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PRAIRIE SCHOONER
BOOK PRIZE IN FICTION

Editor: Kwame Dawes

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Domesticated Wild Things

and Other Stories

Xhenet Aliu

University of Nebraska Press / Lincoln and London

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Set in Lyon by Laura Wellington.
Designed by Nathan Putens.

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For Capt. Michael Jon Pelkey

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DOMESTICATED WILD THINGS,

AND OTHER STORIES

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You Say Tomato

My mother ate taycos and tortillia chips. She had good idears. She said that Mac was playing Nytendo, that he needed some deroderizer for his pits, that my real father had told her his name meant *warrior* in Albanian but it was actually more like Shit For Brains. My father was a Moslem, which was a word nobody used anymore, at least that's what Sami Rashwan told Shamika Johnson after she called him a dirty Moslem dicklick when he burped his way through *I Sing the Body Electric* in special chorus. My mother used other words that nobody said anymore, things like *coloreds* and *grody*. It was grody, for example, when her and Mac had sex on the waterbed in the room next to mine. I tuned the alarm-clock radio to AM static and held it against my ear while the mattress slapped against the bed frame with the patter of a wet fart. You had to sometimes burp a waterbed mattress to reduce air buildup and unnecessary noise. You had to sometimes condition it for I don't know what reason. This maintenance was easy to neglect and was why I was not allowed a waterbed, and why hers eventually sprung a leak that voided the lease and shorted out the downstairs lady's TVCR.

My mother said I was lucky because that last apartment was shit anyway, and our new one had central air and no bulldykes living downstairs. I was lucky to have a real home with a sliding-glass door that led to a backyard I never used because the neighbor's

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eighteen or so children infested it with their head lice and gummy Care Bear entrails. I was lucky to have a real home even if I had to wear fake Reeboks on my feet, and if I wanted to keep that roof over my head then I'd best not be asking for those authentic sixty-dollar Nikes Sue Applebaum was wearing.

I never found out what Slatora meant in Albanian, but in American it meant that by ninth grade it would become Slut-whora and that my shoes would always come from racks in Caldors instead of in boxes at Lady Foot Locker. I tried to make up a nickname, Tori, but my mother wouldn't let it stick and anyway, it wouldn't really mean anything different. Meanwhile Edward Donalds got to go by Mac, but that's just the kind of guy my mother would have as a boyfriend, someone who would give himself a name like that just so he could paint it on the cab of his truck. Sue Applebaum had to go by Sue Fattybum, and I was lucky, she said, because at least the name I was called implied people wanted to have sex with me.

No matter how many times I rode my bike the mile and a half to the Applebaums' house, I pulled up huffing to their street and had to rest a few minutes so I wouldn't seem out of shape when I got to their driveway. The Applebaums all called me skinny, but that was only because they were all as fat as their names made them sound: Sue and Stacey Fattybum and their parents, Dora and Samuel Fattybum. Samuel Applebaum was not fat in the same genetic way as his wife and daughters, just round in the belly from egg noodles and long bouts of unemployment. He was waxing his Dodge Daytona when I walked my bike into their driveway, wearing the fingerless driving gloves that served the same purpose as the bra on his car: none.

"Hey, Slatora," Mr. Applebaum said when I rolled my bike past him into the garage. "She's looking good, is she not?"

The Applebaums were people who said things like "Is she not?" instead of "Isn't she?" They got agita instead of stomachaches.

"Yeah, she's looking real good. Real shiny," I said.

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"Well, don't just think you can walk by me without giving me a hug, pretty lady. We will be feeding you tonight, will we not?"

I leaned my bike against the cement wall and walked back to Mr. Applebaum. He pressed his chest against my face and planted his lips on the top of my head. He wore Avon cologne that came in bottles shaped like pistols and spark plugs, and he tucked his pastel polo shirt into his pastel slacks like an off-duty police officer. Mr. Applebaum was actually a former police officer, retired a few years before Sue was born. *Retired* was the word they used instead of *discharged under circumstances not discussed in the Applebaum house*. Mr. Applebaum was also a retired Radio Shack manager, ADT salesman, and part-time community college recruiter. He slid his hand to the small of my back, his pinky resting on the thick elastic waist of the peach Hanes Her Ways that crept up past my jeans.

"Man, I have to pee," I said and pulled away.

"Too much information," he said, although Mr. Applebaum often peed with the bathroom door opened a crack. Sometimes Pepe, their cocker spaniel, nosed his way through while Mr. Applebaum stood over the toilet, and Mr. Applebaum pretended not to hear the creak of the door on its hinges. Sometimes he whistled while he peed, sometimes he coughed. Sometimes he turned on the waterproof radio they kept in the shower, and that was something I envied the Applebaums for: that waterproof shower radio, the unexpected indulgences tucked into the musky corners of their house, the feeling that everyone everywhere was entitled to a little something special.

When I went inside, Sue was wearing Stacey's Ministry T-shirt. *The Land of Rape and Honey*.

"Stacey let you wear that?" I asked Sue.

"For three bucks and a back massage," she said. "And I have to do her dishes all week."

Sue didn't fill it out like Stacey. Sue was that rare kind of fat: fat and flat, no giant breasts to balance out the kangaroo-pooch of her

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stomach. Mrs. Applebaum told Sue her boobs would come and the weight would go. She'd bought Sue the Deal-a-Meal system from television, and Sue shuffled through the cards as if that was all there was to it. The Applebaums were people who bought things from television: Deal-a-Meal cards, Time-Life music compilations, juicers. I could die from want walking through that house.

"So what do you want to do tonight?" Sue asked.

I shrugged. "Go to the Athenian?" I asked. The Athenian IV was a Greek diner run by Albanians who winked their eyes at any girl over thirteen who entered. Sue's mother let us go there because she knew we knew better, while my mother would never let me near it since that was where she'd met my father.

"I'll see if my mom will drive us later," Sue said, although Mrs. Applebaum always drove us wherever we wanted to go, and later, of course, she did.

"I'll come back around ten thirty to pick you up," Mrs. Applebaum said when we pulled up to the neon sign that lit the way to the entrance.

"Eleven," Sue said.

"Ten thirty," Mrs. Applebaum said. "I can't stay up all night waiting for you. Besides, what are you going to do in a diner for two and a half hours? Now give me a kiss."

Sue rolled her eyes about the ten-thirty pick-up time but not about the kiss. That she planted on her mother's cheek with a loud *mwah*, the sound the Applebaums would have you think every kiss naturally made. The Applebaums hugged in big round-the-waist squeezes that kept your lungs from taking in new air until they finally released you with a groan that sounded like their kisses: mwah. I thought mwah could've been a word I didn't know, a Hebrew one like the others they'd taught me. Shalom. L'chaim. To life, the last one meant. Shalom meant hello, goodbye, and peace. I used to wonder how people knew which meaning someone actually intended when they said it, but Sue rolled her eyes when I asked her.

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"Context clues," she said, which made it sound like we were playing school instead of whatever it was we were actually playing.

Inside, the host asked us if we wanted smoking or non.

"Smoking," Sue said, even though we didn't have anything to smoke. The old ladies who smoked Misti 100s by the inch stubbed their butts into hard elbows when they saw girls like us, as if the very idea of us could steal the joy from cigarettes. We flipped through the menus the host placed down on the table, but we would just order coffee and gravy fries like usual. We only looked through the menu so we could wonder aloud who ate the stuff.

"Salisbury steak?" Sue said. "I bet it's Stouffer's."

"Lookit, chicken cacciatore. It's like, a fried chicken wing with some American cheese on it."

"Chicken cacciatore? Is that what you want?" a waitress asked over our shoulders.

"No, just coffee. Do you want some fries?" Sue asked me.

"Um, I don't know. If you do I'll eat some."

"I'm only going to eat a few," Sue said.

"Me too."

"And some gravy fries," Sue told the waitress. The waitress came back a minute later with cups half-full of coffee. She left space for plenty of creamer, like we always drank it. Light and sweet, like us, Mr. Applebaum said. He called his girls *sweetie* unless he was mad. When he was mad he shouted and called everyone by their proper names, everyone except me.

"I'm sorry about this, sweetie," he'd say to me. "All this yelling around you."

The Applebaums were people who yelled hard and apologized later. They weren't people who shut themselves away for days at a time, pot smoke crawling out from beneath hollow doorframes like silverfish.

"Could you get the waitress to bring some more cream? We're going to run out in like, four seconds," I said. "Man, I have to pee."

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"Too much information," Sue said.

I got up from the table and wound my way around the loose chairs strewn about like roadblocks in the smoking section. Smokers didn't get booths with mini jukeboxes mounted into the walls. They didn't get to play Genesis or Joe Walsh. Life hadn't been good to them so far, which was why they were smokers. Still, they weren't as bad off as the men who sat alone in the swivel chairs at the counter. Those men ate pies from the glass dessert case and leered at girls passing by on their way to the bathroom. I walked the furthest path around them that I could but eventually had to swing close to them to get to the ladies room, which was planted so near the counter that every girl who had to pee could smell the Copenhagen on their breath as they let out grunts that approved of the best asses passing by.

"Slatora," somebody called when I reached the door. I turned my head toward my name believing that no one at that counter should have known it, but I saw then that I was wrong: I had earned a place among them. Mac Donalds grinned at me from four feet away, his pink tongue an earthworm crawling through the space where his right canine should have been.

"Hi," I said. The oval patch on the chest of his coveralls spelled his name in a cursive close to calligraphy, like an invitation to a wedding nobody wanted to go to. He held a Pall Mall between his lips as he spoke.

"Your mother know you're here?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I guess. It's not like it's a bar."

"It's worse. These are the guys got kicked out of the bar."

At home, Mac slept till noon on the weekends but was out the door before sunrise on weekdays. We rarely spoke. I just heard the grunts and creaks of the new box spring on the other side of the wall and kept my door closed until I left for the Applebaums'. I know he watched our television while we were gone because he spotted the sofa with change and sunflower seeds that had fallen out of his pocket, as if he had to leave a trail to find again the place

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that he'd left. My mother collected the change and dropped it into a bowl that she turned in for paper bills once a month. *I sure as hell earned this*, she'd say.

"Where's my mother?" I asked him. I just wanted to make sure she wasn't there.

"Kicked my ass out of there tonight," he said. "You hear about what happened?"

I shook my head.

"Big news, kid. I found a dead body on my truck route this afternoon. It's gonna be all over the news tonight. Don't you watch the news? You should be watching the news instead of all them soap opera pieces of trash."

I'd never watched a soap in my life. "You found a body?" I said. Instantly she flashed in front of me: a swollen woman shawled in gauzy white, as if the she'd planned ahead what to wear for the best effect. Or maybe she was naked. Maybe Mac stared at her nipples the way he stared at my mother's when she wore his curdled tank tops without a bra.

Mac choked out something that was supposed to be a laugh, but from the way his eyes jumped from mine to the ashtray to the exit sign humming red over the door I knew he didn't mean anything funny. He changed his mind because he knew it wasn't working and coughed instead, and a tiny black cinder floated down from his cigarette like a mosquito slapped dead on a forearm and flicked aside. "Well, parts of it anyway. Bunch of *parts* of a dead body."

"Oh my god," I said. I didn't want to talk to Mac, not then or ever, but dead bodies have a way of making you want to know about them, these people you never gave a shit about in actual life. "Where? How?"

"Out on 73, you know that real freaky road kind of near the old Watertown drive-in? Over that area," he said. The Watertown drive-in had shut down before I could ever watch a movie there, the broad white screens still propped up on poles like sails on a boat that had run a hundred miles ashore. Only people that went

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down that way were drunk teenagers on ATVs and the men who met at Maxie's Café, the gay bar someone stashed away in a place where wives would never think to look for their husbands' pickups. "Yeah, I mean, all hacked up. I literally fucking tripped over an arm sticking out of a cereal box. Fruity Pebbles. Fucking funny, right? Fruity Pebbles, yabba fucking dabba do. Excuse my French, Slatora. Kind of shaken up still."

I still saw the woman in white, tucked bit by bit into boxes. "I don't understand," I said, "you tripped over them how? Were they just in the middle of the road or something?"

He exhaled so much smoke through his nose that I wondered how his nose hair didn't catch fire. "Christ, you sound like your mother. No, they were in the woods. I had to take a piss, if you need to know that much."

I shook my head. I didn't. At least at home Mac peed with the door closed, although his stream was so loud that it carried through the two rooms between the bathroom and my bedroom. "But who was it? I mean, what . . ."

"Slatora, I don't know anything more than you do. I'll be watching the news myself to find out what the hell's going on." He shook his head. "Great start to the weekend, I'll tell you that much."

There were more questions I wanted to ask him, the last of which would have been, Why did my mother kick you out for finding a dead body? But Mac had turned his attention to the waitress refilling his coffee, and I knew that to mean conversation over. I started to walk away, and then Mac cocked his head back in my direction. "Don't worry, I won't tell your mother you were here," he said.

It was supposed to make us friends, I think, but it only made me forget that I'd gone over there in the first place to pee. I pivoted on my heel instead and rushed back to the table, where Sue sat twirling a thin piece of hair that'd fallen out of her ponytail. She barely looked up when I sat back down, but I knew she was glad that I was there. Sitting together in the smoking section felt powerful, but alone it was a reminder of why we should never let ourselves

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grow up to drink coffee by ourselves in a room lit entirely with neon.

"Holy crap, guess what?" I said as I dropped back into my seat. "I just saw my mom's boyfriend Mac over there by the counter. He found a dead body this afternoon. All hacked up into little pieces and stuffed in cereal boxes."

"What?" Sue said. She was envious of what I'd just said, I knew, the same way I envied that Ministry T-shirt. "What are you talking about?"

"Yeah, he found a murdered person. He says it's going to be on the news tonight."

"Oh my God," Sue said. "That's *crazy*. Who was it? Where did he find it?"

"I don't know," I said to both questions, which meant I was only lying about one. "He didn't want to talk about it. He said just to watch the news."

"What time is it?" Sue checked her watch. "Well, I want to catch the ten o'clock, then. I'll call my mom to tell her to pick us up early." She got up from the table and slipped out to the use the lobby payphone. While I sat alone, I sipped my coffee and the waitress brought out the plate of fries we'd ordered. I pulled one from the bottom of the pile and slipped it into my mouth, swallowing the last of it before Sue came back to the table.

"She's going to come in a half an hour," she said. "Why aren't you eating yet?"

"I'm just not that hungry," I said. The salt of the gravy still coated the roof of my mouth, and I ran my tongue along it to collect the residual stew collected in the ridges.

"I hate you. You're so skinny," she said.

I rolled my eyes, but inside I felt the blood pumping fast through my veins, egged on by caffeine and joy.

I was wrong about the body. There was no white dress. There was no lady at all. The newswoman said the parts had not yet been

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identified but that they likely belonged to a city contractor who'd been missing for weeks. Police were investigating the possibility that the murder was mafia-related.

"Damn guineas," Mr. Applebaum said. He stood over the couch through the entire story, poised to act should the phone ring and he be called out of police retirement.

"Now that's not necessary," Mrs. Applebaum said. "We've got all different types in this room and we're not going to encourage hate speech. Slatora is a Muslim, don't forget."

"My mother says Moslem," I said.

"It's basically the same thing," Mrs. Applebaum said. "You say tomato, I say tomahto."

"No you don't," Sue said. "I never heard you say tomahto."

"I'm just trying to make a point. There are a lot of different ways to say the same thing," Mrs. Applebaum said.

"Edward Donalds is your mother's boyfriend? What was he doing out on Route 73?" Mr. Applebaum asked.

"He drives a linen truck. I guess he was out delivering linens," I said.

"Delivering them in the woods behind Maxie's? There's only one thing that place uses linens for, and it's not for cleaning up coffee spills, if you catch my drift."

"Samuel, stop talking like that! Slatora is not her mother's boyfriend's keeper."

"He said he was in the woods to pee," I said. "And he tripped over an arm."

"Was there anybody with him?" Mr. Applebaum asked.

"I don't think so," I said. "He didn't say anything about it."

Mr. Applebaum laughed a laugh that was supposed to be quiet, like he wanted to keep it to himself, but of course we all heard it. "Stop it, Sam," Mrs. Applebaum said. "There are kids here."

"We're not kids," Sue said.

"You're *our* kids," Mrs. Applebaum said. She sat between me and Sue on the couch and squeezed both of our thighs. "Always."

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The Applebaums were always hugging and kissing and squeezing thighs. They'd taken the *honorary* out of my title and made me into one of their kids, Sue and Stacey and now Slatora. I even kept the alliteration going, an effect of a poet. The Applebaums were people who might even know what alliteration meant, unlike my mother, who laughed at the word *assonance* written on one of my English papers.

"Assonance," she'd said. "I'll kick your assonance good."

My mother sounded like she wanted to kick my assonance good when she called the Applebaums a half hour later.

"Where the hell are you? Did I give you permission to spend the night there?" she said.

I brought the cordless phone down the half-flight of steps into the basement of their split-level so the Applebaums wouldn't hear me. "I don't know. I don't usually need permission to spend the night here. I do it all the time."

"Well it's about time you get some rules. You need to starting asking me before you leave this house."

"It's not a house," I said. "It's an apartment."

"Don't get smart with me. A house is just wherever you live."

I wanted to argue but there'd be no point.

"And I want you back here now," she said.

My heart dropped down to my generic Reeboks. "But why? I'm just at Sue's. Why are you making such a big deal suddenly?"

"Because I'm sick of you people treating me like an idiot is why," she said. "You and Mac both think I'm stupid."

"I don't have anything to do with Mac," I said. "He's your boyfriend, not mine. I barely even know him." I didn't mention the conversation at the Athenian. I didn't mention the ten o'clock news.

"Yeah, well that makes two of us then. I didn't know I was dating a cocksucker either."

I kept quiet.

"Never told me he was a fag," she said.

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I kept quiet.

"What are you, a mute?" she said. "Say something."

"How do you know he's a fag?" I asked.

She snorted. "Watch the news, then tell me what he's doing out in the woods behind Maxie's. You know what the pile of mattresses behind that place is used for, right? Or do you? God, you're so naïve, Slatora. It's about time you grew up."

"I know what the mattresses are for," I said, even though I'd just then figured it out. They were used for the same thing hers was. I could see my mother there, through the phone: her limbs splayed over the bed like unwanted things, things she constantly shooed away. She wanted other people to take them in, like foster children.

"Well aren't you a baby Einstein," she said. "Now get your ass home." The phone clicked back into a dial tone, but I held onto it for another minute while I blinked back tears. Finally I headed back upstairs.

"What's going on?" Mr. Applebaum said. "Why are your eyes all glassy? Everything alright?"

"Yeah," I said. "My throat's just dry or something."

Sue's room held two identical canopy beds that she'd outgrown, but the Applebaums kept them so I'd have my own bed to sleep in. Me and Sue draped ourselves over the mattresses with *Seventeen* magazines spread out in front of us, her with the newest November and me with October, which I'd already read three times over the month. We both flipped through the pages too quickly to even pretend that we were reading them, until finally Sue looked up.

"I can't believe Mac found some guy all hacked up like that," she said.

"I know," I said. "For some reason, when he first told me about it I thought it was a woman. I always picture dead bodies being women."

"You're weird," Sue said. "Of course guys get killed. Probably more than women."

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"I know. It's just how I picture them," I said.

I imagined my mother at home, lying among bedsheets that hadn't been washed or made in months, her nipples poking out from Mac's tank top like tiny pebbles under a blanket. You could trace a chalk line around her sometimes, the way she lay on her back for hours. Then it would all go to hell when she got up and slammed a coffee mug so hard into the sink that ceramic pieces splintered off like sharp teeth and fell into the drain. Then she'd curse and break another one when the teeth bit into her skin when she tried to clear the clog. She might show up at the Applebaums soon, if she was mad enough. But probably not. Probably it'd be best to wait it out until the morning, when she'd pull her legs around as if they'd been cast in cement.

"Your mom sounded pissed when she called," Sue said. "Is she upset about it or something?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't ever know what she's upset about," I lied. I always had some idea, or many ideas that were all, I think, a little bit right.

"Your mom's even weirder than you are. No offense," Sue said. "You know I love you because you're weird."

"You're weird too," I said. "You have two canopy beds in your room. You gave your sister a back massage to wear her Ministry T-shirt."

"And three dollars," she reminded me.

"And you're Jewish," I said.

"You're Moslem," she said.

"Your mom says tomahto," I said.

"Your mom named you Slut-whora."

"She wants me to take after her," I said.

"I wish my mom had named me something slutty instead of something fatty. Now I'm stuck with this big gut."

"I've never even kissed anybody," I said. "So obviously the name doesn't have anything to do with it," I said.

"I'll trade you anyway," she said.

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"Gladly," I said, only I wonder if Sue knew I wasn't after her name.

The Applebaums were all blessed with insomnia. Stacey got to stay out until dawn at the Tune Inn in New Haven, spilling out of her room the next afternoon reeking of cigarettes and other people's sweat and the Sharpie marker that blacked in her fingernails, a perfume that Sue and I could only dream of wearing. The rest of the Applebaums stayed up for Arsenio and infomercials. I took my place on the loveseat between Mrs. Applebaum and Sue, eating Moon Pies and drinking pink lemonade to stay awake.

"That Bronson Pinchot is so talented," Mrs. Applebaum said after we watched him on Arsenio. Or "Wow, that stuff really works," after DD7 dissolved a pool of red wine from a white carpet. It worked also on rust. Grape juice. Pet stains. Blood.

"Wonder if that guinea used DD7 to clean up after he sawed apart that city contractor," Mr. Applebaum said.

"Sam, I'm not going to say it again. This is probably very upsetting to Slatora. How do you think Sue would feel if one of us had found a dead body?

"He's just my mom's boyfriend," I said. "I don't really care that much."

"Even so. It's a human being we're talking about. He deserves a little respect."

"Actually, he's kind of gross. I think my Mom broke up with him tonight."

"I was talking about the dead person," Mrs. Applebaum said.

"Oh," I said.

Mr. Applebaum laughed. "No offense to your mother, sweetie, but it doesn't sound like Mac is the kind of guy you'd want around, anyway. Just from my time on the force, I knew about the guys that hung out around Route 73. Not the cream of the crop."

"I know," I said. "I don't get to choose my mother's boyfriends, though."

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"Exactly. Leave her alone, Sam. She doesn't have anything to do with Edward Donalds, and neither does her mother anymore, so let' s just leave it at that."

Mr. Applebaum ignored Mrs. Applebaum. "You know, Slatora, you're welcome to stay here if you'd like. On a more permanent basis, I mean, if things aren't, you know, that *great* at home," Mr. Applebaum said.

I nodded my head but didn't say anything. It seemed speaking would make me seem desperate, for me to say that things were not that *great* at home, although I appreciated how Mr. Applebaum put things, in terms of what things weren't instead of what they were. Mrs. Applebaum and Sue didn't say anything at all, but I could tell from the way they stared at the screen with expressionless faces that this was something they'd talked about before. My eyes watered over again.

"The heat in here is so dry," I said. "God, my throat. I'm going to go put on my pajamas."

I walked quickly down the hallway to Sue's room. She kept a T-shirt and a pair of boxers she'd outgrown two years ago in the top drawer of her white bureau for me to wear whenever I slept over. I pulled them out but just hugged them to my chest because really I'd just gone in there to cry where no one could see me. I would come back in ten minutes saying that I'd gotten caught up reading *Seventeen*. I'd have brushed my teeth and washed my face and said that I'd gotten soap in my eyes. Red eyes, all that dry heat. But as I sat down on the canopy bed, Mr. Applebaum pushed open the door to Sue's bedroom and then closed it shut behind him again. I let the tear that slid down my cheek just drop from my chin onto the nightshirt, because by then I'd run out of other things to do.

Mr. Applebaum sat next to me. "Do you want to talk about anything?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Do you want to stay here with us?" he asked.

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I shrugged.

"I know things are tough for you," he said. "But you're lucky that you have a friend like Sue. You're lucky that we all love you. Some people don't have anything."

"I know," I said. "I know I'm lucky." My mother said it—lucky. Sue said it—lucky. I was a high roller, making all these somethings out of nothing.

"We'll make a place for you. You're a very beautiful young woman," he said.

I didn't say anything because I thought that would be conceited.

"Very beautiful," he said again. "Can I have a hug?"

I pulled in close to his chest. I think the cologne had gone bad. Those bottles had all sat on his dresser for years, and the musk and wood had long been swallowed by alcohol.

"You need any help changing into your nightclothes?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"I'm kidding, Slatora. You know I'm kidding." He smiled, and the tongue that crawled out from his lips looked soft and cold as an earthworm, like the one that'd been crawling out of Mac's lips a few hours before at the Athenian, as if Mac had bit down on it and it had regenerated, and then I'd carried the new part from one place to the next. Those were the things you could pick up on damp mattresses in woods: earthworms, things that crawled inside of bodies and churned them into dirt. They regenerated when you tried to cut them into pieces, and suddenly they were everywhere. They didn't even need each other to live. They didn't need anything, only really they did.

"I have to use the bathroom," I said.

"I'm glad you didn't say you have to pee," Mr. Applebaum said. "It's not becoming."

I brought the nightshirt and boxers into the bathroom with me and changed into them in there. I washed my face and gargled with Listerine and sat on the toilet for a few minutes, the radio in the shower on but soft, so only I could hear it.

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By the time I went back to the living room, Mr. Applebaum had taken his place on the La-Z-Boy. Mrs. Applebaum and Sue moved their feet off the cushion where I'd been sitting before I got up to change.

"We were keeping it warm for you," Sue said, and I sat down without saying anything.

What I wanted to do was say many things, tell a story laid out in pieces like a corpse tucked in cereal boxes, if only I could get the different parts to imply one whole thing. I wanted to tell Sue that in two days Mac would again be in bed with my mother, the static on my alarm-clock radio turned so loud they will bang on the wall to get me to turn it down until my mother storms in, swearing, and rips it from my hands. I wanted to warn her away from a life that in four years would uproot her to New Haven with Stacey, working as a telephone operator by day, passing Sharpie markers and ashtrays to each other in a condo financed by the double indemnity paid out after the Metro-North commuter train kissed hard the Daytona that had somehow stalled on the tracks, Mr. Applebaum found inside still gripping the wheel. I wanted to tell her that in fifteen years Mrs. Applebaum will run into people at the IGA and always, without being asked, tell them all about her girls. I wanted to tell her thank you for keeping the seat warm for me.

All of the ways to say the same thing, and dear God, I could never even come up with one.

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