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It's Not Going to Kill You, and Other Stories

Erin Flanagan

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Flyover Fiction
Series editor: Ron Hansen

It's Not
Going to
Kill You,
and Other Stories

Erin Flanagan

University of Nebraska Press | Lincoln and London

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To Kelly Hansen

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

It's Not Going to Kill You 1

The Good Neighbor 23

Dog People 37

I Don't Live in This Town 57

Front and Center 73

A Possible Story 93

The Summer of Cancer 104

Feather the Nest 115

The Winning Ticket 133

A Democrat in Nebraska 148

The Only Thing That Can Take You 159

All I Want Is You 175

Source Acknowledgments 193

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It's Not Going to Kill You

Candace wonders which is a bigger sin: to take communion and not mean it or skip it all together, and if she doesn't believe in God, does it matter one way or another? What she does believe in right now is keeping the peace. Her mother, Laurel, taps Candace twice on the knee then stands with her crutch in her armpit. Candace follows obediently, knowing if she stays in the pew her mother will be angry, the rest of the congregation taking note. She makes her way sideways to the end of the pew, trailing her mother's staggering step to the front of the church, where Candace sticks out her tongue to receive the wafer from an eighth grader in a white robe. Candace saw this girl earlier as she was dropping Wally off in the children's room—her too-short plaid skirt, a mesh top over a black tank—but now in the robe the girl looks angelic, the only hints betraying her true self are the too-dark eye makeup smudged above her eyes, the red lipstick too yellow for her skin.

Back in the pew, the chalky wafer dissolved and stuck in the back of her throat, Candace fumes that she's already bent to the will of her mother. Laurel called on Thursday night and said she'd slipped in the bathtub—"Nothing too serious. When I came to, everything still worked."

"Came to?" Candace echoed and knew it was worse than her mother had let on, that she wouldn't be calling and *not* asking for

help unless she needed it. Candace asked Rhonda Lantry to cover her shifts at the hospital—knowing Rhonda never did a favor for free—and pulled Wally out of school on Friday, telling the principal it was a family emergency and she didn't know when they'd be back. Saturday night when Candace arrived home, driving her Volvo down the long, rutted lane, she was surprised by her mother's appearance on the porch—her lined face, her white hair, an Ace bandage wrapped around her ankle, the leg unable to support weight. As a nurse, Candace could tell her mother had done the bandage herself, that the wrap was too lax and nearly useless.

"Nothing serious?" she said as she bent to hug her mother, and Laurel bucked away saying it's not like she cracked open her skull and to move out of the way so she can get a handle on that grandchild. Candace wondered if all this aging had happened since her father died or if it had been accumulating over the decades and she just hadn't noticed. Candace had promised her mother at the funeral that she would try to make it back every three months or so, but somehow a year has passed and she's just now returning. Each time she thought about it—the Fourth of July, Wally's birthday in September—she couldn't imagine coming home without her father—the quiet of the farm with no one there to mediate between her and her mother.

"I thought you were getting in a few hours ago," her mother said when Wally finally wiggled away. "I made beef stroganoff, Wally's favorite. It's a brick now thanks to his mom." And that's how Candace ended up in church, to pacify her mother. It's January, and she figures this is as good a way of celebrating the New Year as anything else: exchanging passive-aggressive lunges with her mom.

Candace feels a tap on her shoulder and turns to see the plump woman from the Sunday school room. "We've had an incident," the woman whispers, her eyebrows drawn together.

Candace glances at her mother, who hobbles behind her out of the pew, and the entire church watches until they're out in the hall. Wally is waiting for her outside the children's room, a stuffed Moses

in his hand. He is a soft-looking child who wears clothes from the husky section, still years away from the growth spurt that will lengthen his body to proportion. He catches his mother's eye and sniffs heavily. Laurel gets to him first—even on one leg she's spry as a chicken—bends at the waist, and puts her palms against his chubby cheeks. "What happened?" she says. "God find out your mom's not a Christian?"

"Not exactly," the woman who pulled them out of the service says. She holds out a hand to Candace. "I'm Gloria. I took over the Chat and Chew from your mother." The Chat and Chew is a Wednesday-night church potluck that Laurel quit a few months ago, disgusted that a woman's devotional had devolved into little more than a gossip session. She told this to Candace over the phone during one of their awkward Thursday calls, claiming, "You put three women in a room together and forget it. They'd rather talk about shoes than God. Give them a reality show and they can yak about it for days, but ask them about Original Sin and you can hear the crickets chirp. Stupid women."

"Nice to meet you," Candace says and shakes Gloria's hand. Another boy sits next to Wally, no doll to comfort him, his hair fire red. His wrists are meaty and thick, more like a man's than a child's, and there's a scab on his arm that looks like a rug burn. He smiles at her in an uneasy way, all of his teeth exposed. "What happened exactly?"

"This is Todd," Gloria begins, and Laurel steps forward with her finger extended.

"This is trouble."

"There's been some trouble, yes," Gloria says, and Wally leans against his grandma, his arm around her waist.

"Let me guess," a man behind Candace says, and she turns and is confronted with Keith Danvers, her grade-school bully. He has the same red hair as the boy, the same meaty build, and as she glances at the kid again she's transported back to third grade, the same age Wally is now, and he is so clearly Keith's son that

looking at him is like peering down a long tunnel into her past. Keith puts his hand on the boy's shoulder and squeezes. "You take a bite out of this kid?"

"That's exactly what happened," Gloria says, nodding her head, clearly glad to have the cards on the table. "We were studying Galatians 5, and he leaned over and bit this poor boy on the arm." Wally pulls up his sleeve and there are two semicircles on his flesh, a ghostly smile.

"Good Christ," Laurel says and turns on Keith. "You raising this animal?"

"Trying to," Keith says. "Kids have a mind of their own."

Laurel crosses her arms around Wally's chest, keeping her balance with the crutch. "Not if you're doing your job."

"This isn't the first incident," Gloria says meekly, and Keith moves his hand from his boy's shoulder to the back of his neck.

"I'll talk to him."

"You'd better," Laurel says.

"I'll gather the rest of your clan," Gloria tells Keith and disappears into the Sunday-school room.

He turns to Candace. "Candy Corin, nice to see you. You back visiting?"

"For a long weekend."

He nods toward Candace's mother. "Really long, I'm guessing."

Gloria emerges with three more redheads of varying sizes behind her. "All these are yours?" Candace asks, and Keith nods.

"Every one."

In the car on the way home, Laurel says, "You didn't do much to defend him," and Candace is stunned. She can't remember one incident from her childhood in which her mother defended her. That had been her father's job. Her mother's advice was to toughen up, to pull herself up by her bootstraps, that whatever was bothering her wasn't going to kill her. Laurel looks at her grandson in the rearview mirror. "You doing okay back there?" she asks Wally.

"Okey-dokey," he says to his grandma, and Laurel laughs.

"That's my boy," she says, and Candace stops herself from correcting her mother, from saying, "No, actually. He's mine."

When her father died a year ago, Candace and Jon had been separated for three months, and since that time she's gone back to nursing and started drinking two glasses of wine a night. She spent hours trolling dating websites and imagining the anger Jon would feel if she remarried first—how he would awake one morning in a shitty apartment with no one who loves him. Searching through the one-paragraph descriptions with spelling errors and ambiguous pictures (at best), she constructed a new husband around the absence of Jon, her rage converting to revenge. Her mother called one evening in January and told Candace her father was dead, from a heart attack that Laurel had watched from the kitchen window. "One minute he's driving the tractor down the lane to scoop snow, and the next it's heading toward the ditch and I'm thinking, 'what's that fool man up to now?'" Candace took the call in her own kitchen, her face reflected in the window like an apparition.

She hadn't told her family yet that she and Jon had separated, and the next day she called Jon at his new number, crying, and told him about her father and asked if he would go home with her. He said he would be happy to, that he wanted to be an ex-husband who would be there for her, an answer so self-serving it became in her mind's eye the reason they'd separated in the first place. As she stood near her mother—Wally between them, Jon on her other side—waiting for the pallbearers to bring her father's body and set it above the hole in the ground, her mother leaned over Wally and tucked a strand of hair behind Candace's ear. She turned toward her mother, her face melting into her mother's hand, and Laurel pursed her mouth. "You need a haircut," she said. After the funeral, Candace left Jon downstairs to fend for himself and ignored her mother's instructions to serve coffee to the guests. She and Wally lay down on the single bed of Candace's childhood, and she took

him point by point through the long-gone decor: the poster of Michael Jackson in a pale-yellow sweater that had hovered above her bed, an ad on the wall for Guess jeans with Anna Nicole leaned over a convertible, a stuffed Opus on the nightstand—the room of her childhood summoned before her.

In the house now there are signs everywhere of her father's absence. His rifle collection is no longer in the mudroom attached to the garage. The large radio where he listened to the farm reports every day at the kitchen table is gone, replaced by a small TV. The dining-room table is in the garage, the china hutch suspiciously absent. "You get robbed?" Candace asked when she entered the house after the thirteen-hour drive the night before, and Laurel snorted. "Make it easier if I would," she said. "I don't know what I'm going to do with all this stuff. That's just what it is too: stuff. Who needs it?"

After church Laurel hands Wally the remote as he settles in a nest on the floor, the carpet a vibrant maroon where Candace's father's La-Z-Boy sat for two decades. "Knock yourself out," Laurel tells Wally. "Fifty channels."

"That's it?"

"I got you some DVDs from the library too." She points to a stack next to the TV, a large flat screen attached to the wall.

"That's a new TV," Candace says.

"The people on Fox News are the only ones I talk to all day, I might as well be able to see them." Candace feels a flare of anger at the subtext—"since my own daughter doesn't call me, only visits once a year." She thumbs through the stack of DVDs, all action flicks, some rated PG-13. At this age Candace wasn't allowed to watch TV before 7:00 p.m. when evening programming started, unless it was Wednesday and her mother had church group and her father came in early from chores. Then they'd sit down at 6:30 and watch *Wheel of Fortune*, a show she still watches sometimes as she's making dinner.

In the kitchen Laurel leans her crutch against the fireplace and

switches on the small TV, the one that used to be in the living room, and lowers the volume to zero. She preheats the oven to three-fifty then limps to the fridge, declining Candace's offers of help. Laurel pulls out an egg casserole and orange juice. "You still take this?" she asks shaking the small carton of half-and-half at Candace, and Candace nods. The theme song for *iCarly* starts in the living room. "Amazing," Laurel says as she pours three glasses of juice. "It took me a week to figure out how to run that remote. I keep a cheat sheet tucked in the sofa cushions in case I get Alzheimer's."

"How will you remember where you put it?" Candace asks and Laurel laughs. Despite all the problems she has with her mother, they've always shared their sense of humor.

"Your father was scared to death of losing his mind. He used to do Sudoku puzzles every night. He memorized the state capitols out of a grade school textbook he bought at an estate sale a few years ago." Laurel leans her hip against the counter, the weight off her left leg. "He never would have guessed his body would go first."

"You doing okay?"

Laurel pushes off the counter and slides the casserole in the oven. "That woman you met, Gloria? She's not even a Lutheran. She came over from the Methodists a few years ago and is trying to take over the world."

"Starting with the Chat and Chew?"

Laurel pulls three placemats from a drawer, plates from the cupboard. "Good a place as any."

"Let me do that," Candace insists and sets the table as Laurel remains standing. "Did they kick you out?"

"We've been good members of that church all our lives," she says. "Don't get me started on the world going down the tubes."

Candace knows what most likely happened: her mother pissed someone off, got on her bossy high horse, and rode it all over town. She is about to push her mom on the truth but then realizes her mother still talks in the plural, that she has not fully conceived a

life without her husband. She can't imagine her mother making her way through social situations without the earnestness of her father to soften the blow, the kind way he was able to diffuse her.

Candace reaches in the breadbox for the bag of sweet rolls she knows will be there, the same brand she ate after church every Sunday as a child, one of the few store-bought sweets her mother allowed in the house. She gathers the silverware from the drawer, and once it is arranged on the table, she and her mother sit down with their cups of coffee warming their hands in the drafty house. Candace knows without looking that the thermostat is set at sixty-six to keep the bills low, cardigans and afghans in every room.

"You have a doctor look at that ankle yet?" Candace asks, and Laurel shakes her head, blowing on the hot coffee. "Let me see," she says and reaches toward her mother, but Laurel scoots her leg under the table.

"What's done is done," she says. "I have enough sense to know it's just a sprain."

"Even so, that can be serious," Candace says, and her mother turns the volume up on the television. "Fine. Don't let me look at it. I'm only a trained nurse, you know. I only drove thirteen hours to try and help. Maybe later you and your stubbornness can go for a run."

"My stubbornness and your martyrdom. I wonder who would make it to the finish line first." Laurel takes another sip. "And don't get fresh with me."

Candace gets up and dumps the rest of her coffee in the sink. "I came here to help," she says.

"Then call your son for dinner. It's time to eat."

Candace and her mom make it two full days without a real fight. In those days Wally and his grandmother build a snowman, drive the tractor up and down the lane, and bake pecan sandies from scratch with Laurel's secret ingredient of coconut. She showed her grandson how to latchwork, and he started an owl wall-hanging

kit for his bedroom in Park Ridge. They have filled their hours while Candace has lain on the couch ignoring her mother's requests to go through her father's things, Laurel insisting that Candace make some hard-headed decisions about what to keep and what to toss. She told her mom they would stay through Wednesday, but Monday after dinner Laurel drags all the mementos from the attic, insisting Candace go through them: the bicentennial pictures from 1976 when he grew a beard and Candace wore an old-fashioned Holly Hobby dress with a bonnet, and they walked side by side in the Pilgrim parade; her father's high school yearbooks; the coin collection he had since childhood; the ledgers he kept for the farm, his spidery script on every page. Candace doesn't want to go through the boxes. What she wants is to lie on the couch next to Wally and watch Bruce Willis blow things up. To think about her next boyfriend and how he will look like Bruce Willis. She and Bruce will be having dinner at Spiaggia when they run into Jon, who will be eating alone. Even better, he will be there in sweatpants getting takeout, a dish for one. She isn't sure if Spiaggia does takeout, but if not, maybe they can make an exception.

"I need you to look at this junk," Laurel says, hobbling into the living room with the first box, and when Candace doesn't answer Laurel starts for the front door. "Fine. I'll take it to the dump."

"Jesus," Candace says, following after her mother, grabbing her coat on the way, not wanting to subject Wally to any more bickering. He's heard enough between her and his own father the last few years. "What's the big hurry?"

"I'm moving. I'm selling the farm."

Candace is stunned although the evidence is everywhere. Yesterday she was looking for a pen for her crossword and opened drawer after empty drawer in her father's desk before finding a golf pencil in the kitchen. She shakes her head. "This is a rash decision. It's just because you fell."

Laurel hugs the box closer. "I fell two months ago."

"Jesus Christ, Mom. Why didn't you tell me?"

Laurel continues toward the pickup. "I bought a duplex in town, a one bedroom. I didn't want to bother you."

"You think it's a bother to tell me you're moving? It's not just your house. Maybe I want to live here," she says and instantly feels like her mother backed her into this statement, both of them aware how ridiculous it is.

"What're you going to do? Raise chickens?"

"You haven't had chickens in twenty years."

"See? Another dream down the tubes."

"You can't just throw his things away and forget about him," Candace says.

"Don't I know it." Her mother hands over the box with her father's collection of windup clocks. "What am I going to do with a box of clocks? I don't have anywhere to be."

"Fine," Candace says and puts it in the backseat of her Volvo. "I'll haul it to the dump right now."

"Good riddance," Laurel says and goes back in for Candace's collection of prom dresses, the box topped off with a pair of ice skates.

"We're leaving in the morning," Candace says to her mom as they load the hatchback. "I shouldn't be gone from work so long. I need to get Wally back to school."

"I thought you were staying until Wednesday." Laurel holds up her hand. "Save it," she says. "You do what you want, but don't lie to me about it." There is no winning. Candace gets behind the wheel and puts her key in the ignition. "You remember where the dump is?" her mom asks. "God knows you haven't been here much the last twenty years to refresh your memory."

"I think I can find it," Candace says.

There are two bars in town—the Standard and the OK Corral; the OK is where people in their twenties and thirties go before they graduate up to the Standard, accepting they're now townies and will never leave.

She takes a seat at the OK bar, the stool worn and soft. There is a sparse Monday crowd gathered in the back by the pool table and dartboards. Two women sit at the end of the bar in too-tight tank tops, giggling like they might be underage, their arms goose-pimpled against the cold.

“What can I get you?” the bartender asks. He’s younger than Candace, she guesses by ten years, and he cocks his head to the side and squints an eye as he lights a cigarette. Cigarettes. She used to love those.

“You got a vending machine?” she asks, motioning to the cigarette.

“In the back.” He pushes a button on the cash register and digs out a handful of quarters. “The dollar part’s broke. They’re six bucks.”

“Six bucks?” she asks, incredulous. In college she and her girlfriend swore they’d quit smoking when cigarettes got up to two dollars a pack, and then again at three.

“You don’t have to buy them,” the bartender says, but he continues counting the quarters in stacks.

Candace gathers the change and slides off her stool, stopping at the jukebox on her way back from the cigarette machine. She puts in four quarters and picks songs by Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, Garth Brooks. She doesn’t listen to this music at home, but as the twangy beats make their way into the bar she wonders why not. It’s uplifting to listen to other people’s misery. Back on her stool she lights a cigarette and rests her elbows on the bar, listening to the happy sadness of the music, the clanging of the pool balls in the back. There’s a squeal, and she turns to see the two girls from the end of the bar have joined the game, one leaning over the table to take a shot, her tank top riding up her slim back to show a smooth, tan swath of land. It is a long moment before Candace realizes she is staring and averts her gaze, in time to see that one of the men playing pool has been staring at her. Her heart jumps in her chest at the surprise of meeting someone’s eyes. Keith Danvers.

He puts a hand in the air but doesn't move it, just short of a wave. He hands his pool cue to one of his buddies and makes his way to the bar and sits next to her, circling a finger at the bartender to indicate another round for him and her.

"You don't have to buy me a drink," she says.

"I know," he says and sets his palms on the bar.

"And if I drink it, it doesn't mean I've forgiven your kid." She peers up at him. "Your kid or you. You remember what a bully you were in school?" she asks, and Keith nods.

"I do. I was a bully a good chunk of my life, but I'm trying to change."

"You used to torture people when we were younger. Beating up kids smaller than you. Teasing the fat girls. When I got lice in fifth grade you called me a leper and made everyone else in class call me one too." Candace can still remember the nurse's hands flowing through her hair every year with great efficiency, creating parts, the rubber feel of the gloves against her scalp. And then, in fifth grade, the woman's hands stopped, and when they started moving again, they moved much more slowly. Keith was next in line and by the time Candace made it back to the classroom, where she had to wait for her mother in the hall while the teacher gathered her books, everyone knew. "I don't care if you're trying to change," she says to Keith. "That doesn't make it all right."

He looks at her, surprised. "I never said it did."

He turns toward the pool table and she puts a hand near his elbow. "Wait," she says. "Sorry." She holds up her beer can as thanks and lifts it to her mouth, realizing only when the metal touches her lips that the bartender didn't open it and she looks like a fool. She sets down the can, cracks the top, and tries again. Keith is drinking soda. "Thank you."

He points at the pack of cigarettes next to her purse. "A nasty habit."

"Here," she says and pushes the pack toward him.

He tilts his head to the side like the bartender and lights a

cigarette, smoke winking his eye shut. "I'm sorry Todd bit your kid."

"Does he do that a lot?"

"More than you'd hope."

Candace draws the can of beer in a circle against the bar, leaving a trail of condensation. "What does his mother say about it?" She winces, knowing it sounds like a pickup line, like she is digging to see if he is single, but she isn't—at least she doesn't think she is. Although what a great story that would be to end up with her childhood bully after all these years, to get to tell everyone she meets she is with a man who knew her as a baby, although who would she tell? It would mean she is living in Pilgrim and everyone would already know their story. Besides, this is a town where almost everyone is married to someone they knew as a baby.

"She's been gone about two years," he says.

Candace looks up abruptly. "Oh. I'm sorry."

"Left us high and dry." He gives her what appears to be a genuine smile. "You remember that old Kenny Rogers song? 'You picked a fine time to leave me, Lucille'? It was like that. 'Four hungry kids and a crop in the field.' Just like that."

"I'm sorry," Candace repeats.

"Her name is even Lucille. Can you beat it? Although we called her Lucy. Or Luce."

"Lucy Twill? The other redhead in the class?"

He takes a sip of his soda through the thin straw, the ones people use to stir their drinks but normally don't drink from. "The one and only."

Candace grins. "Your high school sweetheart."

"Exactly. My high school sweetheart."

The song flips from Johnny Cash to Garth Brooks, his classic about friends in low places. "You don't drink," Candace says signaling Keith's soda as the bartender brings another round, this one on her.

"Nope," and Keith leaves it at that.

She takes a sip of her new beer, careful this time to make sure it's open. They sit for a while and listen to the clank of the pool balls, "Beast of Burden" by the Stones starting on the jukebox, Mick with a mouthful of longing.

"Your folks still out on the farm?" he asks, and she tells him her father died a year ago and he shakes his head. "I'm sorry, I knew that. What an asshole for forgetting." He tells a story about seeing her parents at the Standard a few years ago on New Year's Eve. They won a pitch tournament and as a prize, in addition to a Pepperidge Farm cheese basket, were brought on stage at midnight to kiss in front of the crowd. "Your old man bent your mom at the waist, leaned her back, and laid one on her. They could barely stop laughing long enough to kiss." It brings tears to Candace's eyes imagining this scene between her parents, this version of them she never knew. "I was there with Luce," Keith says. "I thought we were having the time of our lives, but she'd already put a security payment down on an apartment in Hartley."

Candace thinks of the missing furniture in the farmhouse, the empty drawers, the stack of four plates where there used to be eight. "I'm already drunk," she says as the bartender brings another set of drinks. "I shouldn't drink so fast."

Keith pulls another cigarette from her pack. "If you're too drunk to drive you might as well keep drinking." He puts the cigarette in her mouth and flicks the thumbwheel. "I have a truck out front and I'm sober as a stone. I'll be able to get you home."

Two hours later, Candace is straddling Keith in the driver's seat of his Dodge Ram, her knees buckled up near her armpits. *How is this done again?* He puts his cold hand under her shirt and slides it to the front, squeezing her breast through her padded bra so she barely feels it, Keith with a handful of fabric and foam. It's sweet really, she thinks, that he doesn't put his hand *under* the bra, which would make more sense, and they stay like this for what feels like a long time, a cramp starting in her left thigh, just kissing. She

imagines her father coming out on the porch, one of his old shot-guns in his hands, but then she remembers her mother cleared out the guns, followed by the memory that he is dead. What started out as a passionate lunge across the console has hit its peak, and Candace pushes off Keith's door and lands with an *oomph* in the passenger seat. She wonders if it was something Keith always wanted to do, kiss her back in high school, but listening to him talk about Lucy—his voice edged in bitterness—it is obvious he has loved his wife for a long time.

"I'm sorry about this," she says.

Keith laughs and pulls his shirt down over his belly—hairy while Jon's had been smooth—and Candace reaches into the footwell and pulls up her purse. "That's what a guy wants to hear after a make-out session in his truck. 'I'm sorry.' Me too then, I guess."

"That's what it was, huh? A make-out session?"

"Tried and true. You'll have a bruise tomorrow from the gear shift to prove it."

"Do high schoolers still do this? It's ridiculous."

"My oldest's sixteen, and yes, they do."

"She tells you?" She can't imagine telling such a thing to her father.

"Would it be better if she didn't?"

Candace shrugs. "Good point."

"I'm the guy whose daughter makes out in cars and whose son bites." He pulls a cigarette from a soft pack tucked in his visor. "The third one seems pretty normal, but who knows, it's early. Maybe she'll be the worst of them all."

"There's nothing wrong with your kids," Candace says.

"I'm kidding. I know." He lights the cigarette. "Best damn kids in the world. I love them like my own."

"Aren't they?"

"You need to loosen up, Candy. Take a joke."

Outside the pickup, the dark engulfs them. It doesn't get dark like this in Chicago, even in the suburbs, and the sweet smell of

cold manure and the night sounds of the world make her wonder if she could have a life with Keith Danvers, stuck here in the country outside Pilgrim. Keith hands her his cigarette and she takes a drag, the beginning of a hangover making its way to the forefront.

She doesn't understand how her mother can pack up this house as if she is the only one who has ever lived here, make this kind of decision on her own. The house is full of memories. "When I had lice my mom had to burn the sheets. She cut off my hair and burned that too. The house smelled like burned hair for a week."

"I had crabs once," Keith offers.

Candace starts laughing and chokes on the smoke. "You shouldn't tell a woman something like that. You'll never get me to sleep with you now."

"You have your purse in your lap. I figured that ship had sailed."

"Was that why your wife left?"

"She was already gone by then. I was alone."

"Not one night, it sounds like."

"No, you're right," he says. "And then not for a month after that, not with my million little friends." She misses this, the intimacy, hearing secrets in the dark. The kitchen light comes on and she expects to see her mother's face through the window, but instead she sees Wally open the pantry and peer in.

"Listen," Keith starts. "I know I was a bully in grade school and junior high, high school even, but when I fell for Lucy I turned into a puddle. I wanted to apologize for every wrong I ever did. I wanted to say sorry to the ground for having to walk on it, I just didn't know how. I'm sorry," he says. "I really am."

They talk for a few more moments about the old times, then she kisses him on the cheek, opens the door, and jumps down from the truck, her feet unsteady on the gravel. "Thanks for a fun night," she says. "I'm sorry to hear you had crabs."

"It happens," he says. "What can you do?"

Inside, Wally closes the pantry quickly as his mother comes

through the door. "I'm hungry," he says. "I can't help it." Candace suffers a well of guilt that he feels bad about this, that he has been teased about his weight at school, that he has been picked on by other kids, and worst, that she has also berated him about it even though she has a sleeve of Thin Mints in her suitcase upstairs that she eats at night in the bathroom.

"Here," she says and leads him to the table. "I'll make you a snack. What're you in the mood for?"

He thinks for a moment. "A grilled cheese?"

She opens the fridge and locates the ingredients. "You got it." She pulls a skillet off the rack above the stove and puts in a generous pat of butter, holding the knob to the right as the gas lights. "What else?"

Clasped in his hand is Blanket Puppy, a stuffed animal his father bought him when he was two years old and that he only revisits in times of trouble. "Doritos?"

She opens the pantry. "How about sesame crackers?"

"That'll work."

She pulls out the bread and slathers two pieces with butter, placing thick pieces of cheese in between. She puts a bite of cheddar in her mouth and decides to make herself one too. Wally doesn't ask her where she's been or why she's just getting home, only sits at the table waiting for his sandwich. They eat them dunked in a pool of ketchup, their fingertips saturated with grease and crumbs. After they finish, she puts the dishes in the sink and the ketchup in the fridge, and when she asks Wally if he's ready for bed he asks if he can have another.

She pauses and he says to never mind, but she says, "No, no, it's fine. If you want another sandwich, I'm happy to make one for you."

She repeats the process, getting the ketchup back out and setting it on the table, slathering the bread with butter and pressing the cold cheese between the slices. She watches him as he eats this time. He stops after most bites and wipes his hands on his napkin,

conscious of being watched. His hair, mussed from a few hours' sleep, sticks up in the back like a turkey's tail, just like it did when he was a baby. She reaches over and attempts to smooth it down, surprised when he doesn't flinch away.

"I'm done," he says and runs a finger across the plate and sticks it in his mouth.

"What else?" she says. "What can I fix you?" She wants at this moment to put the entire kitchen in front of him.

"I'm good," he says and yawns. He reaches for Blanket Puppy and she sees his stomach as his T-shirt pulls higher, the skin flabby and vulnerable. It's hard going through school with lice or a fat stomach. It's hard being a kid with a dad only on the weekends or an adult with no dad at all. His shirt drops back into place as he stands up, and Candace thinks of the girl at the bar—her thin, tan stomach peeking out from under her tank top—but she thinks of it merely because they are both stomachs, then pushes the thought away and steers Wally to their room.

The next morning Candace insists on taking her mother and Wally to the Standard for breakfast, a last-ditch effort to end on a peaceful note. "Where's your car?" Laurel asks as they come out of the house, the crutch secured in her armpit. Her mother is stiffest in the morning but can usually manage without the crutch through the second half of the day. Candace remembers her car, parked next to Keith's truck when she stumbled out of the OK, her father's life in the backseat. "Never mind," Laurel said. "I can bring you to it after breakfast."

Todd, Keith's youngest, is sitting at the restaurant counter next to two old video game machines. Candace scans the restaurant quickly while smoothing her hair, but the only other redhead she sees is a skinny girl on a stool in too-tight jeans, the crack of her butt displayed. Candace shuffles her mother and Wally toward the back room hidden behind the corner where there is a stage by the north wall for cover bands on the weekend, where Candace's father

bent her mother at the waist for a kiss. They peruse the menus in silence. Wally asks his mother if it's okay if he gets the pancakes and bacon, and she nudges him toward oatmeal and a juice. After the waitress takes their orders, Wally begs to go up front to play Street Fighter Two, and Laurel digs in her purse for a few quarters, handing them over along with a dollar bill, saying he can get change at the hostess stand.

Candace is glad now that she ate a sandwich the night before, her hangover more like a memory. "So where's the house?"

"On Vandalia Street. Next to Rip Walsh's old place."

Candace nods. She hasn't lived in this town for almost twenty years, yet she can picture the street, Rip Walsh out in black socks and sandals raking his yard.

"You like it, then?"

Laurel scrubs at an invisible spot on the Formica tabletop. "It's fine. The appliances are older than the hills, but it's not like I'm going to live there forever. Or if I do, forever won't be that long."

Candace feels a tightening in her chest. She was shocked when her father died, even though throughout her childhood his immortality was constantly questioned. When she was eight he cut his neck with a machete while walking beans; her thirteenth birthday he lost a finger to a thresher; when Candace was in high school he developed a blood infection from a hog bite. After she left home she worried less and less about her father, the accidents growing less frequent, but she realizes now that it was only because her parents stopped calling with the news. "Is there something you're not telling me, something else?" She pauses, her stomach bottoming out. "Are you sick or something?"

Laurel snorts. "I'm not sick, I'm just old."

The waitress sets their coffees down, and Candace reaches for an individual creamer, shaking it in her hand before pulling back the tab. "You remember when I had lice?"

Her mother clutches a hand dramatically to her chest. "Do I? You cried for a week straight. You were allergic to the shampoo so

we had to get a doctor's brand, and you cried the whole way to the drugstore and back. You were so embarrassed that the pharmacist would know. He had a kid a grade above you."

"I remember that," Candace says. "Dad took me to the Dairy Freeze afterward and bought me a sundae. I ate it in the car, even though I wasn't supposed to."

"I remember," Laurel says, and Candace looks at her. "I know all kinds of things you thought were a secret."

"Like what?"

Laurel puts her elbow on the table, her chin in her palm. "Well, let's see. That you went to that rock concert in Omaha with Sheryl Collins when you were a sophomore. That your father caught you smoking cigarettes when you were fourteen with Nicole Doyle. That you were out last night with Keith Danvers."

Candace laughs. "You know about that?"

"I might have been kicked out of the Chat and Chew, but I still have my contacts." Laurel takes a sip of coffee.

"Has it sold yet?" Candace asks about the farm.

"Not yet, but it's listed with Ed Jackson. He sold your dad every tractor he ever drove. Started a real-estate business a few years ago."

"You don't need to sell the farm," Candace says.

"I don't have to keep it either."

The waitress comes and tells them their food will be up in a few seconds, and Laurel nods to the other room where Wally's hidden away with his video games. "How's he doing?"

Candace isn't sure if she means in the other room or since the divorce or with his grandfather in the ground. "Fine, I guess."

"You guess? He's your child. You should be doing better than guessing."

"How am *I* doing then?" Candace challenges her mother.

Laurel pats her daughter's hand one time. "Just fine," she says, and the answer, in its optimism, brings tears to Candace's eyes. What a shitty year it's been—her dad dying, the divorce—but not

only for her. As she turns her chair toward her mother, Wally comes around the corner with Keith's son Todd and she sees a red smear around Todd's mouth. She feels the room slide to the left, sure it is blood, that Todd has again bitten her son. Only Wally is smiling, which doesn't make sense.

"Todd's sister bought us doughnuts," Wally explains, and holds up the Cherry Bismarck in his hand as he slides into his chair, powdered sugar on his chin so he looks as if he were blowing bubbles in the snow. "We're friends again."

Just like that, they are friends again. All their past sins forgotten.

Candace motions to the empty seat next to her. "Todd? You want to join us?"

"That's okay," he says and licks his fingers one by one, moving methodically down the line. "My sister's done flirting with the cook. We got to get to school." He turns to Wally. "Maybe next time you're in town you can come out to my house. I've got an Xbox 360."

"That'd be cool," Wally says and shrugs, a barely contained grin on his face. When Todd gets outside he knocks on the plate glass window and waves, his sister already at the car, a girl intent on walking three steps ahead of him. He leans in and kisses the window so boldly that Candace thinks she can hear it, then he pulls back and grins, pointing at the smeared red mouth left on the glass, his breath visible in the cold. Wally laughs and waves back, then turns and smiles at his mom. "He's cool," Wally says and Candace shakes her head.

"Someone's going to have to wash that window."

"Most likely a woman," Laurel adds.

The waitress sets their plates down along with their check and tells them to take their time. Laurel reaches for it before her daughter can, and Candace knows better than to argue with her mother. She imagines her mom out on the farm each night watching Bill O'Reilly or Shep Smith, yelling at her large, new television. "We'll

be back in a few months," she says. "Help you get settled in your new place."

"Don't be silly. Gas prices as high as they are, you should wait at least six months."

"Maybe we'll fly."

Laurel snorts. "Into where? Omaha? You'd still have three hours to drive."

Candace wets the tip of her napkin in her water glass and hones in on Wally's face, the smear of powdered sugar. "Mom," he whines but she ignores him, pulling his cheek to the side as she tackles the spot.

"Oh," she says. "It's not going to kill you." And when she's done she puts both hands on his cheeks, pulls his head toward her mouth, and kisses the part in his hair.