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Emma Binder, "Roy"

Francisco Gonzales, "Serranos"

Emma Binder

Roy

IN THE SUMMER between seventh and eighth grade, my dad's brother, Uncle Roy, came to watch my sister Missy and me while our parents saw our grandma Lori die. Lori lived in an aluminum shack down in Nebraska; she was our mom's mother, but our mom couldn't travel two states southward alone, couldn't be trusted to drive herself. That summer, she was trapped in her brain's dark aquarium, prone to sobbing while drying dishes or seeing something bloody on TV. Over breakfast, she once glimpsed a prop plane flicker through the window in the sky, wandered out there in bare feet to look at it, and didn't return until the next morning. She needed our dad to chaperone.

Missy and I had never met Uncle Roy, but we'd seen a single photo: in it, he stood on a dirt road outside his slouch-roofed ranch house in the Upper Peninsula, wearing denim overalls and no shoes, head globed in wiry red hair. He looked nothing like our dad. To embroider the scene, Roy held a scrawny raccoon aloft in his hands like it was Simba in *The Lion King*. He and our dad only talked once a year, on Christmas, but he was the only person they could find to watch us on short notice.

We'd also heard stories: Roy drank too much, ate skinned snakes and possums. Roy, at ten years old, tried to train-hop from

Iron Mountain to the Catskills to live in a hollowed-out tree. Roy had once hosted a poker game where a man got shot, but when the police arrived, they found no gun and a room full of men who claimed the bullet came through the window.

"If he starts drinking, call us," our dad said to me the day before Roy arrived. "If he brings anyone over, call us. He promised not to bring a gun, but if he does, what do you do?"

"Call you," I said.

On the day they left, Roy careened too fast into our neat gravel driveway in the North Woods, driving an old Ford Ranchero with blisters of rust on its matte black hood. It was mid-July. I could hear aluminum cans and loose tools sliding around his truck bed. By the time he pulled up, our mom was already in the car with her purse and suitcase, lying fully prostrate in the back seat.

Before our dad left the house, he bent to kiss my and Missy's foreheads. "If there was anything I could do, I'd do it," he said.

From our bedroom, Missy and I heard Roy and our dad exchange muffled words in the kitchen. Then the kitchen door slammed, and we heard our dad backing his car down the driveway. Missy and I crept out of our room. We found Roy drinking a carton of apple juice in the kitchen. He looked like he did in his photo but older: his coarse orange hair wild but tinsel-silver, his clothes faded as if leached of their color by rain. A violet scar stretched from his temple to his chin, cleaving his face like a crack in a vase. He looked at us and grinned. A tooth was missing from either side of his mouth.

"My nieces," he said. "In living color. You two look just like your mom."

He put down the juice and started pulling drawers in the kitchen and pantry. He rummaged through the fridge and freezer, opening jars of vinegar and bacon grease to smell what was inside. Then he started on the living room, opening desk drawers, slipping spare quarters and matchbooks into his pockets. Missy and I waited in the kitchen, listening to him scrounge through all the

rooms of our house, until we finally heard him make his way to our bedroom.

I marched into the hallway and found him standing in our doorway.

"That's our room," I said, standing before him with my arms crossed. Missy stood behind me, watching. He turned around.

"I get it," Roy said, slowly looking from Missy to me. "She's the princess, and you're the tough guy."

Missy and I both blushed with pleasure.

That night, Roy told us he was off to find a drink, and peeled down the driveway in his Ranchero. Two hours later, he marched into the kitchen with a twelve-pack of Miller, three scratch tickets, and a rifle wedged under his armpit.

As soon as Missy saw the gun, she started to cry.

"Don't worry," Roy said. "I'll show you how to hold it."

"We need to eat dinner," I said.

"Sure," Roy said. "I know that."

Roy cracked a beer and got cooking: Hamburger Helper from the pantry, fried in Crisco and Kraft steak sauce. The room bloomed with steam and the smell of fat. Missy, at eight years old, hung in the kitchen doorway, while I sat at the kitchen table, watching Roy drink two, three, four beers in the span of a half hour.

"Is it true you eat snakes?" Missy said shyly, half-hiding behind the doorway.

"I've been known to eat a snake or two," he said. "But that's not the craziest thing I've ate."

He'd eaten cow tongues, he told us, shoe tongues, cattails, prison food. He'd eaten hundred-year-old pickled eggs from behind a bar shelf in Houghton. You're lying, we said, and he shrugged, then set two bowls before us of Hamburger Helper that turned my stomach before I even tasted it. Roy himself didn't eat

it, just headed to the screened-in porch with a beer in his front overalls pocket and a pouch of tobacco. Smoke wafted through the kitchen window and mingled with the overhead lamplight, at which point I realized that smoke was still curling from the stove. I got up to shut off the burner, and when I turned around, I found Missy dramatically scraping her meal into the garbage.

"When are Mom and Dad coming back?" she said, eyes glassed over with tears.

"Not until Lori dies," I said. I squeezed her shoulder. "Come on. It's not like Mom does much better."

Roy wobbled back inside, garbed in cigarette smoke, and handed us each a scratch ticket. He showed us how to rub off its coating with a penny. Missy gave a yelp: she'd won twenty dollars.

"Lucky girl," he said. "I'll redeem that for you." Missy handed him the ticket and he slid it into his pocket, never to be seen again.

That summer, I'd just become friends with two girls from school named Natalie Golding and Lauren Shipley. I already knew that our friendship wasn't going to last, but I felt lucky to have friends at all. I'd been eating lunch by myself for years. They treated me like a project they'd undertaken with burdened hearts: they somberly taught me how to braid my hair at sleepovers, told me what music to listen to, sternly chided me when I said something odd. One night they dressed me up in Natalie's clothes, since she and I were supposedly the same size: flare jeans, a tight pink shirt, and a dust-blue patent leather belt. I stood in front of them in Natalie's room while they stared, heads cocked.

"I don't know what it is," Natalie said. "It's like it doesn't fit." She circled me once.

"Can you stand up straighter?" Lauren said. I pulled my broad shoulders back.

"I guess that's better," Natalie said. "Sort of."

I was already expending huge amounts of energy to look and act more like a girl: tweezing the fledgling hairs between my eyebrows, shaving my legs and armpits, wearing my mom's drugstore lipstick at school. That year, I'd finally quit wearing the loose-fitting boy's clothes that I'd liked since I could remember. None of it felt natural, but what did? Becoming friends with Natalie and Lauren seemed like a fluke, a lucky accident that the universe would soon correct. In the meantime, I tried to learn, copying the way Natalie's sentences curled at their ends, or how Lauren, who took year-round ballet and gymnastics lessons, walked as if led by a firm kite string.

I rode my bike to Natalie's house a few days after Roy showed up. Just that afternoon, he'd taken me and Missy into the backyard, rifle in hand, and set up a line of beer cans on a stump. It was time we learned how to shoot, he told us. My dad's instructions rang in my ears—*What do you do?*—but Roy was unlike anyone I'd ever met, and something told me that if I didn't learn everything he had to teach me, I would never get another chance.

When I got to Natalie's, I told her and Lauren about Roy and the gun. The bone-splitting sound of it. The way I sent bullets into the crowns of trees, and all Roy did was whoop, like I'd done something great. I pulled the front of my shirt down and showed them where a violet-blue bruise was already growing on my collarbone from the rifle's kickback.

"That sounds dangerous," Natalie said, glancing at Lauren.

"It totally was," I said. I felt exhilarated and strange. I plopped down on the floor of Natalie's room. "What do you guys wanna do?"

"We were going to ride bikes to the ice cream shop," Natalie said. "You can come. Unless you want to shoot people with your uncle."

I rolled my eyes and stood up. "Let's go," I said.

I bounded down the stairs and pulled on my white high-tops from the Salvation Army, then walked outside with Natalie and

Lauren close behind me. Natalie's mom, Mrs. Golding, was in the yard in a visor and sunglasses, hosing the hedges. "You girls ride safe," she said, waving as we biked down the drive.

On our way into town, Natalie and Lauren pulled ahead of me, talking in tones that I couldn't hear. Sometimes their friendship with each other seemed coded and secretive, characterized by a barrier I couldn't pass. I pedaled faster, replaying Mrs. Golding's words: *You girls, you girls, you girls*. I always winced when I heard those words, as if bitten.

Behind them on the road, I tried to pedal faster, focusing only on the crunch of my tires against gravel and the steady pulse of my heart. Ahead of me, Natalie and Lauren erupted in laughter, like two roses blooming at the same time.

Most days Roy slept until noon or one o'clock, so Missy and I spent our mornings watching PBS in the hot living room with the windows open. Dust from the sofa seats wafted through sunlight like flour. When we got bored, we did handstands in the yard in bare feet or wandered in the woods that bordered our backyard, where a skinny creek unspooled like a piece of yarn off Torch River. These mornings, I felt like I was only waiting for Roy to get up and make my life interesting.

Then we would hear the slam of the refrigerator door, heavy boot-steps on the floorboards: Roy had sprung alive and started drinking.

First thing, he started making phone calls. He called a guy in Manistique who owed him money, then another guy who he claimed was his friend but never picked up the phone. Then he left a rambling voicemail on the machine of a woman named Daisy in the Upper Peninsula, who, we gathered, had recently left him for another man. He told Daisy's machine that he was getting his act together. When he got back to Houghton, he would light candles for her, reel in the stars, buy her gold hubcaps, whatever.

"I'm at my brother's place," he rambled into the phone. "These girls need me, honey. But I'll be back as soon as I can, my flower, my love."

Missy and I listened to him from the living room with the TV on mute. Then he readied his tackle box and went fishing in the backwoods creek. Missy and I trailed behind him through the woods, asking him questions.

"Do you have a job?" I asked.

"I'm a purveyor of what other, lesser men call trash," he said.

"Why do you drink so much?" Missy said.

"To ease the pain of my memories."

"What's your worst memory?"

"Wouldn't you like to know!"

Downstream from Roy, we waded in the creek while he fished for brown trout. We listened to him curse and mumble and sing out-of-tune Hank Williams. I watched him thread worms on a hook with his broad, coarse hands graven in dirt. When the sun started angling slantwise through the pines and mosquitoes came out in droves, the three of us made our way back to the house, at which point Roy started drinking with a real sense of purpose.

Nights, he took off in his truck for the Blue Dog, a gravel-lot bar a few miles down the road with flickering neon in the windows. Depending on if he lost or won money playing pool, he came back in either a grand or a foul mood. One late night, he brought a woman home. Tense in our side-by-side twin beds, Missy and I heard her voice through our bedroom door, shining through the dark like an axe blade.

"Who is that?" Missy said, her voice small.

"How should I know?" I said.

Missy started to cry softly into her pillow. "I don't like him," she said.

"Shh," I said.

Music came on from the kitchen radio and the woman laughed. Glasses clinked, Roy let out a hoot, the music turned up. After not

too long, we heard them stumbling into our parents' room, where through the thin walls we could hear them breathe and moan. Missy put a pillow over her head but I went on listening, trying to imagine what the woman looked like.

The sounds didn't last long. My throat was dry, heart pounding. I felt the way I did when I bought candy from the cashier named Willa at the Rhinelander Sunoco, a high school senior who had long brown hair with streaks of red, ears laddered with silver rings. I always tried not to look at her face, but instead watched her hands as she counted change. They were small and deft. I fell asleep thinking of coins slipping between her fingers, clattering to the counter. Her narrow hands reaching to pick them up again.

My dad phoned one night from the hospital in Nebraska where our grandmother was dying.

"How's everything up there?" he said. "Is Roy drinking?"

I thumbed a bottle of Old Crow on the counter. "No. Everything's good."

"He's not acting strange? He's feeding you?"

"Yep."

"What did you eat last night?"

I thought back to the last dinner I'd had at Natalie's house. "Casserole. And a salad with croutons."

"That doesn't sound like Roy," my dad said. "But I'll take it."

"How's Grandma?"

"Like we expected," he said. A steady beeping noise pulsed in the background. "Your mom's fine. Don't worry about her. We'll be back as soon as we can, okay?"

"Okay," I said.

"Sit tight," he said. "And look after your sister."

Roy shot and cooked a possum living under our porch steps. He rustled between couch cushions for change. He came home one

evening with a burst vessel in his eye, blood stitching the cracks in his teeth, from a pool game gone sour. Some nights he stumbled inside after a night at the Blue Dog and wept into Daisy's voice-mail machine.

"I'm hurting," he cried. "I've got nobody. I'm in this strange town, and these girls need me, honey, but I'm here all alone . . ."

The night after his pool fight, I found Roy on the screened-in porch, looking contemplative. He'd decided to stay home, he said, while his eye and his pride healed. The broken blood vessel made his right eye look livid and evil. I sank into the chair beside him and asked him to tell me about the time he ran away to the Catskills.

"You ever read that book *My Side of the Mountain*?" he said. "No? I don't know what happens in schools anymore." He sank into his chair and took a long pull from his bottle of Old Crow. "I packed some bread and clothes and my dad's Swiss Army knife. It was easier than you might think. Early in the morning, I took off for the trainyard, and made it across state lines before the police caught me and took me home."

"Why did you do it?"

He drank again and looked out the screened window. The porch light came ablaze in his red and silver hair, dousing him in what looked like a halo. "I just didn't fit in," he said. "Not like your dad always did. I wanted to live in a different way, getting dirt in my teeth." When he looked at me, his eyes were shining. "You're a little rougher than some. You understand."

I nodded. I did, I did.

One evening, Roy drank more than usual and had an idea: we would all go to the casino together.

"You girls play slots before?" he said.

We shook our heads. Before Roy had mentioned it, I didn't even know there was a casino in Rhinelander.

"Let's go," he said. He tucked a half-empty fifth of Jim Beam

into the front pocket of his overalls and pulled his boots on, then stumbled out the kitchen door without tying his laces. We followed him and climbed into his truck. As he backed down the driveway, he veered to the left and drove into a lilac bush.

"Goddamn," he said, and pulled forward. "Fuckin' trees everywhere." On the second try, he made it onto the road. All the way to the casino, he drifted onto the shoulder and braked too hard at stop signs. I thought I was going to be sick. Missy burrowed her head in my armpit. But we eventually pulled into the parking lot of a huge building, as big as a hotel.

"Like riding a limousine to heaven," Roy mumbled.

We followed Roy inside, where we found a brave new world of light and sound and smoke. Slot machines made sounds like coins dropping into bright tin cans. Missy latched herself to my hip, gripping my hand so tightly I had to shake her off. Patrons sat wreathed in cigarette smoke, fixed on machines or broad green tables with cards and dice. Roy gave us each two dollars and told us he was going to play blackjack.

"Win big," he said, and wandered off.

Missy and I lingered for a few minutes behind a man playing slots, her head burrowed in my hip, while I studied what he did. It seemed simple enough. We sat down behind a slot machine and had just fed it all four of our dollars when a uniformed woman walked up to us.

"Hey," she said, squinting at us. "How old are you two?"

"I'm thirteen," I said. "She's eight."

"That's not good," the woman said. "You here with your parents?"

"Our uncle."

"Where's he?"

We pointed him out. Roy sat slouched forward at the blackjack table with one overalls strap falling off his shoulder.

"Let's get this sorted out," she said. The three of us walked over to Roy. She tapped him on the shoulder. "Did you bring these kids in here?" she said.

Roy looked at us. "They're my lucky stars," he said.

"This is no place for little girls," she said.

"Did you say little girls?" Roy stood up and stumbled. I could see the black cap of his Jim Beam poking out of the top of his overalls pocket. "This one here," he said, pointing at me, "is the toughest guy I know."

"All right," she said. "Time to go."

"Let me finish this game."

"Not a chance," she said. "Get out or I'll call the police."

Roy raised his hands. "Hey. We're on our way." He pulled the Jim Beam from his overalls pocket and took a sip. "We're on our way."

The woman scowled. We followed Roy out of the casino, the uniformed woman walking close behind us. People stared at us, but I walked with my chest puffed out, proud as hell: *the toughest guy I know*.

Roy seemed clearer and calmer as we drove home, as if the bright lights of the casino had shocked him into sobriety. He turned the radio on and sang along softly. Back on the dark road leading back to our parents' house, we saw a grouse dart through his headlights. To our surprise, Roy swerved into the right shoulder, hitting it with his right front tire, eliciting a bright shriek from Missy.

Roy pulled over to the right and asked for his work gloves from the glove box. I handed them to him.

"Why did you do that?" I asked.

"Don't worry," he said. "Just a little North Woods hunting."

On the bench seat between us, Missy began to cry. "It's dead," she said.

"That's right!" Roy said cheerfully. He got out of the truck. In the glare of his headlights, we watched him kneel at the front tire and stand up, holding the bloodied bird in his gloved hand. He held it by its broken neck and wagged it for us in front of the windshield. Missy let out a sob. He circled to the back of the truck, threw the grouse in the bed, and got back behind the wheel.

"It's an ancient rivalry, girls," he said to us. "Bird versus truck. Bird never wins."

The next night, after helping Roy dress and quarter his grouse, I went to Natalie's house for dinner. It had only been a week since I'd last seen Natalie and Lauren, but it could have been years; I felt older from spending time with Roy, steely and changed. When Natalie opened the door, I felt her looking long at my clothes and face before letting me inside. I followed her to the kitchen, where Lauren was sitting at the table and Natalie's mom stood over the sink, washing pans. She looked at me and paused.

"Sophie," her mom said, looking at my jeans. "Is that blood?"

I thumbed a rusty spot on my thigh. "Me and my uncle went hunting."

"You need to change clothes, sweetie," she said, frowning her brow. "I'll go get some of Natalie's from the dryer."

She left the kitchen and I stood there, suddenly afraid to touch anything or sit down. Natalie and Lauren stayed sitting at the kitchen table, staring at me. They had chicken and green beans on their plates, paper towels folded into halves.

"You have a feather in your hair," Lauren said flatly.

I rustled around and found it: a single mottled grouse feather, which I plucked from my hair and laid on the tablecloth. All three of us stared at the small brown feather. I should have felt ashamed, but I felt giddy and proud.

"I think I'm gonna go," I said after a long beat of silence. "I have to help my uncle with something."

I turned and walked out of Natalie's house, knowing that it was all over, just like I knew it would be.

That night, I found Roy on the screened-in porch, drinking alone and rolling a cigarette. Shiny dried grouse blood stained the front of his overalls.

"Back so soon?" he said.

"Yeah," I said, sinking into the chair beside him. "What are we doing tomorrow?"

Roy clumsily lit his cigarette. "What do you want to hang around with an old man for?" he said. "You don't have any other friends?"

My face flushed. I suddenly felt burning mad at Roy. I got up to leave the porch and he waved me back down.

"Sit," he said. "Just teasing you."

We watched bugs circle the overhead porch light for a while.

"You looking forward to your mom and dad coming home?" he said.

"Not really," I said, thumbing the coin of blood on my jeans.

"Is that so."

"My mom cries all the time. She just sits around all day."

"Well, she's an odd woman," Roy said. "I never thought she was right for your dad."

In the dark, a howl gleamed from the woods. Roy got up, opened the screen door. The porch light seemed trapped inside his nest of hair, which he threw back at the sky as he hollered back into the dark. I could see the moon wobbling over the pines, brimful and gibbous, as if about to spill.

"You know your mom and I once made love," Roy said, wheeling back around. He let the screen door slam behind him. "She's a wild horse. I've got a porch around my heart for that woman, to this day."

I sat quietly for a moment, absorbing the idea. "Does my dad know?" I said.

"Maybe," he said, easing back into his chair. "Or maybe he's willed himself not to." He looked at me and shook his finger. "You can't help who you love, Sophie. It's your fate."

"What about Daisy?"

"Daisy?" he said, as if surprised that I knew the name. "Well, sure. A person needs company."

As I was getting ready for bed that night, Roy's words circled

around my head: *it's your fate, it's your fate*. I thought about Willa at the Sunoco, her long fingers, the little shells of her ears. My fate.

I stood for a long time in the bathroom after brushing my teeth, staring at myself. In the two weeks that Roy had been at our house, I'd forgotten to shower more than once or shave my legs. My unbrushed hair had grown matted and thick. I looked wild. A thumbprint of dirt smeared my cheek. I felt different, full of strength and hot blood, like I would never again go back to school, wear someone else's clothes, or pretend to be what I wasn't.

A few days later, the phone rang. It was our dad. Lori had finally died, he told me, and now he and our mom were on the road back from Nebraska. They would be back late that night, or early the next morning.

"Let me talk to Roy," he said.

I peered through the kitchen window. Roy's truck was gone, I told him.

"Well, tell him we'll be there soon," he said. He sounded worn thin.

I lay awake all night, buzzing with dread. At three in the morning, I heard the distinctive sound of Roy's Ranchero pulling into the driveway, then the slam of the kitchen door, and his heavy boots stamping through the living room. Several hours later came another car and the muffled sounds of our parents talking through the window. Dawn crept forward, dousing my bedsheets in pink and white.

I crawled out of bed and shook Missy awake. We met our parents as they were walking into the kitchen, where Roy's gun sat propped against the wall, and beer cans cluttered the table and counter. My mom looked older than she had when I last saw her, her face scribbled with pain, hair listless and greasy. Her arms felt thin as she hugged me. Then we heard a groan, and in came Roy

from the living room, wearing the rumpled clothes he fell asleep in, boots still on his feet.

His face changed when he saw our mother. They stood still for a moment, apprehending each other. What passed between them was silent and electric. She stepped forward to try to slip past him on her way to her bedroom, but Roy reached to take her hand. She pushed him away.

"Don't," she said.

Our dad, meanwhile, seemed not to see their exchange. He was too busy staring at the state of the kitchen: the gun, the beer cans and bottles, cards and cigarettes littering the table.

"Roy," he said, his voice quavering. "What is all this?"

Missy and I went back to our bedroom before too long. But we heard their whole fight unspooling through our window: Our dad cursing out Roy, Roy howling with laughter, our dad throwing beer cans at his truck until he drove away. Cans rattling in Roy's Ranchero bed as he sped down the driveway and onto the road. His bright, unruly hair shining almost audibly through the rear truck window.

Eventually, our dad came into our room and knelt between my and Missy's beds, where we sat with our knees pulled up to our chins. He told us that he was sorry, he should have known better; everything would go back to normal now. But I knew that it wouldn't, even if I never saw Roy again. I didn't want it to. The room was thick with light. There was a spark growing inside me, calling me into a different future, like a train hurtling fast into the wilderness.

her. I pull her to me. I feel her body against mine, rigid and small and hard. Her heart pounds against my palm. I fold her in. I tuck her in as close as I can and hold her for as long as she lets me. When she begins to pull away, I let go, certain there is nothing I can say, nothing I can do, to make her stay. So I do the only thing I can. I pull her hands out of her pockets. I push her shoulders back. I am not gentle.

Francisco González
Serranos

THE TRAILER PARK was our domain. We were nine sets of parents, with a dozen children. On the other side, we had all lived in the same village. Now we lived in Ranch View Mobile Estates, on the outskirts of Buellton. The owner had posted a sign at the entrance that said **FIXER-UPPERS AVAILABLE!** and another that said **THIS COULD BE HOME!** We knew because our children, who were literate, had told us.

At Ranch View Mobile Estates, there was no code enforcement and no regulation enforcement. A scattering of oaks and sycamores fought for their lives among heaps of used, broken, empty things: huge propane tanks, PVC pipes, busted stoves, crippled tractors. When we walked around our neighborhood, we did so with the occasional sound of shattered glass crunching underfoot.

But the trailer park was a good place to raise children. Each family had its own Shasta, Forester, Kenskill, or Spartan. Rent was only a few hundred dollars per month. And the entrance could not be seen from the county road, which made it difficult to find, even if you'd been told where to go.

A wall of corrugated tin surrounded our five-acre community. We had fashioned secret exits along its perimeter, where we'd

loosened the bolts that joined the sheets of metal. In the event of a raid, we could jiggle the bolts, slide a panel, and take flight into the woods.

Although we had been ten years in the valley, and no longer thought of ourselves as foreigners, our precautions had long ago become a part of us. We avoided banks, police stations, doctors' offices. We had stopped attending Mass, since we'd heard the stories of worshippers seized at the steps of churches. And we visited Albertsons or Safeway only in groups of three at most. We couldn't risk losing too many adults; someone had to remain to watch over our daughters and sons.

We were civilized people. We were not like the migrants who stumbled through the valley, alone or in small bands. They'd wander the roadsides, begging for work in alleys or parking lots. They'd toil a week or two on ranches. Now and then, we caught sight of them sleeping rough in the shade of trees, in creek beds, or beneath bridges. Very few of them managed to harden to the labor, put down roots, and endure as we had.

When the strangers walked into Ranch View Mobile Estates, we thought they'd arrived by mistake. There were eight of them. They lugged fifty-pound packs, bedrolls, and polyester blankets; they wore huaraches on their feet. We nearly approached them to ask if they needed directions, but they knew where they were going. They had keys to the vacant Holiday Rambler and began to move in.

The Holiday Rambler was one of those enormous 1960s trailers. It had a makeshift plywood porch. Its broken windows were boarded up, and its flanks blackened by a fire that must have burned before our time. We were shocked that human beings would make that rig their home.

At first glance, the strangers all appeared to be young men in their early twenties. But then we noticed a woman among them

who had long gray hair. Her presence eased our fears. If the youths had traveled with an elder and taken care of her, surely they couldn't be so bad.

Nevertheless, we agreed that the worst thing you can have in your proximity is other people. We observed the strangers' every move as they made improvements to the derelict trailer. They pulled the weeds that obscured it. They chased away the family of possums that lived in its undercarriage. They unboarded its windows and used old rags to shine its corroded aluminum exterior until the trailer looked bigger, and parts of it reflected light.

The strangers knocked on our doors and made their introductions. Rather, it was the gray-haired woman who introduced them, while the seven young men stood behind her in silence. The woman wore a woven cotton dress with the sleeves torn, and a crimson rebozo around her shoulders. She moved and carried herself like a prizefighter in the ring. She seemed to be in charge.

She said, "I am Mother Paz. And these are my sons."

Immediately we were skeptical. The young men did not resemble their supposed parent, nor did they resemble one another. That, and Mother Paz appeared far too old to be their mother. Despite this, when she referred to them as "sons," she sounded so confident that none of us could bring ourselves to challenge her.

One by one, we presented ourselves to our new neighbors and shook their hands, which were every bit as rugged as ours. It was hard to communicate with the young men. Their words were plated with an accent we didn't recognize. But Mother Paz spoke for them, and she spoke our language well. She told us they had come from the Sierra Madre de Chiapas.

"So you're Serranos," we said. "Tell us, how bad are things in Chiapas?"

This was a rhetorical question. We knew about the peasants

who had risen up against the government and been crushed. We knew about Subcomandante Marcos, and Red Mask, and the massacre of Acteal. It was the stuff of legend.

The old woman, who styled herself a mother, grinned at us, and yet we detected a gloom passing behind her eyes. We could tell she was pretending not to be upset, so we pivoted.

We asked the Serranos if they needed jobs. We explained that we earned our keep three miles up the road, at a boutique winery of some renown, where grapevines crowned the terraced hills. The winery also had horses, hens, and goats. We cared for the animals, and we cared for the grapes; we poured samples for tourists: reds, rosés, whites.

We mentioned that our boss might need a few extra hands, since it was now April, and fruit would soon appear on the vines. "We can set you up," we offered, "as long as you deliver." We didn't know what sorts of people grew up in the southern mountains, or what manner of work they'd be skilled at, but we hoped we might win them over by doing them a favor.

Mother Paz shook her head.

"Thank you, but we have all of us farmed for the last time."

Arrangements had been made: they would work at the new Greek restaurant.

The Greek restaurant was on the far side of Los Olivos, which meant that the Serranos had to commute more than six miles each way on foot. They left in the small hours before dawn and got back after dark. We predicted, correctly, that their routine was not sustainable.

A few weeks into it, we were all dining at the picnic tables at the center of the trailer park, when the Serranos approached us. Mother Paz asked if we knew of an easier way to reach Los Olivos—a bus, perhaps. No, we assured her; there was no public transportation in this corner of the valley. We were used to

walking to the winery, and our children were used to walking a half mile to their high school.

Mother Paz snapped her fingers. "I should have known—there's always one stitch in the rug that I miss. I've got another idea, though."

She'd heard about the Department of Motor Vehicles. She and her sons would probably go there and obtain driver's licenses. If they saved for a few months, she figured they could buy a used car. Nothing fancy—something small would do.

We couldn't stop ourselves from laughing. We informed the Serranos that they wouldn't be driving on California roads, not in this lifetime. Only citizens were allowed to have licenses. And even citizens had to take tests, fill out forms, and speak English if they wanted to get behind the wheel of a car. The process was so convoluted, so overfilled with restrictions, that it would be simpler to hijack a crop duster and fly to work instead.

Mother Paz was incredulous. "Those rules are absurdities!" she cried.

Again, we laughed.

"You're not wrong," we said. "Even so, you're in the North now, and every dance is a different dance."

The following Saturday, the Serranos left the park in the chill of dawn. When they returned several hours later, they were walking single-speed bicycles with knobby tires. The bicycles were teal or hot pink or lime green, and low to the ground. Some of them had tasseled handlebars; clearly they were built for kids.

We didn't know how to ride bicycles, and neither did our children. It was immediately obvious that the Serranos didn't either, though they wasted no time in trying.

They practiced in the evenings. Three or four of them would roll through the trailer park, pushing themselves along with their feet, while the rest used flashlights to illuminate the path ahead.

We were glad they had sense enough to wear helmets. Some of the riders managed to lift their legs for a few seconds, but they seemed to spend most of their time crashing to the ground and shouting words that we assumed to be profanities.

Mother Paz, who was clumsier than the rest, crashed so many times that her helmet finally broke in two. The young men helped her up, and she shook dirt from her dress.

"Remember the proverb," she said. "The Devil fell and lost his grace, but not his pride."

Minutes later, she was at it again.

In the days that followed, the Serranos began to add accessories to their useless bikes: reflectors, baskets, luggage racks, bells. A few of them tied artificial roses to their top tubes. Then came the American flags, the miniature ones you could buy at Walmart; the Serranos attached these to the backs of their seats.

There was something particularly annoying about the flags, which seemed to imply that we needed to be reminded of where we lived. Or perhaps the Serranos were foolish enough to believe that stars and stripes would save them if they got in trouble in the world beyond Ranch View Mobile Estates.

Spring gave way to an early summer. Squashes and tomatoes ripened in the fields on either side of the county road, and grapes swelled in the vineyards. It wasn't hard then to ignore the Serranos. Our shifts were longer and busier; visitors flocked to the winery in buses and expensive cars. Our boss would lecture them on acidity, tannins, and flavor compounds. Meanwhile, we'd hustle back and forth with fresh glasses and bottles, getting them drunk. Some of the tourists seemed to shit money. The older they were, the more they drank, the more they tipped us.

On Friday afternoons, we'd line up at the front office, and our boss would pay us in cash. He'd remark that Spanish people were good workers, and we were confused as to why he would say that,

because we had never met anyone from Spain. When we asked our children to explain, they rolled their eyes and said, "He's too stupid to live."

Our children transacted mysteries that were beyond our knowledge and past our learning. They were good at English, so good that they could memorize rap lyrics. They could even identify peculiar accents just by overhearing a few words; they'd gesture at chattering tourists and tell us, "That man is probably from France," or "That one sounds British."

On Sundays, our children read the local papers to us, translating on the spot. They'd decode the content from cover to cover. Gossip. Sports. Crime. Politics. It made us giddy to see these displays of intelligence.

Sometimes our children would ask us, "Do you ever wish you could read? Or speak perfect English?"

And we would joke, "We wish you couldn't. So you'd understand what it's like for us."

One day, we returned from the winery to find the Serranos riding their tiny bicycles through the trailer park—without crashing. The seven young men rode single file, with Mother Paz leading them, and they were all whooping and laughing. Somehow they'd solved the puzzle of balance.

We stood there watching the Serranos. They formed an odd parade, with their American flags fluttering behind them. One of the young men had duct-taped a portable radio to his seat post and was blasting country music. Mother Paz glided past us, cackling. She looked almost like a witch on a broomstick.

The spectacle of the bicycles so excited our children that some of them began to clap and cheer for the Serranos, but we found this irritating and demanded their silence.

Every weekday morning, we trudged to work on the shoulder of the county road, while our neighbors followed the same road to Los Olivos on their bicycles. They usually passed by without saying much, which was fine with us. We had no real desire to converse with them. We would have preferred to keep them on nodding terms, at most.

Occasionally, though, one or more of them would slow down to match our pace and spoil our mood with talk. They boasted that it now took them only thirty minutes to reach the Greek restaurant, "or twenty, if you really step on it." They could visit any of the surrounding towns: Santa Ynez, Ballard, Los Alamos. They'd been to the Santa Maria Target, where the aisles were so long that you couldn't see the end of them. And they'd been to a theater in Solvang, where they'd watched a movie about a million penguins mating. The movie had inspired them. Someday, they said, they might try their luck at crossing the mountain pass into coastal Santa Barbara. They had never seen the ocean, but wanted to.

Privately, we agreed that the Serranos were idiots to put themselves at risk in their petty adventuring. We were content to keep a low profile and focus on our work. While we moved drip tape, mucked corrals, and sprayed chemicals between the vines, we'd fall back on our fantasies. Our children would grow up to be suited professionals, stacking money. With a little luck, we would end up living in their two- or three-story houses. Then there would be nothing left to do but play with our grandkids, push their strollers, and rest our bones.

In June, the Serranos invited gabachas into the trailer park. The gabachas were roughly the same age as the young men, and drove not bikes but ramshackle cars. They'd pull into our community and stroll past us as if they had every right, as if we were furnishings in their living room. Sometimes they brought plastic

bags of mota and six-packs of beer, and they'd sit on the porch of the Holiday Rambler, drinking and smoking with the Serranos. There were at least four or five gabachas, though they were hard to count, because we couldn't tell them apart. They all had brown hair with blond highlights. They all wore lipstick and short skirts, and had tattoos. They'd all get drunk and talk too loud, and when they laughed, they'd tip their heads back and open their mouths wide, like donkeys.

The Holiday Rambler had next to nothing in the way of insulation, so we could tell right away when the sex began. On weekends, pairs of Serranos and gabachas would enter the trailer in shifts, and we could hear their coaxing, moaning, and grunting. The Holiday Rambler's walls jounced and swayed until we wished it would collapse. But it was built to last.

We decided to make our displeasure known to the Serranos. Since we were conscious of our numerical superiority, we agreed it would be best if only three of us approached them. A group of that size could impart seriousness, without the implicit hostility of a larger crowd.

On a Saturday morning, the chosen three of us found Mother Paz sunbathing on a lawn chair beside the Holiday Rambler. She wore a pair of sunglasses, a high-waisted bikini bottom, and a T-shirt with Superman leaping out of it.

It was a small matter, we said. But did she think her boys could be a touch more discreet? With their exchanges?

We had decided beforehand that *exchanges* was the most suitable word in our arsenal. Its vagueness would spare the conversers from directly acknowledging the dope, the boozing, and the carnality.

But Mother Paz only said, "You know how young people are."

We had hoped for a simple conversation. Briefly, we considered whether this woman's grasp of our language was really as strong as we'd thought. Then we noticed the telltale rocking of the Holiday Rambler starting up, and, along with it, the braying of a gabacha.

This prompted us to say that yes, youths can forget themselves, and they can forget their neighbors, and sometimes it takes an elder to set them right again.

Mother Paz removed her glasses and folded them.

"Scripture tells us that love does no wrong to a neighbor, and therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."

We were struggling to keep our cool; we were in no mood for a religious debate.

"Our children look up to you," we admitted. "You're showing them things they shouldn't see and shouldn't hear."

"I'll take that message back to my sons. But I can't make any promises."

When we instructed our children to keep their distance from the Serranos, they asked us to explain why.

"They seem to be hardworking people," we said, "but we don't want you to be entangled in the things they do when they're not working."

"They're really nice to us, though," our children said. "We play *lotería* or soccer with them when you're not around. And Mother Paz brings us *baklava* from the restaurant."

"She's nobody's mother."

"Who cares? She's our friend."

"Why not make some real friends, kids your own age? When school starts again, invite some classmates over—we'd be happy to meet them."

"Our classmates avoid us. They say we smell like trash because we sleep in a landfill."

"This is a trailer park, a neighborhood. They should know the difference."

"Difference? What 'difference'?"

Our children became furious. They were sick of spending empty summer days surrounded by rubbish, explaining obvious

facts to us. They suggested that we were jealous of the Serranos since "you're boring, and they're fearless. And you can't control them the way you control us."

We were hurt, and sad that our influence was no longer what it had once been, but we were not entirely surprised. Our children had entered their teens, and we had expected defiance on their part. Some of our coworkers at the winery, the ones who lived in other communities, had shared stories of their sons and daughters dropping out of school, experimenting with narcotics, dating hoodlums. We couldn't imagine that our children would sink so low, but they were bound to find new ways of testing us. Naturally, we were tempted to punish them. Our own parents wouldn't have tolerated such flagrant disrespect. They would have taken belts to us, or whips, or electrical cords—whatever happened to be within reach. In the end, though, we kept our hands down and let our children be. This was a phase that would pass in its own time.

Grape tending kept us occupied well into the evenings. We trimmed clusters, discarding immature fruit. We planted bell beans, oats, and daikon beside the vines to lure away insects. The air was heavy with the scent of fresh manure and turned earth, which smelled to us like prosperity and renewed our optimism.

One night a commotion woke us from our shallow sleep. There was the sound of something like whistling and popping, and we noticed intermittent bursts of light coming through our curtains.

"Stay inside," we told our children. "We'll handle this."

When we opened our doors and stepped out, we were horrified: the eight Serranos—along with a few *gabachas*—were shooting bombettes and flash powder and multicolored jumping jacks. They were spinning flame wheels and fiery balls that screamed into the air. An immense plume of smoke had risen from our neighborhood.

“Stop!” we begged. “Stop all of this!”

Mother Paz came forward.

“Friends, it’s *Independence Day*,” she said.

We tried reasoning with her. Hadn’t she heard of *zero tolerance*? The fireworks were illegal. And they were especially dangerous at this time of year, when a single spark could set the entire valley ablaze. The display was visible for miles around. If a malicious outsider should see it and call the police, we’d all be taken away.

We implored Mother Paz to trust us and benefit from our advice. In order to persist in the North, you had to hush your impulses. You had to withdraw from the world until nobody gave a damn about you.

Mother Paz delved into our faces; there was no shame in hers.

“I’ve been told that tonight is a night to celebrate. Maybe you should relax for once.”

Enraged, we told her, “Maybe you should live in a place where you don’t have neighbors, so you don’t have to act like neighbors!”

“All right, fuckers! I don’t know anything about anything—is that what you want to hear?”

The seven younger Serranos had been observing our exchange. From their wide-eyed expressions, we could tell they understood our anger, if not our vocabulary. Mother Paz turned to them, barked something in their language. They extinguished their firecrackers, and the gabachas followed suit, until all was dark again.

That weekend, the Serranos avoided us. They stayed behind the door of the Holiday Rambler.

On Sunday evening, we held a meeting in the Becerra family’s trailer. All eighteen of us crammed ourselves into the kitchen/bedroom/living room.

We said, “These Serranos have come to spread chaos! They’re pissing on us, and we’re kneeling here with open mouths!”

Only one set of parents dissented, counseling forgiveness.

“They’re our brethren,” they said, “not our adversaries. Haven’t we all crossed the same border? Aren’t we all just workers following the work?” They suggested that this was a teachable moment for our children. This was an opportunity to put a good lesson into their hearts, and into the hearts of our neighbors.

The rest of us wouldn’t have it. Our animosity was only hardened by that sort of talk. Forgiveness be damned—those beasts hadn’t even apologized. And it wasn’t our job to teach them how to apologize, or think, or be passable humans. Now was the time to stand up, raise our voices, and yield no ground.

We said, “If it comes to battle, so be it: we have the numbers!”

We would tell the Serranos to pack their bags. We would order them to leave Ranch View Mobile Estates immediately.

All eighteen of us marched across the trailer park. Since we wanted to appear as formidable as possible, we had changed into our best pants, guayaberas, and dresses—the things we’d worn to one another’s weddings, our children’s baptisms, and weekly Masses, back when we were still brave enough to attend church. A few of us also strapped machetes to our hips. They were tucked into leather sheaths, and we didn’t plan on using them, but we thought they’d add considerable authority to our demands.

We intended to give our neighbors the type of shock they wouldn’t forget. Candlelight flickered in the windows of their trailer, the focal point of our wrath. When we reached its porch, we assumed the most vicious expressions in our power, and pounded on the door. It swung open.

A gust of warmth and humidity escaped the Holiday Rambler. We were greeted by Mother Paz and her sons. They wore aprons and chef’s coats. Behind them, on a small table, sat a host of saucers and bowls caked in flour. Pepper stems and seeds were piled neatly

on a rectangular cutting board. We saw wooden spoons, spatulas, and dough scrapers soaking in a washbasin.

Three of the young men held a massive earthenware pot. They lifted its lid, and gesticulated in a way that said, *Have a look*.

The pot contained several dozen rectangular dark green pouches, which were fat and smooth and beaded with moisture. They looked like vegetables from another world.

Mother Paz noticed our bewilderment.

"Some tamales for you, prepared in the southern style," she said. "They're wrapped in the fronds of a banana tree. Don't wait too long—eat them while they're hot."

A few of us tried to speak, but we couldn't bring our denunciations into being. We were stupefied.

Food is sacred to our people, and has been for numberless generations. Its presence governs our behavior. You can't attack someone when they've cooked fresh provisions for you and opened their hands; tradition tells us that it would be as bad as striking down the healer who binds your wounds. Maybe the Serranos were aware of this, or maybe they weren't. In any case, we were constrained by our principles and unwilling to commit sacrilege.

So when at last we found our voices again, we had no choice but to thank our neighbors. We accepted the earthenware pot. Of course we hadn't forgiven Mother Paz and her sons, and our differences were far from settled, but they had pulled our fangs and bought themselves time. We divided the strange tamales between us—half a dozen per family—and returned to our homes, dressed in our finery.

The tamales, which had been made by this so-called mother and her so-called sons, were the best we had ever eaten. Their flavor bloomed in stages. Beneath the leaves, the cornmeal was soft and buttery. This was followed by a tangy second layer that surprised us with a hint of tamarind. The most intense delight lay at the

core of each tamal, where a spicy flourish whispered across our taste buds.

Our children ate with us. They asked, "How come you've never made tamales like these?" and laughed when we had no answer. We considered that perhaps our ancestors had passed down the wrong recipes, and these were the first true tamales we had tasted; maybe all the rest had been mockeries. We licked and scraped the banana leaves, extracting every trace of their essence. It was happiness pumping through our bodies.

Our neighbors were uncivilized. They were unpolished. But you don't need so much polish when you're sincere.

The Migra came for the Serranos on the ninth of July.

They had raided Santa Ynez, southeast of us. And they had been seen in Buellton. Still, we hadn't expected their agents to bother with a town as small as Los Olivos, which had only a thousand inhabitants. For some reason the Migra—or else the town itself—wanted to make an example out of the Greek restaurant.

The details oozed into our knowledge from various sources. We learned them from coworkers at the winery, and from cashiers at Albertsons, the ones who spoke our language. And our children told us what they could, when the *Santa Barbara Independent* printed a brief article about the raid.

We listened as our children translated: The raid had happened around six P.M., during the dinner rush. The Migra had taken ten restaurant employees into custody. They had fired two shots in the process, since a few suspects had resisted capture. One suspect had been hospitalized with "minor injuries."

Our children turned a page, then another, and frowned. "There's nothing more—that's all it says."

An amateur photographer had been dining at the restaurant at the time of the raid, and we examined the black-and-white photos she'd snapped. You could see trucks and vans and pistol-wielding

agents with bulletproof vests, who were escorting three handcuffed men out of the restaurant. The young men must have been taken completely by surprise; they hadn't even removed their hairnets or their latex kitchen gloves. They'd averted their faces from the eye of the camera, and we couldn't make out their expressions, but we recognized them as our neighbors.

Our children announced their plan to walk into Los Olivos. "We're going to check things out," they said.

They pointed out the fact that only three Serranos had appeared in the paper. Maybe the other five had eluded the Migra and gone into hiding. Maybe they needed help.

It took us a few moments to realize that our children were serious.

"This is a game to you?"

"We should go," they said. "We're American-born, and we can't be taken away."

"Don't be so sure!"

We recited the names of friends and relatives who had thought they were safe but had vanished all the same. We stressed that men, women, and children were known to die in Migra prisons. And captives died just as often when sadistic agents turned them loose in hellholes like Agua Prieta, Reynosa, and Ciudad Juárez, where people like ourselves were food for wolves.

"At this rate, the newspaper will run an article about a gang of thumb-suckers who should have listened to their parents!" we said.

Our children held their ground. They crossed their arms.

"This is the right thing to do, and it's the least we can do for our neighbors," they said.

We couldn't back them down, so we began to beg. We wept and wailed. We embraced them and refused to release them.

Then, too, we were proud of our daughters and sons, even

though we wouldn't reveal it. The years had sculpted their character. They were so strong that siding against them was like siding against nature. Someday perhaps we ourselves would be dragged away, and they would need that strength to survive in this country without us.

Our children's voices softened.

"If the Migra got their hands on you, we'd scour the earth," they said. "We'd find you, no matter what."

And with that, we let them go.

Raided businesses often make a show of reinventing themselves. After several expeditions to Los Olivos, our children reported this to be the case with the Greek restaurant. For a week, it stayed dark inside. Then a crew of workers undertook a series of renovations. There was a lot of drilling and hammering, lifting and moving. The workers repainted the façade, and it became powder blue instead of brown. They replaced the plastic OPEN sign with a neon OPEN sign, which was bright enough to be seen from down the block. They filled holes in the parking lot, paved it with fresh tar, and etched new lines between the parking spaces.

In the second or third week after the raid, the gabachas reappeared at Ranch View Mobile Estates. Sometimes they sat alone on the porch of the Holiday Rambler, hugging themselves. Sometimes they came in pairs and loitered together. When they spoke, they spoke in murmurs. Every now and then, they'd try the door, even though they already knew it was locked. Perhaps they just wanted to touch something that their lovers' hands had touched.

A month after the raid, our children informed us that the Greek restaurant had started doing business again. Its double doors were propped open. A large banner appeared across its awning. It said

GRAND REOPENING in big letters, and UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT in smaller ones.

The Holiday Rambler's curtains remained closed behind its windows. There were days when clouds rumbled, and their sprinkling brought up nettles and smutgrass around the trailer, until it appeared to be sinking into the weeds. We could still see the path leading to the home of our erstwhile neighbors, which had been imprinted by the weight of their comings and goings. Abandoned laundry fluttered on their clothesline, and when night calmed the breath of the trailer park, we could hear T-shirts slapping against pant legs.

Our children stopped looking for the Serranos. But they couldn't stop dreaming about them.

In one dream the Serranos lived in a zoo, where each of them was housed in a small cage with steel bars; when you got too close, they'd roar in the way that mountain lions roar.

In another dream Mother Paz couldn't see you, even when you stood right in front of her. She'd wander around the trailer park muttering, "Almost."

Our children tossed and turned in their sleep. They woke up gasping, and we kneeled beside their beds, held their hands, and soothed them just as we had when they were babies. We told them they needed not worry. The Serranos were nothing if not resourceful; they were quick on their feet. "And wherever they've ended up, they're surely together," we lied.

When our children were out of earshot, we confided our true feelings to one another. The dreams had provoked in us a new sense of disquiet. They were exactly the sorts of dreams you might have about the dead, when they reach out from the hereafter.

Now when we went to work, we slogged through the woods and up the Santa Ynez riverbed, which is parched all but two months of the year. August was the height of rattlesnake season, and we

had to watch our steps, but none of us wanted to follow the county road anymore. We felt endangered by the eyes of passing motorists.

A harvest day arrived, and we rose before dawn to prepare ourselves for long hours among the vines. While our children were fast asleep, we covered up with hats, bandanas, neckerchiefs, and long-sleeved shirts. We packed coolers with food and water and gathered at the picnic tables. We were about to leave.

Just then, we spotted Mother Paz.

We were terrified at first. If someone had told us that we were seeing a wayward spirit, we would have believed them. But Mother Paz was really there, riding through the entrance to Ranch View Mobile Estates on her pink bicycle with its American flag. She rode alone. She wore no helmet, and her long gray hair swirled freely in the wind. We were astonished—somehow she'd escaped.

The Migra worked in mysterious ways. Once, in Lompoc, they'd barged in on a wedding banquet and taken more than forty people, but spared the singer and his band. Another time, they'd raided a plum orchard outside Los Alamos and arrested only the male workers, leaving the women behind. It was hard to discern any logic in their doings. Agents took parents and left children; they took children and left parents. Perhaps they had decided that Mother Paz was old and would die soon anyway, and did not think she was worth their trouble.

The violet sky advised us that we were supposed to be at the vineyard, yet none of us made a move. Mother Paz dismounted her bicycle a stone's throw from the Holiday Rambler and let it fall to the ground. Her face was dirty. She looked barely awake and far away; she was panting like the wounded.

Stupidly, we asked, "Where are your sons?"

Mother Paz brushed past us without a word. She must have hoped that the events of the last several weeks hadn't been real and that the young Serranos would be waiting for her, and she didn't

have any space in her thoughts for us. She pulled a key from her pocket. A moment later, she hobbled into her home.

We acted strong, enclosed in the trailer park, but we knew we were prey. Neighbors brought our fears to life. It was easy to hate them; we couldn't bear to love them, since they never lasted long. The heat of day was upon us, defining our shadows as we approached the Holiday Rambler. We decided it would be enough, for us, not to be forgotten. Gently, we knocked on the door.

Caroline Kim

Hiding Spot

IT WAS A GOOD HIDING SPOT. Too good. Mrs. Lee stood in her closet with her hands on her hips, squeezing her eyes shut, telling herself to “think, think.” She could almost see it, see herself folding tissue paper around her wedding rings, pushing them down into a blue velvet pouch that also held her wedding pearls and a white jade ring passed down from her mother. Yes, she could almost even feel herself pulling the yellow drawstring tightly closed and putting it all . . . where?

In a box? Under something? *In* something? Scornfully, she remembered congratulating herself for picking such a good hiding spot because no one would think to look there. She felt like a character in a folktale, an old fool, tripped up by her own cleverness.

It was only three months ago that she had hidden her jewelry, in the days before she and Mr. Lee went on a cruise to Alaska. They weren't the vacationing type, but one day while Mr. Lee was reading the *Chosun Ilbo* online, he saw an ad for a cruise line offering incredible deals. “It'll feel like we're losing money if we don't go,” he said. The only catch was that the cruise left in just a few days from Seattle. No problem. Isn't this why they'd retired