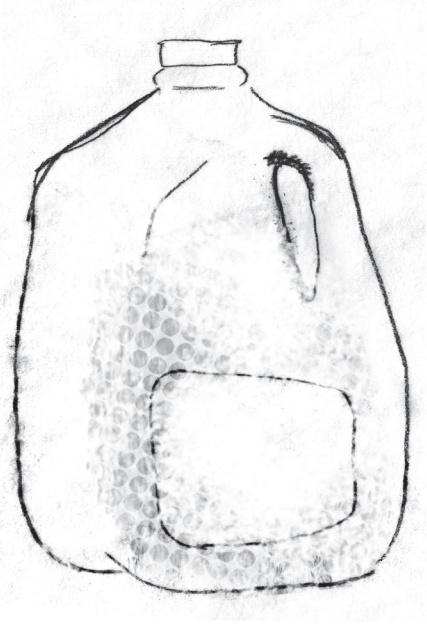

She hopes every morning he awakens and dreads going to work, dreads turning these milk jugs over, dreads seeing the numbers that mean the days when things will end.

Benjamin Rybeck

Shop, Drop, and Roll

She carries out the plan she made months ago: attend the grand opening of the Shop, Drop, and Roll (SDR). The local papers alerted her about this incoming store, as did the ads on television, as did the whispers at work. Lately, things like this have interested her more than ever: new restaurants opening in downtown Portland, or new novelty snacks (cracker on one side, pretzel on the other!). New, new, new: this is what she gets when she enters the SDR, grabs her shopping cart, and glances toward the two TVs hanging above the entrance, once of which shows herself in present tense walking into the store, the other of which shows the parking lot where she imagines a past version of herself still lurks. The SDR might be the newest thing she's ever seen. The SDR—with its white floors that stretch on and on and seem unwalked-upon, maybe even unwalkable; with its Christmas lights streaming over every rack of every aisle—the SDR might as well be a newborn home from the hospital.

To her as a little girl, grocery stores were great mountains, impressive sights. Bright packages of foods she loved stacked—*stacked!* Her father would guide her down the aisles and allow her to point to four things on the shelves that she absolutely wanted, and her father would buy the items, no questions asked. This agreement they had, the two of them. This agreement turned the grocery store into a wild place. Whatever she wanted she got, in the grocery store, and at home.

But the SDR is more than a grocery store. Three full stories packed with food and drinks and electronic equipment and furniture and tractors and minivans and even reproductions of old trains! She has trouble imagining how the small children in the store today experience this place, these sights, this overload of whiteness. Does it all look as

glorious as the grocery store looked to her years ago? She looks around as she pushes her cart down the cereal aisle. She spots a child with light-up shoes and pigtails, pointing to an item she wants on the top shelf. Her father responds unfavorably, swatting the miniature hand from the air. The child looks unfazed, as though getting her hand swatted—and getting other things swatted too—is routine.

Never hit a child anywhere, she'd always thought; not on the face, not on the hand. Never hit a child, no matter how much they misbehave, no matter how much they annoy you, no matter how much you want to, never, ever, *ever* hit a child. Her parents had never hit her. Her parents had been sweet and loving and gentle. Children, she'd always thought, are the purest creatures in the world, and deserve to do what they want without experiencing pain. Discipline should take forms other than the infliction of pain; discipline should take the form of the deprivation of beauty and wonderment, but only for long enough to make the child begin to miss it. But she knew other opinions on the matter floated around the world like ash being taken by the wind. One alarming day, she heard some woman who'd just written a book about child-rearing say on NPR that hitting a child is encouraged until the child is three, because all they understand until then is pain. But this made no sense to her. Surely *she* understood more than pain at three. Surely she understood wonderment too, guiding her father through the grocery store, and picking those items off the shelves like diamonds pulled from a mine.

But today, she pushes her cart through the store but does not take anything off the shelves. She moves through the cereal aisle, and then gazes at the dairy coolers, with the ice cream, milk, etc. etc., while above her noises flash in her ears, the noises of the electronics on the second floor, of large TVs, loud speakers, and blaring videogames. She wonders whether to put something in her cart, to maintain the appearance of shopping. Did she even come here to shop? She's not sure. She tries to decide what kind of dairy products she needs. She traces her fingers across rows of cheese and milk jug caps, and she

cannot decide. She wishes to be more like the man she spots peripherally, reaching repeatedly into the cooler, checking expiration dates of milk. She wishes for that determination. She turns and gets a good look, finding him handsome and familiar. But he's not here to shop. He's here for something else. He wears a blue Oakhurst Dairy polo shirt with a nametag pinned to it. She cannot make out his name, but she can make out his title: Merchandiser. This is why he checks the expiration dates on all the Oakhurst Dairy products, turns them over to confirm their freshness, tracks the milk.

She doesn't need to see his name to know who he is. Bryan Velas. She hasn't seen him in a long time, and really, it's pure luck she sees him today, but it's Bryan Velas all right, and everything that made him popular in school remains: the Prince Valiant hair (on the edges of which premature grayness now creeps); the muscular chest (which a flabby stomach now underlines); the small feet which, folks said, made him a ballerina on the basketball court. She knows Bryan by all these things. She wonders by what he might know her if he only turns her way.

What might he remember about her? 6th grade, when she decided to write notes to the people she met with text like, "Hello, my name is Melissa, what's your name?"; or 7th grade, when she wrote a note for Bryan Velas and he showed his friends, and they passed it around writing the most vulgar things they could think of at the bottom of it; or 8th grade, when, for multimedia class, each group needed to make a video, and Bryan and his friends decided to shoot a video called *Melissa Explains It All* in which they made fun of her for having "magical powers," for being able to "communicate with the dork dead through lame-ass notes," and when Bryan and his friends followed her around with this camera for a month, videotaping her in some embarrassing situations, like whistling in the lunchroom and moving her head back and forth as though dancing to her sandwich, and when the boys *of course* got in trouble for making this video, but not before screening it for a classroom containing 50 of her peers? Everybody

knew her. Everybody in school knew the girl with the magic powers. The girl who wrote the magic notes. But, she figures as she watches Bryan Velas check more expiration dates, he probably won't remember any of this, and he probably won't recognize her even if he turns her way. It doesn't matter, anyway. She can't remember anything about him, apart from what he did to her—in middle school, and later on. She can't remember if he got into an Ivy League school. She can't remember if working for Oakhurst Dairy—his father's company—was something he'd always wanted to do. But she hopes he is dead-end. She hopes every morning he awakens and dreads going to work, dreads turning these milk jugs over, dreads seeing the numbers that mean the days when things will end. She hopes he checks for his own expiration date in the mirror every morning. She hopes he looks for it in his eyes, in his mouth, in his fingertips. She hopes he looks for it and wishes, *wishes*, it's sooner than he thinks. Maybe if she had hit Bryan Velas and his friends in middle school they would have learned. Maybe if she hadn't just tried to turn the other way and ignore them, but had instead whaled on them, giving them smacks on their foreheads, giving them kicks in their stomachs—maybe they would have become ghosts to her. Or maybe his parents should have done this. Maybe there's something to be said for hitting.

She keeps close to Bryan Velas as he moves on from the milk to check the cheese. She wants him to notice her, to look right at her. She wants him to see that she's older now, just like him, although her hair isn't going grey yet, and her stomach is still reasonably flat. He reaches into the cooler and pulls out another jug of milk and turns it over and then puts it back. He pats down his body until he finds a notepad that he withdraws from his pocket. Then, he looks to the floor, up and down the floor, as though looking for something else he dropped. And for a moment, he looks right at her, and he holds his eyes on her for a second, and she freezes. She's like a child again: in the grocery store, she gets what she wants. But now, with Bryan Velas's eyes on her, she doesn't want this recognition anymore. She wants to

hide inside her shopping cart and curl up like an item somebody has taken off the shelves.

But nothing lights up in his eyes: not recognition, not pain, not anything. This look: is it the same look she remembers him giving that morning after the accident, when his parents came to pick him up, when his dad, his shoulders broad as though always wearing a padded blazer, came to pick him up and led him out of the gymnasium by the hand, as though guiding his son to a safe place back home, away from the eyes that watched him as she lay crumpled on the floor, feeling like she might die, soaked in the cold sweat that came when she went into shock, pain rippling like an earthquake through her body and cracking her skin—is this the same look he gives her now? Well, she was 16 back then, and 14 years later, she can't quite remember. She wishes she could remember.

Because after all of that, time sped up for her a little bit. She left Portland for Tucson at 18 to go to college, and on the new campus, she became a new person. Not because she made up stories, but because she refused to answer most questions. She recognized that part of her downfall in middle school was answering every question with complete honesty. (Melissa, what *on earth* are you doing? I'm rocking out to my sandwich!) She vowed, in college, to never lie, but to simply *shut up*. Myths cropped up by senior year. She became popular because of what people *thought* they knew. They heard she performed with a circus family. But no: she used to have dreads and follow around the Smashing Pumpkins. A groupie. But no: not just any groupie! A sexless groupie! Because some of them heard she lacked a vagina. She possessed the sort of past she'd always wanted: magical, dangerous, absurd, full of daring escapes through windows, snow angels in fields, and banana-colored boys. But she wanted more than this too. She wanted a child. But the doctors told her, at 18, that the worst was true: she could never have a child. She wanted to be artificially inseminated, but the doctor chewed on the metal part of his eraser and told her, Impossible. She took the brochures and pamphlets

from him that day anyway, as though she just needed to research the situation thoroughly. Surely, she could find a loophole here; surely she could find a way out of her own body. She carried the bag of brochures and pamphlets back to her dorm room and set them on a chair at the fold-out card table she ate upon, and she named the bag Thomas. The dining room became Thomas' room, and Melissa slept in a sleeping bag on the floor. She told him her story. After years of avoiding herself, she told Thomas who she *really* was. She knew this looked crazy; but nobody watched her anymore, and sometimes it felt nice to talk to something.

Now, with Bryan Velas's eyes on her, she needs to make a decision. She should run away? Should she speak to him? Should she ram her shopping cart into him and throw him to the floor and give him the beating he deserves—the beating his parents should have given him years ago, when he only understood pain? Usually, she avoids decisions. She goes months without opening her mail because opened mail asks her to decide: pay this bill on time or not on time, renew subscription or cancel subscription. She has not even picked anything off the SDR shelves.

But she doesn't need to make any decision, because he just says to her, Excuse me, and she backs up, out of his way, and he reaches past her, grazing her arm with his fingers as he searches out another jug of milk. His fingers curl around the handle, and he lifts the expiration date to his eyes, and she backs off, her body feeling rubbery, that fleeting feeling of his fingers still hot on her arm. She stumbles backward like a drunk person, and stares at him as he puts the jug of milk back, as he picks up another one, as she becomes invisible to him once more. She wants to swat at her arm, his touch now a mosquito drinking her blood; she wants to swat that feeling of him away. She hasn't been touched by anyone for a couple years now. Not since moving back to Portland at 24. The last time was her coworker in the bookstore whom she took to her car and climbed on top of, and he came so quickly he didn't even have time to spit out his gum. Number

30 for her; 30 in six years. The first time for her, she was 18, and he was 18, and he lived across the hall in her Arizona dorm room, the boy whom she used to spot picking his nose when he thought nobody could see. They did it on his couch, him on top, him fumbling with the condom, and her putting her hand over his and guiding it away from the wrapper and telling him, Don't worry about that. He didn't protest in the way she thought he might. He just slid into her, and it didn't feel nice; it felt like work. Boys in the dorms, boys in her classes, a handful of professors, coworkers at the bookstores in both Tucson and Portland where she's worked since graduating college: she targeted them, often providing the condom herself—the condom she had pierced with a needle earlier that afternoon. She could get outside of her body. If enough boys fell upon her, surely the problem would not stick; surely one of them could get her pregnant. But the doctors were right. She tried, tried, tried, but she could not fucking do it; she could not get pregnant.

Of course, Bryan Velas was handsome; he still is handsome, really, his hands still rugged (even though his skin looks a little dry), his jaw still gaunt (although softened by a bit of a double chin). Sometimes, with the boys on top of her, she thought of him, not mocking her, not hurting her, not ruining her life, but running his hands through her hair, and moving inside her, and biting her ear. Sometimes she thought that for all the boys she found herself with, they all should have been Bryan Velas. After all, he was the reason she could not have a child. Shouldn't he have been the one to climb atop her time after time? Shouldn't he have been the one to set things right? And for a second here, she lets herself sink into it, the dream of family. A miracle, a miracle! the doctors would have cried as they handed her baby boy to her—as they handed Thomas to her—and as she handed that child up to Bryan Velas, standing over her, smiling. A child the two of them would have raised. And a child they never would have hit. A child she would have taken to the grocery store, to the Shop, Drop, and Roll, and walked down the aisles with, and picked out the

groceries with. A child whose hand she never would have smacked down, no matter where it pointed.

She swears a spider crawls on her arm, and she swats at her skin, but there is nothing there. The tingling: it was just the feeling of Bryan Velas's touch leaving her body. It's just the feeling of world coming back to her, of the dream disappearing once again.

One minute later, she leaves the SDR. The sunlight looks dim to her. She rubs her eyes—a little too hard, maybe, because her left one keeps itching, keeps feeling dry, like she hasn't blinked in weeks. She pauses for a second at the front of the store, looks at the pine trees around her, still full in the winter, still green and mountainous. Cigarette smoke curls to her nose. She smoked a cigarette once in college. It almost knocked her over, made her see the world momentarily through a candle flame. She spots the smokers: a teenage boy and a teenage girl who look identical, with black hair and septum piercings, wearing the SDR uniforms, the blue khakis and tan t-shirts and striped bowling vests. They declare a thumb war as they smoke. He wins.

She moves away from the front of the store and feels better, except for a leak of guilt over leaving her shopping cart in the middle of the aisle. Usually she makes a point of cleaning up after herself wherever she goes. At friends' places in college, she stayed late to do the dishes. At restaurants, she stacked her plates before the waiter came to take them away; she wiped down the table with a napkin too. She never wanted to cause additional stress. But now who tries to alleviate *her* stress? If she'd left her college friends with a huge mess after every party, so what? If she'd been rude to every waiter or waitress she'd ever seen, would it have changed anything? If she had fought back against Bryan Velas, would he have stopped? If she had had that child, and the way to stop him from becoming Bryan Velas was to hit him, then she would have begun the first day she got him home. She would've made a fist in her room and brought it down. The second day, she would've returned with a broom handle. The third day, a

belt. She would have beaten Thomas until he bruised, until he cried, until his life was ruined, until he hated her and would later spit out how much he hated her in his adult voice, cursing his mother for the abuse—but at least he would be kind. She would've beaten him every day to keep him kind.

The sunlight hurts her back. Sometimes this happens. The pain returns to her at odd times, no matter how many of the pills she takes in the morning, no matter how much over the recommended dosage she flies. She wipes at her face. All her movements feel slow. It takes minutes for her hand to climb to her forehead, then for her palm to turn over, then for it to wipe across her skin. And such an ordeal, her labored-over steps, each one a decision.

She sees the Oakhurst Dairy truck—not one of the big 18-wheelers that sometimes drive round Portland, but a small truck used for minor pickups and deliveries. The logo of the dairy, the smiling acorn with beautiful teeth, streaks across each door. She approaches the truck and stares at the acorn. Stupid smile. The truck isn't too high, so she turns and looks into the side mirror. She smiles, trying to do it like the acorn, but just looking foolish, looking like somebody who isn't accustomed to smiling. Her smile looks like a lopsided gash in a basketball. She feels like she's looking into a funhouse mirror: her smile is really not that ugly; her body is really not that wide; she is really not that tall.

She flattens her palm against the side of the truck and feels its vibrations. The smell of exhaust becomes strong to her. It surprises her that she didn't notice it before. The truck warms her palm, and she looks through the window, to the front, and she sees someone sitting there: a little boy, in the passenger seat, close to her, separated only by the inch or so of glass. Her guess about his age: four years old. He has been watching her as she scrutinizes herself in the mirror. When her eyes meet this boy's, he smiles like he sees a clown. And she cannot help smiling back, because when a child smiles at you, *always* smile back. She touches her teeth and the child touches his. She puts her index finger against her temple and the child does the same. She makes

a face—a grimace, like a monster face, mouth contorted and opened wide—and the boy makes the same face. The boy mimics her every action. Although the boy's young, he must understand she needs a mirror. So he obliges her.

After a minute of this, she stops trying to be funny and stares at the boy. Yes, she sees the resemblance; the boy *does* look a bit like his father, with his tousled blonde hair longer than the hair on most small children, with strands falling down his forehead, making him an unusually sultry four-year-old. This past version of Bryan Velas smiles at her. This version of Bryan Velas before they met in middle school, before the abuse, before the mockery, before the accident. This version of Bryan Velas that just wants to smile and open his eyes, just wants to be a mirror for somebody badly in need of one. Seeing this past version of him makes her detest the present version even more. He leaves his son in the truck? This is the most offensive thing Bryan Velas has ever done. Eclipses everything he ever did to her. Leaving his son in the truck. Not taking his son inside to show him the store, all the cleanness, all the colors, all the people rushing round with wide eyes. What is there to see in the parking lot? Wonders lie within the SDR—wonders Bryan Velas hides from his son, forcing the boy to sit in the vehicle and stare straight ahead.

She cannot let this be the case. She cannot let this boy stay cut off from the world inside. She cannot let Bryan Velas make of his own child what he tried to make of her. So she tries the door; it's locked. She tries again, and now, for the first time, the boy stops looking amused, and instead his eyes widen. She struggles, pulls hard as she can. When it becomes clear this will not work, she bangs on the window. The boy jumps but still watches her. Hey, she says. She knocks on the window twice more. Come out. Unlock the door. Let me take you inside. Do you want to come out? She expects an answer to this question. Yes or no. She wants yes or no. If the boy does not wish to come out, that's fine, she will leave him inside the truck, she will leave him alone, no harm done. She believes in respecting the wishes of children. But the

boy needs to answer her at least; otherwise, how will she know? She needs her answer. So she bangs again, harder this time, and pulls on the door handle, letting go and hearing the plastic snap back into place. She keeps trying, snapping the handle, knocking the glass. Hey! Answer me! Do you want to come out? But still, the boy remains impassive. She doesn't understand. How can the boy *not* be ecstatic that somebody has arrived to free him? He's been locked in here for so long now, kept away from the fun inside, kept away from all the excitement a child should be allowed to see. How is he *not* unlocking the door; how is he *not* tumbling like a basketball from within; how is he *not* rolling into the parking lot quickly, freely, ecstatically?

When she was little, her father always gave her the choice before he went into the grocery store: come in, or stay here. She always chose *come in*. Why would she want to sit in the car and stare at a parking lot when she could go inside and look at the colorful things on the shelves, and run her hands over the vegetables, feeling the stony texture of the ears of corn, the smooth texture of the bell peppers, the grainy texture of the broccoli—or the powdery texture of her father's hand as he wrapped it around her own and led her through the aisles? Nowhere else did he hold her hand but in the grocery store. That place joined her and her father together like two halves of the same person—as though the great silence that filled her home normally, where her mother and father never spoke and never kissed—as though, in the grocery store, this great silence served a purpose, because no noise needed to be made, no secrets needed to be told, because father and daughter already shared everything when they walked down the aisles. After all, why tell a secret to yourself?

She wants to give this to the child. She wants to take his hand and guide him through the store. She wants him to see. She bangs the window with both fists, and kicks the side of the truck, and shrieks, Yes or no? Yes or no? The boy closes his eyes as though playing dead. He crosses his arms. His chest rises and then falls like a leaf whenever he breathes, because he breathes deeply, heavily. Yes or no? Falls like

a leaf.

By now, the others in the parking lot—all the people loading up their minivans with the day's purchases—have noticed the incident: the crazy woman banging on the door to the truck, shrieking, that crazy woman who, a few of the shoppers had noticed, just walked through the store and stared at children but didn't actually buy anything or put anything in her cart. Inside the store, the security team—consisting of overweight ex-cops with mustaches and red, sweaty faces—notices the incident on the store cameras and swings into action, moving out the door—moving past Bryan Velas, who has finished checking the expiration dates and is leaving the store himself, unimpressed and knowing he needs to move along to the next stop on his route. The store confused him and he's lost track of time. He does not know how long his son has been waiting in the truck. And he still doesn't know how to answer his question: Bricks or wood? This is what the boy asked him as they pulled into the parking lot that afternoon, and Bryan Velas did not know the context, and did not know to what this question referred; he guessed the boy had heard his father saying those words on the phone earlier that day (probably while discussing the renovation plans for the house, which plans he hopes to have the money to get started on pretty soon), but the whole time in the store, the question has haunted him. Bricks or wood? Bricks or wood? And he's still thinking about it—still trying to decide how to answer—when the security guards storm by him and almost knock him over. Other people in the store notice, and the other moms and dads rush out to the parking lot. *Maybe it's my child*, these people must think. *Maybe I shouldn't have left him in the car while I came inside to shop.* And when Bryan Velas gets outside—when the sunlight feels cold on his forehead, shines dimly on the pavement; when, compared to the white light inside, it seems like midnight out here—he sees the cluster of people, shoppers and security guards, descending upon his truck, *his truck*, and he sees his son in there as the woman screams at him—as the crazy woman screams at him. But he knows this woman, doesn't

he? He recognized her in the store, but that shame he felt when he saw her—when he turned and looked *right at her* and then could only gather the words Excuse Me together—froze him. He had friends who sometimes saw her around town, but he himself never saw her around town, and he thought if he'd avoided it for six years, he was bound to avoid it for some time. But there she was in the store, and in that moment he froze, in the moment he muttered Excuse Me, he thought of that day, just as he's thought of that day every day for the last 14 years: the laughter amongst his friends and himself upon seeing that the new girl coming in to try out for cheerleader was Melissa; when the group of them high-fived when they watched Melissa try to let herself be grabbed tightly enough to be lifted into the air (she kept instinctively trying to wiggle away from whichever established cheerleader touched her); and finally, when Bryan Velas threw his basketball toward the court. He was an excellent shot. He knew the ball would miss Melissa by exactly one foot. He didn't want to hit her. He just wanted to startle her. But what he didn't know was that, in the 5 or so seconds the basketball took to fly across the court and bang against the wall behind the girls, Melissa lifted one of the girls up (part of her training), and held her in the air over her head for only a couple seconds before the basketball slammed against the wall and Melissa, spooked by the noise, loosened her arms, and let the girl fall down. Oh, that *other* girl was fine. Led the team to victory in a cheerleading competition later that year. She was fine because she landed on Melissa, her 120 pounds slamming down upon the girl who wrote all those notes, crushing her back against the basketball court. That afternoon, when his dad came to pick him up and take him home, Bryan Velas didn't want to leave; Bryan Velas had this strange feeling like he wanted to stay there, like he wanted to help Melissa. He knew it was his fault. His friends told him it wasn't his fault. That Melissa was just unlucky. That some people *are* just unlucky and nobody can do anything about it. The school administration told him it wasn't his fault. Even Melissa's parents published a letter in the local paper

that said it wasn't the basketball player's fault. But that day, it *was* his fault, because his dad told him so when he got his son home, when he pushed him across the room, when he told him how his son's life was ruined, how his future was fucked, how he was never going anywhere now. Never mind that nobody else seemed to blame him (an unfortunate accident: these precise words most people used), and never mind that when he married that cheerleader two years later, the one who had crushed Melissa, he felt for a brief while like his life wasn't fucked, like things were okay after all—never mind that, because that day on the floor of his house, his dad made it his fault, and his dad made him pay for it with books hurled against the walls, with banshee screams, with a belt.

So Bryan Velas cannot move at the door, cannot walk forward, can just stand there, as commotion rages around him, just as it had that day years ago. Can he save his child? The security guards rush forward. He freezes by the door and watches. He does not know if he can save him. He does not know if he should. Some part of him thinks that he deserves whatever happens. Some part of him, thinking of that afternoon with his father, believes he should stand there and watch, and let this woman consume his child, consume his life. That much he deserves. With the crushing force of the back of a hand landing hard against his face, he realizes that he deserves whatever happens to him today.

But just before the security guards have reached the truck and pulled this woman away, he sees that his boy, as though intuiting something, as though sensing it's time to open his eyes, *opens his eyes*, and looks to the store, and looks at his father. And Bryan Velas, for the first time in a long time—since the boy's birth, since the accident on the highway killed his young ex-cheerleader wife and split the boy's head, leaving him with a permanent scar and only peripheral vision in one of his eyes, since finally accepting, at the age of 30, that he would work at Oakhurst Dairy for the rest of his life—Bryan Velas feels like the two of them, father and son, are completely safe, and like nothing

in the world will ever touch them, because in a moment of crisis, the first thing the boy does is open his eyes and look directly at his father. Bryan Velas knows what this means for them. The boy will come to his father. The boy will tell his father things. No silence will separate them. The world will be a pair of cupped hands for a long time now.

But Melissa knows nothing of this. She cannot see anything but the boy, with his eyes now open, her words now getting through to him, busting down the door that kept them apart, breaking open the window. Yes, she knows, her words did all of this, roused the child from his slumber. She knows that this boy will remember her as the one who helped when nobody else would. He will remember her although his father does not. This much she knows when she asks the boy in the truck, Yes or no? And when the boy opens his eyes and looks behind her, staring with wonder at the SDR as though it's a pile of gems—when the boy does this, she stops banging on the window and forgets how to move. She can have a child. This can be her child. This is the child she and Bryan Velas were meant to have together. Yes or no? In this breathless moment before the guards dash her against the door, she gets her answer. ■