The Snipe

The women sat behind the café at one of a handful of artfully selected, mismatched tables scattered around an elaborately aged fountain. It was the custom of the women to gather there on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. They had begun the ritual out of practicality, using the venue as a gathering point for the local chapter of the Future Species Initiative, which was an organization that staked out wetlands for waterfowl that did not yet exist. The early meetings were forced and unpleasant, framed by a baleful sense of duty toward the unknowable future. Privately the women wished that one of them, some other one of them, would send around a note excusing themselves, which would set them all free until the next scheduled meeting. But in spite of their individual disinclination to foster a relationship, a sort of hazy camaraderie crowded in around them, and they found, as time passed, that the meetings filled a dreadful, yawing void in their lives.

“Did I tell you about my cat?” Wendy said. “What it’s doing?” Therese and Dionne shook their heads.

“It’s been pissing by the radiator. The parquet floor. The original floor. I’m telling you. The cat piss warps the boards. They’re coming up, popping out. Not to mention the smell.” Wendy was particular. She’d spent several years researching apartments in the city before settling on a loft that was once a workshop for a garment manufacturer. One could still see the rust-colored footprints of the sewing machines in the floorboards. She had almost no furniture in the place—just a bed and a spindly, wheeled table for her computer. Furniture, she’d explained, wasn’t worth the investment required to get what she wanted. Therese, on the other hand, couldn’t keep things at a safe distance. She was possessed by the urge to even out the number of things that she owned with the number she didn’t own.

“We told you that would happen,” Therese said, half-smiling as she brushed a constellate of crumbs from the table, lingering evidence of the pastry she’d eaten too hastily. “The cat, the things it would do.”

“It’s not the piss. Listen. Listen to me. I clean the floor with the special
cleaner. The one that gets rid of the smell. I get it under control, to an acceptable state of whatever. I put the cleaning bottle down and I put a big cardboard box in front of the heater. Block the cat from going back there."

"The box catches on fire."

"The cat, the next time I come home, has pissed on the bottle of cat piss cleaner. Right on the bottle."

"The cat wants to start something with you."

"I'll kick the cat. I will." Wendy nodded as she said this, looking solemnly down the length of her slim paper coffee cup.

"No! It's not the cat's fault."

"Then whose? Tonight I'm going to kick the cat. I'm declaring martial law."

Dionne stood abruptly to answer a call. She drifted toward the back entrance of the café, her free hand pressed against the small of her back as she spoke into the phone. Wendy and Therese watched her sway slowly back and forth as she walked away from them.

"It's Russell," Wendy said sharply.

"Is that—"

"Yes. Otherwise, why all the drama?" Wendy made a whistling sound with her teeth. "It's not going to end well. It never does."

Therese nodded silently. She watched Dionne speaking to her lover, head bowed, her free hand touching her brow, involuntarily tracing its shape. She smiled and scanned the customers, blushing at something Russell had whispered to her through the phone. Therese felt a sharp tremor, a brief, radiant spear of longing. She coughed and rearranged her scarf, flattening it against her shoulder.

"I should go," Therese said. It came out soft, like elevator music.

"Well said. Looks like this won't end anytime soon," Wendy answered, waving dismissively in Dionne's direction.

Therese stood and took her handbag in both hands.

"I just feel badly for Art," Wendy said. "Can you imagine?"

"No."

"If he finds out."

"I know."

"People who do that sort of thing," Wendy said, and then paused as she put her cup down. "I'm sorry. I think they should be punished. It's just awful."

Therese nodded. Wendy was not forthcoming about her past, but Therese knew something lingered there, a terrible thing that she protected like a cornered animal with a damaged limb.
“To do something like that. Secret lives. The worst kind of.”
“I know.”

The throat of the mailslot was stuffed with a halved sheaf of circulars and promotional offers. Therese reached down and tugged at the papers. The topmost offer tore in a ragged, sawtoothed pattern as she pulled, shearing the face of a smiling man who was reading the label on a tube of ointment. She tugged harder and everything spilled out onto the tile floor. She bent to collect it, sorting the junk mail from the real mail. There, half hidden in the pile, was another letter from the stranger. She’d come to know the quality of the stranger’s printer ink, how it streaked and aliased. There was, also, the absence of a return address and the bland flag stamp affixed with precision in the upper-right corner.

Therese squatted in the foyer for a long time, holding the stranger’s letter delicately with her fingertips, as though it might flake away into ash. A severe ray of sunlight from the high window heated the small space. The back of Therese’s neck went red.

This letter was longer than the others, broken into shorter chunks that scrolled down the page like a legal document.

“Dear Ms. Davidson,” it began. “In the interest of full disclosure, your husband has been spotted in the following locations at the specified times over the past month. The purpose of this letter is purely informational. No action is suggested or implied.

“On February 7th,” the stranger continued, “your husband met Ms. Dawn Shaunessey for lunch at The Capital Grill. The duration of this visit was approximately 1.5 hours. After lunch, the two descended into the parking garage and entered your husband’s vehicle for an additional 17 minutes. Ms. Shaunessey exited from the passenger side door of your husband’s vehicle at 1:22 p.m., after which both parties returned to their places of work.”

Therese stopped reading the letter. She tried to remember February 7th but couldn’t distinguish it in her mind from any other day. She would start remembering, she resolved. She would start writing down the days, filling a notebook with every detail she could bear. She would find the pattern, learn to recognize the signs as they came instead of in hindsight. Instead of receiving them from the stranger.

“Your husband was seen on February 16th at an inn with Ms. Shaunessey. The two talked at length at a corner booth. On three separate occasions during the conversation Ms. Shaunessey collided playfully with your husband, resting
her head briefly against his shoulder. Your husband clearly craned his neck to inhale the scent of her hair—her shampoo or perfume, or something else. It is not the purpose of this letter to raise conjecture about the behavior observed. The two left the inn at 10:33 p.m. after roughly 2.5 hours and walked down the street to your husband’s office building. They entered the building and remained inside for an additional hour. The light in your husband’s office did not come on at any time during this period. The two exited the building at 11:31 and your husband drove Ms. Shaunessey to the Ashway commuter rail station before returning to your house at 12:14 a.m.”

The letters always ended the same way. “Your husband’s activity will continue to be monitored and logged. You will continue to receive updates. The purpose of this letter, again, is purely informational. No action on your part is suggested or implied. Many individuals, faced with a set of scenarios such as these, have been motivated to take action. But that is not the purpose of this document.”

Therese, on her knees, collected the rest of the mail from the foyer floor and held it to her chest. The house was still and silent as a pine forest.

“What’s this?” Nelson had rushed quickly to the table where Therese had left the open letter from the stranger. He held it out toward her with one hand while spreading out the rest of the mail in a fan pattern on the tabletop. His tie was half undone, hanging loosely around his neck.

“Another one,” Therese said after pausing to clutch her collar.

Nelson sighed. “This is getting ridiculous. I’m going to call Anders and see where we’re at with the investigation.” Anders was a cop and a high school friend of Nelson’s. Nelson had brought the first batch of letters to Anders so that he could open a file on the stranger. He was being groomed for the state senate, and he had been told to expect personal attacks. People coming out of the woodwork to call his integrity into question.


“I just,” she said, and then she couldn’t finish so she looked away at the recessed bookshelf through the doorway into the next room. It was getting dark.

“You don’t actually believe any of this.”

“No,” she said. There were either too many unread books on the shelf, or not nearly enough time, but she couldn’t tell which.

“Look at me,” Nelson said. “You don’t believe this. You don’t, okay? Not
any of it. We’ve been through this. It’s someone—someone trying to do some-
thing to me, to smear me or something. A person in my position, with my
kind of visibility, people just want to find a way in, to tear me down. I just
don’t know, but don’t ever think that it’s something else.”
“I don’t.”
Nelson came forward and gripped her shoulder.
“Because if you were,” she said, and then stopped. Her hands felt grainy and
full. “If you were, you would just put it out there and—we’d be done with it.”
It was not all she’d wanted to say, but it started to edge its way into the desired
territory.
“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said. He pressed her toward him. “Whatever this
person writing these letters is trying to do,” he said, “we can’t let him tear us
down. Not like this. Not this easily.”
She moved toward him and accepted his embrace. He ran his thumb up and
down her spine. She rested her face against his chest and looked at the radio on
the kitchen counter. She wished it was turned on.

Therese opened the trunk of the Escalade and hung her bags from the small
plastic hooks on the seatback that were designed specifically to hold shopping
bags. The trunk door shaded her from the harsh pink spotlights that illumi-
nated the plaza’s mostly empty lot, and the cool air from inside the truck pro-
vided a momentary diversion from the low, moist heat. The bags were filled
with clothes she had bought without trying. She didn’t like dressing rooms,
so she just bought as many of the cheapest garments as possible and returned
the ones that didn’t fit. It was another way to stuff the gargantuan days with
errands and microtasks. She closed the trunk and moved around to the driver’s
side door, and as she got in she saw that there was a vehicle idling in the row
directly behind her with its lights on.

She sat in the lot for a while to see if the other vehicle might drive away.
It did not. She put the truck in drive and began to slowly pull out. Her tires
popped and crushed stray fragments of blacktop as she rolled toward the exit
ramp to the highway. She looked in the rear view mirror, where the lights of
the car behind her remained clearly in view. She waited for the lights to dimin-
ish, but they grew larger instead as the other vehicle advanced in tandem. She
accelerated, faster than she would have normally but not so fast as to appear
frightened or suspicious, because even as her blood cooled and her mouth went
dry with fear, she did not want it exposed to anyone who might be watching
her.
She took the ramp and veered right without stopping at the light. The other vehicle kept up, almost as if she were leading it along on a string. She straddled the lane marker all the way to the merge point, making it impossible for the other vehicle to pass her. She wasn’t sure why this was important, but it felt that way. The other vehicle moved to the right lane and came up close behind Therese.

She moved to the left and let the other car overtake her. She could see in the passenger side mirror that it was a deep blue sedan with darkened windows and a spoiler. It pulled rapidly up alongside the truck and hovered there, keeping pace with her, as the lane emptied out onto the highway. She looked over and saw a young man’s face peering back at her from the driver’s side window. The man stared at Therese, not even glancing at the road. He had tiny fox eyes and his head was shaped like an inverted almond. He wore a pristine white tank top, and when he saw Therese looking at him he slowly lifted a handgun into view. It was short and fat and it looked almost like a piece of jewelry in the young man’s hand, or a silver chalice. This is what Therese assumed of it when she first saw it, which may have been why she detected a fleeting disappointment cross the man’s face. She hadn’t provided the appropriate level of alarm. The man held the gun to his chest and sped off ahead of Therese. She kept driving, pacing herself in the rightmost lane, driving as though nothing had happened, her blood cold and surging.

“Your husband,” the next letter began, “met Ms. Shaunessey outside Toscano’s, an Italian-style restaurant on Western Avenue. He held out his hand for her as she exited a taxicab and she accepted it. They entered the restaurant holding hands. Inside, your husband was visibly holding hands with Ms. Shaunessey over the table for the majority of the meal, which lasted roughly two hours (a copy of the receipt is attached—the original will remain on file). The pair consumed the lion’s share of a bottle of red wine. When the meal ended, your husband and Ms. Shaunessey left the restaurant arm in arm and embraced while waiting for a taxi. The couple exchanged an uncountable number of prolonged kisses. The taxi arrived at 11:42 p.m. This event occurred on March 11th, also (coincidentally) your date of birth.”

“Anyone can fake a receipt,” Nelson said. He had his back up against the refrigerator, his shoulders making a disorganized mess of the tiny, magnetized photographs Therese had set there. He was looking hard into his drink, something cold and stinging inside a promotional freebie pint glass.

“Please stop doing this to me.”
“I’ll have Anders look at the receipt. He’ll be able to tell in a second.”

“It was my birthday. You said. You had an event.”

“Because I did have an event, Therese. The Governor’s Mansion. I could get three people on the phone to confirm this.”

“I’m begging you. Just stop.” She started shaking. She gripped the countertop to steady herself.

Nelson kept staring at his drink. He tipped it forward slightly, loosing the ice cubes, which rang out against the largely empty glass. His face unfolded with childlike wonder as he examined the ice, tipping the glass one way and then the other.

The sun fell and the kitchen was lit only by the gritty blue light of the moon. Therese slowly lowered herself to the floor beneath the pass-through so that she could no longer see Nelson’s face. She gathered herself in a bunch and lay down.

Nelson continued to agitate the ice cubes in his glass. Then he stopped and took a sip. Even without looking, Therese could tell that the sip was staged. The cubes rattled at the base of the empty glass. Nelson crunched an ice cube until it liquefied. With his mouth full of water, he said, “Okay,” and put the glass carefully in the sink. Therese listened with her ear to the floor as he padded in his sock feet down the hallway to their bedroom.

Therese remained on the floor in the dining room for as long as she could stand it. Her heart churned frigid blood through her limbs, numbing the extremities. Against her will she hovered in a sleepless holding pattern. When it became clear that Nelson would not return, would not kneel and run his hand through her hair to comfort her, she relaxed her grip on her knees and spread out on the floor. She lay for another stretch of time, slowly rubbing her cold palms together, unable to warm them. When she finally righted herself, the dining room was flooded with darkness. She read the LED display on the entertainment center. Hardly any time had passed at all.

“This is the thing you do,” said Wendy. They were once again at the table in the courtyard behind the café. “If this is really the thing you want, the thing you do is to construct an accident.”

“You mean—” Dionne put her fist to her mouth and coughed.

“You figure out some way to lead him into a situation where she sees the two of you together. After that, it all unravels on its own.”

“That seems. Mercenary.”

“But that’s—you see?” Wendy pulled her hair back with one hand, stabbing
the air in front of Dionne’s face with the other. Her eyes were round and full of a kind of ecstatic pursuit. “That’s just what it is. That’s what you do. If you want it. Put an end to the deceit. The sneaking. It’s better for everyone.”

A small boy climbed the low wall that ringed the courtyard and disappeared behind the foliage. The boy’s mother shot up in her seat and scanned the area with darting eyes. When she saw the boy’s red sneaker in the peat, she frowned and seated herself again.

“I guess,” Dionne said, and then stopped. She folded her paper straw wrapper into a sort of squat duck and placed it delicately atop the sugar shaker. “I’m worried. Everything is working now, the way it is. These two things. I think I might like it better than if I just went with Russell.”

“Doesn’t make sense,” Wendy said, retracting her head as she frowned.

“I feel better about myself when I’m with him. He feels better about himself when he’s with me. And the wife, she gets a happier man.” Dionne couldn’t conceal a half-smile as she said this, perhaps for the first time to anyone but herself.

“And Art?”

Dionne shook her head and glanced up at the treeline.

“That’s just what I don’t like about this,” Wendy said. “It’s rotten to the core and it’s not going to last. You can’t see that?”

“What lasts?” Dionne answered, looking away. The boy’s mother was trying to coax him from behind the plants.

“You’re a silent one today,” Wendy said, shifting to address Therese, who sat with her legs crossed, thumbing her palm.

Therese nodded and shifted her mug from one hand to the other. “I guess I’m just—it’s just one of those, you know, days.”

“How is your perfect system?” Wendy said, winking almost imperceptibly.

“We never hear about the politician anymore.”

“Oh,” Therese said. “Yes. He’s busy.”

“The campaign,” Dionne said, nodding.

“Yes, and. It’s just a busy time.”

“That will pass.”

Therese nodded.

“You see?” Wendy said to Dionne. “That’s what you want. Right there. The security.”

Dionne looked at Therese as if she’d made the statement instead of Wendy.

“It’s not,” Therese said, holding out her hand as if she could halt Wendy’s language from filling the air.
“You’ll never have that with your. This arrangement. You’ve got to make a choice. And if you can’t make a choice, you’ve got to make it so things unravel on their own.”

“No, I don’t,” Dionne said. She got up from her chair and began collecting her things in the green vinyl bag Russell had recently bought for her.

“Well,” Wendy said, throwing up her hands, gaping at Therese in mock exasperation. Therese hunched over and stared at her hand. She pressed her thumb into her palm and held it there until the flesh whitened. Both of them watched Dionne maneuver quickly around the courtyard tables, holding the bag closely under her arm.

“Did I—” Wendy said, and then gasped. “Am I not right in this?” She addressed Therese as she spoke, but it was as if she was talking to someone standing right behind Therese, a person who responded the way Wendy wanted her to respond.

“I mean—” Wendy said. “No, I’m doing what any friend would do. I would expect the same from her. If I were in—” She broke off and picked up a loose sugar packet from the table, which she tapped gently and repetitively against her index finger.

The parking lot was full when Therese arrived. She read quickly through the newspaper, holding it taut in her hands to still them. The articles and advertisements drew her toward them in percussive waves, but the thing she was steeped in wouldn’t allow her to touch bottom and lose herself in the articles. She was in the mall parking lot, waiting for the man with the gun.

She scanned each page of the paper twice, retaining almost nothing of the content. When she was finished with the paper she scanned the circulars. There were some that she couldn’t even look at, they so repulsed her. Cheap multi-colored brainsplatter kits for parties and a vinyl saddle for riding on the homeless. She folded the paper in a neat pile and put it in the passenger seat. She opened the glove box and found a half-eaten package of spice drops. She ate the drops by the handful until they were gone. Families passed by her car carrying bags and boxes. The children stared at her as they passed, their faces still and somber.

The sky darkened and the lights that craned over the parking lot sputtered on, row by row. Cars pulled away in loose clusters, queuing up by the exit ramp. The mall closed, and Therese watched young attendants shutter the storefronts with rolling steel curtains. The remaining vehicles lurched in unison toward the highway, merging in slow motion, their headlamps bathing the
lot in fading orange light. Therese watched the cars struggle up the onramp to the highway, where they sped off into the clouded darkness. When she turned again to face the mall there was just a single car left sitting in the lot, a blue sedan, its headlights trained on her. A column of exhaust curled away from the rear of the vehicle and snaked across the empty lot, dissipating in the diminishing gray light.

Therese waited to see what would happen. The other car did not move. She could not see a figure behind the wheel. She looked at the LED clock set into her dashboard, which read 9:35. She put on her black leather gloves and stepped out of her truck. She walked slowly toward the blue sedan. She was still waiting to see what might possibly happen.

She came around the driver’s side in a wide arc. She saw the man’s almond face clearly in the wispy light of the overhead lamp. Night shadows brought his features into sharp relief. He looked like a woodcut; his cheeks, chin, and the lines that framed his mouth carved away from the darkness inside the car. His left cheek bore the pockmarked print of severe adolescent acne. She walked up to the driver’s side door and stood with her hands at her sides. The young man did not move. She saw, in his eyes, a tightness that might have been a well-concealed panic.

“I know what you have in there,” she said.

The man’s eyes widened just slightly. His ears drew back against his head.

“And I want to know where you got it.”

The man looked away from Therese, out over the hood of his car. He seemed to be thinking it over. Therese stood as still as she could possibly make herself. She could see, even in the scattered, diffuse light, that his left eye pulsed when he clamped his jaw shut. Without looking at his hands, he put the car in drive and pulled quickly out of his spot. Therese turned and watched him swerve out toward the exit ramp. He paused for a moment at the rim where the ramp let out onto the highway, and she could see the dim profile of his canted head as he peered at her one last time before sluicing into the stream of traffic.

Therese pivoted slowly on the balls of her feet, deliberately grinding the soles of her pumps into the craterous blacktop. She was alone in the lot, not a single mall attendant or security vehicle snaking along the service road. She walked to her truck and got in. She looked at the empty cellophane bag that had held the spice drops. A pinch of sugar crystals remained in the bottom of the bag, and she lifted it to her lips and poured it into her mouth as if she were drinking from a wine cask. The sugar pooled in the center of her tongue.
and she held it there until it dissolved completely. She put the car in drive and crawled up the ramp to the highway.

It was nearly 3:30 a.m. when she slipped quietly into the apartment. She stood in the entryway, the rifle in its padded nylon case slung across her back. The furniture in the living area was just barely recognizable against the flagging gray night. She carefully removed her pumps and placed them on the boot tray, one by one, side by side, as though someone still stood in them, a ghost standing against the wall. She slid across the rug in her stockings until she reached the coffee table. She took a brief survey of the room, her head darting from object to object. She knelt by the couch and slid the rifle case underneath.

“Hey.” It was Nelson, standing in the bedroom doorway in his undershirt and boxer shorts. He held a rolled sheaf of photocopies in his hand, a red Sharpie notched between his index and middle fingers.

Therese froze in an awkward half-crouch.

“The hell.” He sounded confused and agitated.

“I lost something.”

A long silence followed.

“Turn the lights on if you lost something.”

She realized that she was lying and that she wouldn’t be able to keep lying. But also she might not want to get away with the lie. So she remained on the floor.

“You heard me. I said ‘turn the light on.’”

“I found it,” she said. “I found it. I’m good.”

Nelson hung his head and roughed the back of his neck with his free hand. In the fizzed light she could barely make out his wiry, recessed features. He disappeared into the bedroom, and she heard him slump against the mattress and shuffle the papers. She carefully opened her hands, having convinced herself that she held something there.

Therese spent the next several days observing rooftops and vantage points. There was an old jewelry store across the street that would have an exceptionally clear view, but no easy access to the roof that she could see. Better was the warehouse immediately behind the jewelry store, which rose several floors higher and sported a massive billboard advertisement for high-speed internet service that would serve as ideal cover. She could aim through the squat aperture between the roof ledge and the billboard frame and go more or less unde-
tected. Furthermore, she discovered after some research that the warehouse roof could be accessed by a recessed fire escape that was not visible from the street.

On the fourth day she waited in her truck for darkness to fall. She parked on a side street behind the warehouse, feeding the meter periodically with the change she received from the donut store, where she’d bought a bag of donut holes. She sat in the truck and ate them, one every ten minutes until they were gone. The holes fit perfectly in her mouth, and she held them there until the glaze disintegrated, leaving the sponged sphere of dough.

Sometime after eight she took the soft case from the back seat and got out of the truck. A young couple walked by her, the woman leaning into the man’s chest, laughing at something he’d said. The man scanned Therese with an expressionless face. He did not linger on the case strapped to her back. No one else on the street was close enough to see her. She moved quickly down the alley to the fire escape. She could just barely reach the lowest rung, but she managed to pull herself up to the first landing. She crouched next to the oxidized stairwell and peered into the warehouse window. It looked empty inside. Her lungs trembled already. She gulped at the sharp night air, ascending the stairwell as quickly as possible until she was on the roof.

She crawled over to the billboard. Workers had left aluminum buckets of paste by the vertical supports, and she crept toward them for additional cover. She rested her shoulder against the roof ledge and peered through the slit at the building across the street. The lights were on but Therese couldn’t see anyone inside. She slid the rifle case from her shoulder to the tarred surface of the roof, which retained the heat of the afternoon. She unzipped the case and unfolded it. She had not seen the rifle since the clerk had fitted it into the case as she ran her card through the reader. He’d asked her what she was after, coming into the all-night armory at such a late hour. She’d rehearsed that, if asked, she would tell a story about a wild dog, but in the moment she couldn’t muster a meaningful phrase. She just opened her mouth and then closed it again. The clerk had simply nodded, though, freeing her from having to generate a response. “You like pink?” he’d asked. It was her turn to nod.

She had purchased the pink rifle as well as the pink magazine loaded with pink bullets that looked like glossy lipsticks. “The ladies tend to go for these,” the clerk had said. “I had no reason to suspect you’d be any different,” he said. She might, in another context, have bristled at the way he’d addressed her, his voice chalk-dry, like something rattling in the bottom of a rusted can. But at that moment she wanted nothing more than to fall into step with the legions
of ladies who had come to the armory in search of pink rifles. She imagined herself at a shooting range with the ladies, all of them standing in a perfect row, taking aim at paper targets in unison. She thought that when she was done with what she had to do, she might find these ladies, wherever they were, and broker a friendship with them. This notion elevated her task to something approaching justice.

She swung the barrel of the rifle around and slotted it through the aperture, cradling the stock with a gloved hand as she squinted into the reticule. The rifle shook in her hands. She had to mash the reticule into her eye socket to steady it. She swept deliberately across the row of windows along the top floor of the apartment building, examining the objects and peripherals they showcased. Spare, low furniture adorned with acutely degraded artifacts and curios, slim stereo speakers set against the far walls, the blurred pulse of the nighttime television programming, sets of legs and forearms at rest, set into angular couches.

Therese settled on the window that let in to Wendy’s apartment and waited. Even through the reticule she could see the rust-colored footprints of the sewing machines that indelibly marked the floorboards.

In time Wendy appeared in a blue leotard, carrying a rolled-up yoga mat under her arm. She moved to the center of the floor, more or less centered in the window, as if she were praying for Therese to shoot her. She unfurled the mat and tossed it on the floor, where it collapsed in a rippled heap. Wendy appeared to sigh before bending to straighten it. She crouched near the floor, absently smoothing out the edges of the mat. Her midriff bulged over her thigh, expanding and contracting with her labored breath like a bellows. She swayed slowly from side to side, pulling her hands through her hair so that it went tight against her head. Therese could see rogue strands of silver around Wendy’s forehead, shimmering like a delicate tiara.

Therese tugged at the trigger impulsively and the rifle went off. The percussive blast rattled her skull. She dropped the rifle against the roof ledge and pressed her palms into her eye sockets, where reflexive tears had pooled. Both her ears rang like heavy church bells played back at half speed. She lost her sense of direction.

When the vertigo passed she opened her eyes and blinked. It felt like she had blacked out, like she had been asleep for hours, but when she peeked through the aperture she saw that Wendy was standing at the window, craning her head around to try to catch a glimpse of the building’s exterior. Therese saw that the shot she’d fired had taken out a chunk of brickwork on the wall just
above and to the right of Wendy’s window. In a single fluid motion Therese took up the rifle, aimed, and fired a second shot. She barely heard the blast; it came to her as if from the bottom of the ocean. A moment later, a white ring formed on Wendy’s window, and a corresponding dark circle appeared on Wendy’s left cheek. Wendy’s head jerked from the force of impact, but she remained on her feet, slowly raising her hand to the cheek as though she’d just been slapped by a jealous lover. Her look was quizzical. She knelt by the window and put her head down, resting her temple against the casing. Therese watched for a long time to see what would happen next, but nothing did. Wendy stayed by the window, breathing heavily. Maybe she was praying. The vigil bored Therese, so she packed the rifle into its case and climbed down the fire escape.

“I’m telling you I have no idea what it is,” Wendy said. The three women were gathered, as always, at the table in the rear of the courtyard. Wendy’s face was obscured by a dark nylon veil and a pair of enormous, insectoid sunglasses. Her left cheek was puffed and mottled. A shiny emerald corolla of dried pus was visible through the veil.

“It’s some kind of bite, though?” Dionne said. She was looking hard through Wendy’s veil to get a better look at the wound.

“That’s just about the only explanation I can think of.”

Therese tried not to linger on Wendy’s face, but found herself returning there repeatedly, compulsively.

“I heard something go ‘pop’ outside and I went to the window. Then there was another pop and I felt a stinging on my cheek. It was so much, you know, like a bee sting, where it started sort of dull and low and then just gradually got more and more painful.”

“Did you see a doctor about it?” Dionne asked.

“I’m going to give it a few days and see if it clears up.”

She glanced quickly one way and then the other before raising the veil to take a sip from her mug. A drift of foam caught the veil as she drank.

“I don’t think,” Dionne said, and then paused. “That doesn’t look good. You should probably—”

“Maybe you’re being punished,” Therese said. She could feel a slight smile break out across her face. She tried hard to bury it.

Wendy and Dionne both turned and gave Therese a look. It was drastically unlike her to make such an accusation, even jokingly. The two women stared at Therese, who slowly backed into a defensive posture.
Wendy cocked her head, as though she were addressing a disobedient puppy. “I’m sorry. Not that I even believe in that. Being punished. But for what? What are you even talking about?”

“I don’t know,” Therese said. She put her hands in her lap and clasped them. She opened her eyes as wide as she could to try to shake the urge to laugh.


“It’s fine,” Wendy said. “It’s fine. I just don’t get it, Therese. I don’t get what you’re suggesting.”

“I’m sorry,” Therese said, looking away from the other women. She concentrated on the arrowhead leaves of the Chinese money tree whose branches shaded their table and tried to think of things that made her sad.

“Are you laughing?”

Therese shook her head but would not look at the other women. Her chest quaked with suppressed laughter. Her whole body felt light.

“I’m glad you think it’s funny,” Wendy said flatly. She chewed her lower lip.

“I don’t.” Therese breathed in sharply. “I don’t think it’s funny. I get nervous. When I’m upset.” She drew the back of her wrist across her face where a tear had fallen.

“Well.”

“I’m sorry,” Therese said. She was shaking.

“This is,” Dionne said, shaking her head at Therese.

“Disgusting,” Wendy shot up in her seat and started to walk away from the table. Her overcoat caught on the chair back, bringing it down with a crash. The other patrons turned to watch Wendy as she wove through the tables toward the door. Dionne sighed and collected her things. Therese’s whole body convulsed with a kind of silent, wheezing laughter. She moved in slow motion, her lower lip peeled back in a half-grimace as she doubled over on the bench seat.

“Your husband’s meetings with Ms. Shaunessey,” the letter began, “were scarce during the month of April. It is assumed that you had a conversation with your husband about the content of these letters, and that he admitted to his encounters and agreed to alter his behavior. That is not the intended purpose of these letters, as they are strictly informational. But it does appear that, for a time, your husband attempted to end his encounters with Ms. Shaunessey. Unfortunately, on April 22nd at 11:50 a.m. your husband met Ms. Shaunessey at the intersection of Gaspee and Charles. Ms. Shaunessey entered his vehicle and the two drove out to the Waverly Point bridge. Your husband backed the vehi-
cle under the bridge, and the two remained there for roughly 2.5 hours. Since that evening your husband has taken five more of these extended lunches to meet Ms. Shaunessey, always at the same intersection, always in your husband’s vehicle, always under the bridge.

“Once again, the purpose of these letters is purely informational. No action on your part is intended or implied. Many individuals in your situation choose to seek assistance at this point. Many individuals choose to terminate the relationship. It is not our intention to speculate on the nature of your decisions; only to report on what we observe.”

They were watching a cage match between two homeless men on television. “Your earlobes are like a woman’s,” Therese said, running a finger along the ridge of Nelson’s ear.

“Thanks.” Nelson snorted, half-grinning as he circled a phrase in the campaign document he was reviewing. He swatted at Therese’s hand with his pen. She laughed and pounced on him, putting him in a tentative sleeper hold. He chuckled and jabbed his straightened fingers up under Therese’s ribcage. She fell back on the couch, laughing.

“Seriously,” she said, “was it your mother or father who had those ears?”

“I don’t. What? I’m supposed to remember my parents’ ears?”

“I would remember if I had ears like those.”

“Great.”

“No! I love them.”

Nelson whistled through his teeth, which meant that he was done with the conversation. He turned the page and began circling more phrases.

“I want to know more about your parents,” she said, laying her head in his lap. “I know hardly anything about them.”

“They’re dead.”

“I’m not—I’m just. I want to know everything about you.”

“That’s scary.”

“I’m serious.”

“You know what you know.”

“What do you mean by that?” she said. She lifted her head and craned her neck to look at his face, which was composed in an expression of mute indifference.

He squinted. “You know as much as you know. That’s it. There are things you can’t know, Therese. Things you can’t possibly know. Can’t understand. No use in trying to describe them to you. As if that could help.”
“I don’t like that,” she said, resting her head. “I don’t like that idea and I don’t like the way you said it. It does help to know.” She turned back to face him. She was not comfortable in her new posture but she wanted to see him. “That’s all we have, isn’t it? Just the things, the things we say?”

Nelson blinked and cleared his throat. Therese watched his face move slightly in tandem with the show, as though it were rehearsing a set of real-time expressions. She saw the show reflected in the window behind them—a black man with one eye threw a white man against the cage wall. The audience hurled soft drink tumblers at the cage in response, the carbonated beverages splashing the black man’s face. A camera closed in as he screamed something unintelligible at the crowd. Dark fluid streamed down the lines in his face.

Therese closed her eyes. She could feel sleep approaching. It came as a heaviness, a sense of being dragged down by a stone into something familiar and warm, an intoxicating ambient gel where she floated freely, falling but not falling, somersaulting through the void.