the yard that evening, Donald Trump came over the radio, announcing that Mexicans were coming over boarder to rape and kill. She hit the dial so hard it broke off in her hand. She couldn’t wait until she never had to hear that man’s voice or see his face ever again.

She was trying to remember if there was super glue in the house when she walked onto the porch and saw water seeping from beneath the front door. She left the rifle on a chair outside

and rushed in to find the dishwasher gushing. She slid her way to it and tried to turn the power off, then had to wrench the entire unit from the wall and unplug it. Once she had tackled the machine, she began calling for her mom and Lucas. She found Marie curled in Ruth's bed upstairs, rocking and crying. Ruth sat beside her and put her arm around her shoulders and made shushing noises and told her it would be okay. It was just a little water. Everything was fine.

When Marie was somewhat calmed, Ruth went to the window and yelled for Lucas again. The shed door opened and he yelled back. Conscious of Marie behind her, Ruth did her best to keep the anger out of her voice when she told him he needed to come upstairs. Now. No argument. She watched him turn and slam into the shed and then back out again. She returned to Marie. She listened to Lucas' angry stomping into the house until he saw the water. She heard him walk slowly up the stairs and to her room.

Before he could speak, Ruth held her hand up and said, "I need you to do these things in this order: Go get grandma's special drink and bring it here. Then grab every towel you can find and make a perimeter around the water so it doesn't spread. Then open the kitchen and front door, grab a broom, and sweep as much of the water out as you can. I'll join you as soon as I get her down." Lucas nodded and opened his mouth to speak, but Ruth shot him a look and he left.

Ruth stayed with Marie until she heard her soft snoring. When she got downstairs, she grabbed the porch broom and joined Lucas. When they had swept what they could, they got the box fans out of Sarah's closet and set them in the corners on high. They didn't speak except when Ruth pointed out a spot that needed attention. When the first load of towels was in the washing machine, Lucas said he didn't know what had happened, that he had set a timer on his phone, had been checking on Marie every half hour. "She was working on her bottles," he said. "She was fine."

Ruth nodded. It hadn't been intentional after all, and was she really mad about the dishwasher breaking and the damage to the house and the terror it had caused Marie? Or was she mad that her sister was dead and she might not ever have kids and Donald Trump was cheered as he spewed the worst of America? Any of it. All of it. She needed to get out of the house.

"I'm going to go see Lynx," Ruth said. "Take care of the dishes."

"Dishes are women's work," Lucas said. Ruth turned to him and examined his face.

“Was that a joke?” she asked.

“It’s not a joke,” said Lucas. “Dishes are women’s work and I’m not doing them.” Ruth took a breath.

“In what universe do you think you get to say shit like that to me?” she asked.

“The one where I’m the man of this house,” he said and stepped towards her.

“The what?” she asked.

“The *man* of the house,” he said. He took another step until his face was only a few inches from hers and without thinking, Ruth grabbed his arm and pulled him out of the house and into the yard. He struggled against her, but she did not let go until they were far enough away to not wake Marie. He struggled more when they stopped and she twisted his arm until he winced and stilled.

“Listen, kiddo,” she said. “I know it’s been hard, and I know you don’t like me much, but you do not have leave to talk to me like that, got it?” He didn’t respond, she twisted his arm again. He nodded.

“And I don’t know where this horse shit is coming from, but I think I have an idea, and I’m taking away the computer and the phone until you can prove that you have a better relationship with reality,” she said, and let go.

“Fuck you,” he said, and took a swing at her. She dodged the blow and pushed him backwards. He came at her again and she side-stepped and tripped him. He lay on the ground and began to cry. She felt the anger drop out of her. She walked to him but he kicked at her and screamed at her to go away. She stayed for a little longer, but then it seemed like it would be better to give him some space. She didn’t know what had happened. She had never been so angry. Had certainly never taken it out on anyone like this. He was a kid. What the fuck was wrong with her? Whatever it was, she didn’t deserve to let Lynx make her feel better.

Back in the house, Ruth secured the rifle and moved the towels to the dryer. She checked on Marie, then stripped out of her wet clothes and curled into Sarah’s bed like she had done when she was little. She wished so badly Sarah was there. If only Ruth had flown down and gotten her sister and nephew at the first sign that things weren’t okay. Instead, she had listened

when Kendal told her to keep out of it, that Ruth didn't owe the people who'd treated her like shit anything, even if they did share DNA.

"I'm so sorry, Sare Bear," Ruth said. "I'm fucking this up so much and I'm so, so sorry."

On November 8th, 2016, Donald Trump was elected the 45th president of the United States and rabbits fell from the sky. There were signs for weeks that both of these events would occur. The media was running a ratio of 3:1 Trump to Clinton airtime. James Comey had stated Clinton was under federal investigation. Trump had a catchy slogan and angry chants and bright hats and sexist jokes and racist fearmongering. Clinton had policies and experience and the baggage of spending her full life under the scrutiny of male reporters who hated her because they did not want to fuck her and she would not mother them.

As for the rabbits, Ruth had clocked the exploding population and been trying to manage it in the park, but had been denied the funds needed to do so. With Republicans in full control of the state government for over a decade, taking houses and jobs from oil and gas companies in exchange for lowering the tax rate to almost nothing, the state was broke. They'd cut her boss's position entirely and had cut back her hours. The regular job was already more than two people could do, and now that Ruth was on her own, she sure couldn't handle a crisis. She had turned to the Peekolah mayor's office, warned them that the rabbits would spread, but Greg had responded to the email with "we'll look into it," which Ruth had known would mean they would not. Ruth didn't bother reaching out to Carol personally. They hadn't spoken since Carol had begun campaigning for Trump. Ruth didn't even know lesbians could have bad break-ups, but there was at least one.

The rabbits did not actually fall from the sky, of course. They ran on the ground like normal rabbits. Exactly what caused what became known as "The Stampede" would forever be unclear, but that afternoon, just as school was letting out, hundreds of rabbits sprinted through Peekolah like a spooked herd of cattle on the Chisolm trail. Traffic stopped. Children walking home from school, at first delighted, began to shriek in terror as the rabbits swarmed them. A few men pulled their guns from their racks and began shooting, but mostly hit Trump posters and

each other. The few rabbits they did hit made no difference. There were too many of them. Put one down and ten more would rise up in their place.

In the aftermath of The Stampede, Carol used the weather text-alert system to call an emergency town hall. Almost everyone was wearing a MAGA hat and the atmosphere, despite being in response to an emergency, was festive. Every now and then, people began chanting “build the wall” and “lock her up.” Ruth stayed in the back of the room near the exit with her work cap pulled low. A few people clocked her, but she was mostly ignored. George, however, pointed to his MAGA hat and smiled. Ruth pointed to his eyepatch and smiled back.

It took Carol a few gavel strikes before people quieted down enough to start. She called for everyone to cheer the country being back on the right track. She reminded them of how she had campaigned for Trump and how glad she was that they were going to be making America great again. When the applause settled, she told them they could continue to celebrate for the next eight years, but for now, they were there to discuss the rabbits.

“I have some ideas,” said Brent Cuthbertson. He stood and turned to address the crowd, but Carol cut him off.

“I believe Ruth Brinlee has something to say,” Carol said and everyone turned and looked at Ruth. She had not volunteered. Had almost not come. She wished she hadn’t now. But she pushed herself off of the wall and cleared her throat.

“Well,” she said. “As most of you know, last year the state repealed the act that fined people for hunting birds of prey. Afterwards, the hawk populations fell pretty fast, which means most of the rabbit’s natural predators are gone, which is why we have the situation that we do.”

“So, you’re God?” asked Greg, who was sitting beside Carol with his laptop open, probably live-tweeting the event. “You can tell us exactly why this happened?”

“You don’t have to be God to know about the food chain,” said Ruth. Greg started to fire back, but Carol put her hand on his arm and they exchanged a look Ruth recognized well.

“Well, since you know so much more than the rest of us simple country folk, what do you suggest we do?” asked Carol. Ruth knew this was not going to go her way, but she didn’t have any choice. She couldn’t very well up and leave now that they’d drawn her in.

“Trap and kill. All the other options, like sterilization, are too expensive. We’d have to use volunteers at first to set and clear, but once it’s under control, I should be able to handle it,” said Ruth.

“Interesting,” said Carol. “Interesting, but what I wonder is if we can turn this into an opportunity. Anyone here know about Ridgeville, Ohio?”

“Why would I care about some town in Ohio? I want to know what we’re going to do about our town and this infestation,” said Cuthbertson.

“I am so glad you put it like that, Brent. You see, Ridgeville was down-on-its-luck until it realized it had something no other town had. It seems that Ridgeville was infested with skunks. And at first, they were gonna let some government know-it-all come in and trap and kill them.” People turned and glared at Ruth. Ruth didn’t know how she was the government when Carol was the literal mayor, but there it was.

“Luckily, though, the townspeople decided that instead of letting the government push them around, they would start a Skunk Festival. And that little festival has become such a success that it runs all year now. They don’t know what to do with all the tourist money they have. They’ve built a new school and a community swimming pool and everyone owns their own business.” An excited murmur rose from the crowd. Ruth slipped out of the building.

Ruth parked her truck a block away and waited. After about another hour or so, she watched people file out, all of them giddy in their red-hat future. When everyone had left, she watched Carol and Greg step outside and embrace, then Greg locked-up the community center and drove off. Ruth wondered when they would announce their engagement and if it would happen before or after Carol announced her run for some new position. Ruth waited for a bit, then fell into step beside Carol.

“So, these rabbits are a God-sent miracle,” said Ruth.

“The lord works in mysterious ways,” said Carol.

“You once told me prayer was about as useful as tits on a boar hog,” said Ruth.

“Maybe those tits are useful after all,” said Carol.

“So people are going to drive all the way here to see a town full of rabbits,” said Ruth.

“Bunnies,” said Carol. “Bunnies sound friendlier. And I think it’s going to take some visionary leadership, but yes, I believe these bunnies are going to put tourists on our streets and dollars in our pockets.”

“I’m still going to trap and kill the ones on state land,” said Ruth.

“We’ll see,” said Carol.

By the time the paperwork was settled that Ruth could, in fact, trap and kill the rabbits on state land, the population was so out of control that she began to find signs of cannibalism among the adults. She wondered what kind of tourist attraction that would make. ‘Come one! Come All! Come see the Cannibal Bunny!’

Without anyone else on staff, she spent every minute of her days setting traps and snapping necks and donating the food and pelts to whoever would take them. After a while, there were no more freezers to stock and she had to start burning them. All requests for more manpower were denied. They were rabbits, after all. If she couldn’t handle them, they would hire a man who could.

To Ruth’s surprise, maybe because he was no longer allowed to spend so much time in the virtual world, Lucas took an interest in the project, asked her to teach him how to shoot. Each evening after work, they practiced with the sand art bottles that had chipped or cracked during the ever-more-frequent earthquakes. They didn’t talk about the fight or what had been said in it, but Ruth thought maybe they didn’t have to. Kendal had always said that being near someone was about as important as talking to them, that there were brainwaves or microorganisms or something that jumped between people, connected them without words. Maybe she had just said it because neither of them were one for talking, but Ruth had found some truth in it.

Lucas proved to be a crack shot and on Thanksgiving Break, Ruth took him out with her on the job. It wasn’t exactly legal, but there wasn’t exactly anyone to stop her. On their way back home, the truck bed full of rabbit carcasses, the signs of people preparing to profit from the bunny festival emerged. The Trump signs had been replaced with stenciled bunny silhouettes. The yards were full of cages with eyes flashing in the headlights. Ruth wondered if they could smell that she carried their dead.

When they got to home, Ruth backed the truck up to the pit she had dug to burn the bodies, and she and Lucas piled the carcasses into a pyre, then Lucas snagged the lighter fluid and matches. Ruth said she was going to pay Mickey and get dinner ready. Lucas said he would stay until the job was finished. Ruth was proud of him. Hunting had done him good. He seemed to really be coming into his own.

The next morning, Ruth awoke to a migraine so intense she could not rise from her bed, nor could she speak loudly enough to summon Lucas. He must have realized something was off when her truck was still outside, however, and came to check on her. He told her not to worry, that he would check the traps. She knew she shouldn't let him, but those poor creatures didn't deserve to suffer because her brain was malfunctioning. She gave him the code to the gun cabinet and told him to wait to leave until Mickey arrived.

After that conversation, Ruth had no concept of time. She lay in bed caught between awareness and suffering until the sound of gunfire made her put her feet to the floor. Part way down the stairs, she heaved a dry stomach, and when the convulsions stopped her vision had partially eclipsed. She could only maneuver with the blurred shapes in her periphery. When she made it downstairs, Marie was watching NCIS. Ruth assumed this was the source of the gunshots. She tried to call for Mickey, but could not raise her voice, and assumed the woman was out back or maybe napping. Ruth put a hand on her mother's head, but Marie slapped her away. Gunfire sounded again. This time Ruth could tell they came from the yard.

Ruth fought her way to the porch. She could just make-out that the truck was back. She sunk her feet into her boots and worked her way to the computer shed, thankful that Sarah had strung the Christmas lights along the path, as she could follow light better than objects. She was a few yards from the shed door when her feet hit something soft but solid. No matter how she turned her head she could not see what it was. She slowly squatted down and reached for the lump.

Even through the pain and nausea, Ruth knew Lynx's fur and flesh. Her panicked hands traced the dog's body, found the hole and patch of damp and matted fur. A sound erupted from her stomach, which split her head further apart and made her dry heave again. When she

finished, she only a thin sliver of light remained. She felt for Lynx's body, then lifted it to her chest and wrapped her arms around it and buried her face against her as she had so many times. She did not know how long she remained there before the thin sliver of light in her periphery bloomed. She knew it was the shed door opening, and she knew it was Lucas who walked towards her, though she could not see even the shape of him. She felt Lucas squat beside her and bring his face close to hers as the last crescent of light slipped away.