

Lava

“You can’t read those reviews, they’re biased.” Sylvia shifted in the lounge chair, her bare legs sticking to the plastic straps. She sipped her margarita. The moon hung high over the ocean, full and heavy, shining a path toward the horizon. She saw the glimmering path as a sign. Signs were everywhere, but they were vague and misleading. Traps. She needed more obvious directions, red flags impossible to ignore.

“Carl’s the scene chewer. Screw the LA Times.” Jason leaned against the rail and chugged his beer. They’d left a mess of towels on the damp deck, empty beer cans, bean dip, chip bags. “Anyway, I don’t want to talk about Carl anymore.” He dragged a folding chair close to her then sat and brushed sand off his foot. “Jesus, the sand. It’s everywhere.”

She watched him stretch out and tilt one of the geranium pots with his big toe. The leaves were brown and brittle, the flowers gone. “Don’t forget, you need to help me water the plants later. Frank already thinks I killed his creeping Charlie.”

“Your uncle’s a dick.” He tipped the pot over, spilling clumps of dirt. “Only reason he lets us stay here is cause he’s paranoid as shit. Thinks the neighbors are gonna steal stuff off the deck.”

Her aunt and uncle let her use the beach house whenever they went to Las Vegas. The bedroom smelled like an ashtray and the toilet was always backing up, but the location didn’t suck. Surf crashed with a booming regularity, rattling the windows and agitating the pylons beneath the floorboards. It calmed her.

“Let’s do something. Let’s go out,” he said.

“We’re in no condition to drive.” She squinted at him, trying to focus. They’d been partying all week, going back and forth between the beach house and Jason’s apartment in Hollywood, living in a floaty dream world. Colorless days piled behind them like discarded chicken bones. That morning at Denny’s, Sylvia had juggled six four-tops with the ease of a rodeo trick rider, but as soon as her shift was over, a flat humming droned inside her. She could barely count her cash drawer. She’d hit a wall that only more booze could demolish.

Before heading back to the beach, they'd stopped at various locations for supplies: beer, wine, pot, cocaine, tortilla chips, tequila. They arrived at the beach house and quickly got drunk and high, so Sylvia didn't have to think about fixing her life and starting her "new chapter," to quote the judge.

"I'm crawling out of my skin." Jason jumped to his feet. "We should do something." He began to hop from the boogie board to a mound of towels, back and forth like the floor was lava. "We should rob Carl. That's what we should do. Hit the box office. I'll wear a disguise. You pretend you don't know me."

"Fuck no. You'll screw up my community service."

"Now hear me out," he said, pausing on the boogie board. "If we save enough money we can put on our own production. We'll do *Stirring the Pot*. I wrote a great part for you."

She'd read Jason's script and had no interest. "I don't have anything against Carl. Plus, he trusts me for some reason."

"Fuck Carl. Listen, Carl is a rich kid. A trust fund dickwad who gets better reviews than he deserves. He won't even miss the money. It means nothing to him and everything to us."

In the distance, little white caps peaked, disappeared, then peaked again, like some feat of magic. A pelican dove for a fish but came up empty.

"I'm not going to screw Carl and add a whole bunch of new bad karma to my load. No, thank you." She chopped at the ice in her drink. "I'm not going to mess up my community service. I'm too close to freedom."

She could have picked something impactful for her community service, surrounded herself with broken people or sad old dogs. Instead, she'd taken the easy way out. Included in the list of acceptable community service programs were animal shelters, homeless shelters, and Carl's theater. She'd done some theater in high school—dumb bit parts since she couldn't really sing or dance—so choosing the theater was a no-brainer, plus it was less of a bummer. She'd been there almost a year, and in that time had slept with Carl once. He got weird after and for several weeks wouldn't make eye contact. A few months in, Jason showed up. He nailed the audition but lacked the consistency required for nightly performances. Still, she fell in lust. He had unkempt hair and bright blue eyes and an easy cowboy way about him. But he was a child and would always be a child.

"Carl's greedy." He stretched his arms out and wobbled on the board, pretending to surf. "He wants to be everything—director, writer, actor. I say leave something for the rest of us. It's time we take our fair share."

"He's just ambitious."

Jason's mouth clamped up tight and small. He stomped into the house, and she could hear him clanking around. She heard him sniff up half their supply. He came out holding a fresh beer. The pelican was back, making another go at it, but he came up empty again.

The fish were quick tonight. Or the pelican was slow. Jason tried to sit next to her and fell off the chair. "Jesus, these fucking chairs."

"I think you're a little drunk."

"You're one to talk. Judging me."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He staggered to his feet, the moon raging behind him. "It means who got hammered and ran a red light? Who fucked up some little kid's life?"

They fought on full volume for an hour before Jason stormed down the deck stairs and ran along the beach, threatening to swim toward Catalina. Sylvia followed for a bit, then yelled that she was too tired to care and went back inside to turn on the television. The place was a mess. Her life was a mess. She needed to "clean up" her act like the judge had said. When the play was over and her community service was done, she'd ask for more shifts at Denny's, save money and start fresh somewhere, get her own apartment. She'd scrap this crappy version of Sylvia and assemble a new one.

She watched a dumb romantic comedy. The emotionally overwrought heroine reminded Sylvia of her mother, Lenore. Bright red lipstick, long hair wild and windswept. Lenore was a woman of extremes and contradictions. If one pill was good, six were better. Big fits of laughter or crippling sobs and not much in between. After Lenore died, Sylvia made a conscious effort to be her opposite, to glide along the surface like a shallow boat without a wake. It wasn't until Sylvia turned eighteen and moved out of her uncle's house that her evil doppelgänger burst to the surface to assume control, steering Sylvia into dark waters.

She walked barefoot along the wet sand and looked for Jason and began to worry. He wasn't the best swimmer, and there were sharks out there. Jason threatened to do crazy things on a regular basis. She knew he was mostly all talk, but people were all mostly talk until they weren't. A vivid memory came to Sylvia, of being five or six, her mother dragging her across the hot sand, pulling Sylvia toward the ocean, stumbling in her too-long jeans. Sylvia was chest-deep, her mother charging into rough surf when a stranger stopped them, a big shadow against the bright sunlight. He led them to a cool towel and gave Sylvia potato chips.

Sylvia found Jason sitting with his arms around his legs, forehead on his knees. She sat next to him. "Why don't you come back now."

"I'm sorry I said those things. I'm not really going to rob Carl," he said. "It was a dumb idea."

Waves curled across the surface of the water, foamy and luminescent. "I don't want to do bad things. I don't want to fuck up anymore. You understand?"

"Sure," he said. He was quiet for a moment. "When I first saw you at the theater, I thought you were Carl's."

"I'm not anybody's."

The stranger on the beach had given Sylvia a cola to go with the chips, and by late afternoon he was showing Lenore how to stretch properly by manipulating her sit bones. He lived with them for almost a year then ditched Lenore for a woman he considered "less trite."

"Anyway, I already told you, he's not my type," Sylvia said, touching Jason's arm. "Plus, it's none of your business who I slept with before you."

He lifted his head and looked at her. "So, you did sleep with Carl?"

"Don't go crazy on me, Jason."

"I can't live without you. You know that, right?"

"Don't be all dramatic."

He squinted at her. "I'm serious. What are you going to do now that your community service is done? You gonna leave me?"

"I don't know, Jason. We're a mess."

He stroked her arm slowly up and down.

"I mean," she continued, "I appreciate you letting me crash at your place, but I told you it was going to be temporary."

"Sure, I get it." He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"I'm serious. I don't think we're good together anymore."

"No, you're right. We're bad." He leaned in and kissed her, and the kissing turned into groping, and before Sylvia knew it, her shorts were off and getting dragged out with the surf.

The following morning, Sylvia had to throw water on Jason to rouse him out of bed. Her aunt and uncle would be returning today, and the place needed cleaning. With a little medicinal help, they managed to pack up and make it on time for the matinee performance. During a lunch break, they walked the four blocks to Jason's apartment and drank. She knew she was on a dangerous path full of rocks and roots and sharp wayward branches eager to poke out her eyes, yet she could not step off the path, though she wasn't sure why. She imagined it was like draining a car of oil. You drove until the level was way low, you wanted it empty of the dirty oil before you put in the fresh stuff. Was she draining away all her bad habits by giving in to them?

They returned for the last performance, and, after closing the box office, Sylvia slipped backstage to watch part of the show from the wings. Jason, wearing overalls and a straw hat, was in the middle of his big scene. The cast was losing energy, except Carl, who always gave a hundred and twenty percent. Jason flubbed a line. A woman in the audience gasped. Sylvia couldn't watch anymore. She wandered around backstage in darkness that smelled like the inside of a hot steamer trunk, like her old apartment in Tarzana where she'd lived

with her mother. She waved to the stage manager, Cheryl, who was in the dressing room hanging up clothes. Cheryl waved back.

At first, people like Cheryl asked a lot of questions. They all knew why Sylvia was there, but they wanted details about her arrest, about the accident. Sylvia gave away too much of herself, her aunt used to say. If somebody was interested enough to ask, she felt obliged to answer honestly. Cheryl was nice to her but from a distance, as if Sylvia had an odor that couldn't be scrubbed away. The cast and crew had every right to judge her, but how many times had she seen them at the bowling alley drinking pitchers of beer before getting behind the wheel of a car?

After the show, Carl cornered Sylvia in the lobby. "Well, this is it," he sighed and looked into her eyes, his long hair tucked behind his ears. "Everything is ending. People move on. I hate when things end."

"You'll do another show. You'll write something new."

"It won't be the same."

"It'll be great. Whatever you do."

He stepped closer. "You sure you won't come to the cast party?"

"Probably not, Carl. Sorry." She looked past him, away from his wolfish grey eyes. She'd been to other after-show gatherings, endured the pious scrutiny, felt the labels piling up: alcoholic, child mangler, sad sack. People stared at her if she drank. They stared if she didn't.

"Will I ever see you again?"

"I don't know." She wanted to pee and now she could see a line out the bathroom door. "You guys have been great. Thanks for trusting me. It's just...I need a fresh start, you know?"

He pulled her in and hugged her tight. It felt good to be held like that, without the pressure of a hand going up her shirt, until it went on for too long and she felt trapped. She saw Jason coming around the corner and gently pushed Carl away.

"What's up?" Jason said, jaw tense.

"Just trying to convince Sylvia to come to the cast party. You should both come."

"Sure, dude." Jason reached his arm around Sylvia's waist and pulled her close. "Maybe we'll stop by."

"I guess I'll need you to sign the paperwork at some point," Sylvia said. "For my community service."

"Right," Carl nodded. "First thing tomorrow."

Sylvia and Jason had their own little party in Jason's apartment in front of the television with the rest of the tequila. Sand was everywhere, towels piled on the floor, the boogie board deposited in the kitchen with the cooler full of melted ice. They tried to watch a movie, but Jason kept going to the fridge for a snack. Sylvia kept getting up to pee and they both passed out before they got to the end.

They snorted the last of the coke Sunday morning and then spent all day trying to even themselves out with beer, which only left Sylvia with a dull headache and a deepening sense of panic. They'd been silent most of the day and were playing backgammon in front of the television when Carl texted. He wanted to see her. It was important. Don't tell Jason.

Sylvia told Jason she needed to go to her court-appointed alcohol class, which wasn't a complete lie. He walked her to the door and gave her a hug, then looked at her with bloodshot eyes, sand in his lashes. He blinked and, for a moment, she thought he might cry.

She was aware of Jason watching her from the window, aware of her hips swaying in her pale blue jeans, the peek of skin below her crop top. She considered herself only slightly above average in the looks department. She knew what attracted men to her had more to do with body language. She was approachable, accommodating, raised to put others' feelings before her own, and to never lie, an impossible contradiction.

When the nice cop approached Sylvia's car the night of the accident, she'd blurted, "I've been drinking," before he even opened his mouth. She would have confessed no matter whose fault it had been. Even before the accident, forever apologetic, her guilt was intrinsic. This time there was no denying it. A child had lost his eye and his mother still had nightmares about it. Sylvia knew this because she'd faced them in court.

She crossed the street and turned onto Formosa, where the heavy scent of jasmine and rotting garbage filled her with despair. She saw black trees bending in the wind, a homeless woman rattling her shopping cart along the asphalt. Sylvia's mouth was pasty. Her head throbbed. Looking up and down the darkening street, she felt the underbelly rise up oily and vile. She watched a crow peel gum off the sidewalk and felt her panic rising.

One of the last things her mother told her before she killed herself—"Use that brain of yours. The body doesn't last forever." She never told Sylvia what to use it for. That was for the brain to figure out, she guessed.

Maybe it was too late for her. The judge had said, "Rein it in, young lady." And then he winked at her. Sylvia had been planning to rein it in. She just kept putting it off. And Jason derailed her. Jason was charming and handsome. The headshots stacked on his bookshelf proved it. They were handsome headshots and they got him auditions, landed him parts. Sylvia rarely landed anything except trouble. When she landed Jason, she felt the underbelly slink away for a while. She felt her life force return. Until the real Jason bled through like a poorly wrapped sirloin.

Carl lived in an old Spanish-style building off Fountain Avenue. His studio apartment was at the back of a courtyard, facing the alley. She climbed the steps and knocked, and Carl answered, wearing a plush robe over sweatpants.

“Hey, Carl.”

He pushed his hair out of his face and opened the door for her. “Thanks for coming. Sorry the place is such a mess. You want a beer?”

“That’d be great.”

She followed him in and waited while he stepped into the kitchen. She stood in the middle of the messy room, unsure of where to sit. The bed was unmade and there was a beanbag chair in the corner covered in clothes and magazines. A wall-sized bookshelf displayed dozens of Batman collectibles. She guessed most of his trust fund money had gone into the theater, plus the cleaning lady he hired to keep his wood floor so shiny. She was embarrassed and sort of touched to see so much of Carl laid bare in this small space. No wonder they’d had sex at the theater.

Carl came out and handed her some sort of dark ale with an unreadable font on the label.

“My cousin made that one. He’s a brew master.”

She nodded and sipped the bitter ale and said, “That hits the spot.”

He sat on the bed and looked at her. “How’s it going?”

She wanted to sit somewhere. Her legs ached from the long walk over, plus she was pretty sure she had a UTI, but she didn’t want to ask to use the bathroom. “Good. You know. Fine.”

“So, strange thing. The cash envelope from Saturday night is missing.”

“What? No, I put it in the safe.”

“It’s not there. I checked this morning. You sure you put it in the safe?”

“Well, yeah. I always put it right in the safe.” She’d been tired. She’d had to pee. Didn’t she put it in the safe before she left to use the bathroom?

“Anyway. I want you to see something. I have the surveillance video. Maybe together we can solve this.”

“Yeah, sure. Good idea.” She drank half her beer in one long pull then looked at him and nodded. “Sorry. Can I use your bathroom?”

Carl lifted his bottle toward the door. “It’s kind of a mess in there.”

So much crap in the bathroom it took some maneuvering to get inside and close the door. Sylvia lowered the toilet seat, pulled down her jeans, sat and tried to pee. She kicked at an empty Amazon box, a bulk pack of mega roll toilet paper. Still, the floor was clean and there were no pee splashes on the wall, no globs of toothpaste in the sink. To distract herself from the pain, she made an inventory of the items on his vanity: bottle of Polo cologne, mouthwash, comb, hair wax, electric toothbrush, deodorant, old mayonnaise jar full of condoms. She grabbed Carl’s cologne and smelled it—cedar and musk. She thought of her old bathroom in Tarzana, the vanity crowded with bottles of cologne her mother

collected from old boyfriends. She saw her mother face down on the floor in her blood-soaked blouse, all those bottles broken around her. No note, no message of any kind, only the stench of cologne and blood spreading molten beneath Sylvia's feet.

There was a knock on the door.

"You OK in there?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. Be right out."

I'm fucked, thought Sylvia, as she finally let go a trickle of pee. If that money is gone, I'm fucked. She flushed and washed up.

Carl was sitting on his messy bed with his bad posture, though it was sort of endearing. She picked up her beer and sat next to him. "Sorry, so you were saying?" She couldn't believe she'd slept with him. He seemed inviolable, with his elegant face, too pretty to be handsome, the way she imagined Christ would have looked if he'd been a rich white guy. He wasn't really her type, or was he? She had poor judgment, she could no longer trust her choices; her taste in men was, as her uncle once put it, "abominable." She wasn't sure what she liked anymore or what she wanted, except to get her shit out of storage and sleep in her own bed for a while and maybe try sobriety.

Carl reached under his bed for his computer. "We were going to take a look at the surveillance video."

"Oh, right."

He turned on the computer and typed something and a window appeared. Sylvia strained to see the screen. She squinted, closing one eye, trying not to see double. She watched herself sit on a stool in the box office and fiddle with papers. She wore her white blouse and black pants, the standard uniform. The desk was to her left, the door directly behind her. Sylvia watched herself go to the door, press her ear against it, then return to her stool. She sat there, talking to herself, shaking her head like some nutjob.

"You seem restless," Carl said.

She shrugged.

Then she started spinning on her stool, which Sylvia remembered doing to distract herself from having to pee. Then she returned to the desk, picked up the envelope, stuck it in the top drawer and walked out of the office.

Carl hit pause. "You didn't put it in the safe, Sylvia."

"Are you sure about that?"

He played it again. "Nope. See that? You put it in the drawer, and then watch." He hit forward. "You walked right out."

"I had to pee."

He hit play again then fast forward. The door opened and a figure walked in. Carl hit pause. It was Jason in his straw hat and overalls. Carl hit play again and they watched Jason

move things around on the desk, open drawers. He found the envelope, tucked it behind the bib of his overalls, and walked out.

Sylvia stared at the screen.

Carl hit pause. "Well, that's a shocker."

"I'm...I don't know anything about that. I'm so sorry. I can't believe he did that."

He closed the computer and turned to face her. "You were supposed to put it in the safe."

"I meant to. I was going to after I peed. I guess I forgot."

"We all forget things," Carl said. "Funny about the timing though, right? I mean he came right in after you left."

"I can't believe he would do that." Her mouth was getting dry. She couldn't swallow. "I swear, I didn't know he stole your money."

Carl stared at her. "I believe you," he said, and continued to stare until she had to look away.

"What now? What are you going to do?"

"It's going to look kind of suspicious for you, Sylvia. Considering you and Jason. Plus, the fact that you didn't go to the cast party. I'd hate to see you mixed up in another mess."

"Maybe I could have a conversation with him. Get your money back."

"That'd be the smart move."

Sylvia stood. "So, did you happen to sign the paperwork yet? For my community service?"

"Not yet," he said, pulling a strand of hair off his robe.

"I hope you believe me, Carl. I didn't know Jason was going to steal from you. I'll get you your money back. I promise." She stepped toward the door. "Sorry, I need to go. I have my class tonight."

Sylvia texted Jason in her Lyft on the way to Inglewood. He denied taking the money and went on ranting about Carl. Sylvia tried to remember how much cash was in the envelope. Two hundred? Two-hundred? Plus, credit card receipts. She felt responsible. She'd been distracted and a little drunk.

She was still drunk. She chewed a stick of gum, looked in her purse for her breath mints and popped one of those too. She chewed and crunched and saw out her window, past the heavy eastbound traffic, a taco stand her mother used to drag her to. Further up a homeless encampment with once-colorful tents faded and sagging like a ransacked gypsy caravan. She saw stucco apartment buildings with exotic names like The Fantasea and The Tahitian. She was hoping for signs and clear directions. She believed they were mixed up in the things she saw all around if only she could decipher them, if only she had the code.

In the bright hallway outside alcohol class, people wanted to chat. Normal lively people who'd screwed up one night, who'd punched holes in their happy lives then handily patched

them with putty and a coat of paint. Sylvia spoke as little as possible and focused on staying upright when all she wanted to do was sleep. She wasn't like them. They had visions and dreams to get them back on track while Sylvia remained pointless and stuck. A different species, Sylvia told herself, feeling sad and wobbly.

When Dominic finally arrived, they filed into the classroom and settled in chairs. Dominic sat at the head of the circle, his wrinkled white dress shirt untucked, gelled black hair combed back. He glanced at Sylvia. She tried to keep her head clear, but she was so tired.

Dominic lectured about choices and circumstance, grilling them on accidents and statistics. He talked about his own road to sobriety, his resistance to change. She'd heard the story before and felt bad for him. His life full of hard knocks, and yet he'd turned it around. If he could do it, with his odd snuffling laugh and twitchy demeanor, maybe Sylvia could, too. They watched a movie loaded with more facts and statistics and terrifying crash photos. Sylvia felt the hard chair grow harder. The room was hot. She had to pee and her back hurt. She was thirsty and falling asleep. But this was her final class. Once Carl signed her paperwork, she'd be free.

When class ended and Sylvia had her certificate of completion, she slipped away and hurried up the street. She heard steps, turned and saw Dominic jogging toward her. He caught up, hands deep in his pockets.

"Can I walk with you a bit?"

"Sure," she said. Her bladder hurt.

"You OK?"

"Yeah, fine." She stopped in front of a bar.

"You know, I'm here to talk. If life starts to feel overwhelming."

"Thanks. I'm OK though, really. I just have to pee." She noticed his hair had come loose from its gelled position and hung flopped over one eye, making Sylvia think of the beef tongues her uncle liked to fry up on the stove. She turned away. "Anyway, I'm going to pop inside and use the bathroom."

"I'll wait for you," he said, eyes wide and energized. He rose on the balls of his feet.

She nodded, then stepped into the bar and went straight to the bathroom. While on the toilet she checked her texts. Several from Jason. Where R U? Call me. Fuck Carl.

She called him but the phone went right to voice mail. She didn't leave a message. Staring at her dirty tennis shoes, she saw her mother face down on the bathroom floor again. She saw herself fresh off the school bus, lunchbox in hand. She'd been irritated at first, as if what she saw had been a hoax. It was too much, too overblown, a Brian DePalma film—the chunk of green glass in her mother's hand, all that hair floating in blood. "Lennore," she'd said. "Wake up." Foolishly, she'd expected a response. "Momma," she'd tried

again. Then she'd called the police and her mother's brother and sat outside shivering in the thick valley heat until they arrived.

Dominic was waiting for her outside the bathroom. "Hey, want to get a drink?"

"A drink?"

"Just one. I won't tell."

"I thought...you said you were sober."

He waved a hand around. "We need to celebrate. You finished your class. You did it. Let's drink."

She felt her muscles weaken and her body deflate like the old canvas rafts that never held their air. "Sure, OK." She shrugged and followed him, then waited while he flagged down a bartender.

The mirrored bar was crowded with over-animated faces, their reflections distant and small. She heard laughter that wasn't joyous, that came from something buried, something knotted and hard. There was a desperate energy, a scramble to be heard, like traders selling off their plunging stocks. It was an energy Sylvia understood, the energy of expectation. The bigger the energy at the start of the night, the more it was bound to disappoint. She knew this because she'd been living the same party every night for the past five years.

Dominic brought two shots of tequila. Sylvia took one, drank it down, and instantly wanted another. The room spun, loud and frantic. A dull pain thumped in her side. "Sorry. I should go." She looked around for a place to set her empty glass, but all the tables were occupied. She handed the glass to Dominic.

"Stay. Let's talk." He held a glass in each hand.

"I don't feel well, Dominic."

"Awe come on, don't be a party pooper."

She reached into her purse. "Let me get you the money for my drink." She opened her wallet, but it was empty. She dug through her purse and found two dollars and some pennies.

"I don't want your money."

"And I don't want yours," she said, handing him the two dollars.

He held up the glasses. "I can't take it."

"Take it," she said, reaching for his pocket.

"I don't want it." He spun left and punched her jaw with the shot glass.

She backed up and wiped the tequila off her face. Her mouth tasted like blood.

"That was an accident. I didn't mean to—"

She turned and pushed through the crowd and out the door. Outside, she kept going until she reached a quiet corner to call her ride.

She found the apartment empty, the boogie board and towels where they'd left them, beer cans on the coffee table. She climbed into bed, happy to be alone, wishing the sheets

were clean and there wasn't sand between her toes. She scrunched down and pulled the covers up under her chin, her teeth chattering, her face still stinging from the punch.

The pain in her bladder was worse now, migrating into her kidneys. She didn't have the energy or the money for urgent care. She thought about calling her aunt and uncle, but she hated them. She hated them for treating her like a household chore, for talking smack about the dead, for calling her mother "batshit crazy" and believing themselves heroic because they stepped up way back when. She felt drained. She could die from sepsis in her sleep and get what she probably deserved. What did people deserve, she wondered? How did people start over?

Sylvia woke up with Jason on top of her, his tongue in her mouth. She didn't have the strength to push him away. She floated up to the corner of the room and watched while his tongue poked around like a rodent searching for crumbs in the dark. She saw a woman passive and weak and she hated her. She didn't want to be forgiven or pitied or kissed or fucked. She didn't want to be a body that floated around and tricked itself and made bad choices and called men forth and gave them ideas, ideas that had nothing to do with Sylvia. She wanted to be Sylvia without giving up something of herself, without giving in, without need. She wanted to feel the earth cool beneath her feet and morph into solid rock.

She rolled out from under Jason. "I need sleep, Jason. I don't feel well."

"I'll make you feel better," he said and pulled her close again.

Her body went rigid. His wants and desires stretched wide like the mouth of a hippo, her sickness, her own needs tumbling in to feed him.

"I said, get the fuck away from me." She pushed him hard and sat up. She could read the signs, and her mother couldn't. That was the difference. Her mother would have stayed at the bar with Dominic and had another drink while Sylvia waited in the car or was shoved into a corner with a bowl of nuts. "I don't want you to make me feel better. I want you to give Carl his money back. Do the right thing, Jason."

He kicked off the covers and sat on the edge of the bed.

"You have to give it back," she said. "Please."

His body shrank in the dim light. "I don't have it." He grabbed his pillow and stumbled to the living room.

Sylvia gathered her things—clothes, shoes, toothbrush—and stuffed them into her backpack. She checked her small zipper bag, tips from Denny's she'd been saving. It wasn't enough but at least it was something. She wrote a note and put the money and note in an envelope.

Jason, flopped out on the floor, slept soundly as she stepped over him and out the door.

Walking along Fountain Avenue, Sylvia shivered in the warm night. The bright moon followed her, watchful, prehistoric. She climbed the stairs to Carl's apartment. Pain bore

into her side with each step, but there was a certainty in the climb, a peaceful purpose, something she hadn't felt since she was a child pulling boots off her half-conscious mother, stubbing out smoldering cigarettes. Sylvia reached the threshold and slid the envelope under the door.

In the Lyft on the way to the beach, she leaned her head against the cool window and closed her eyes. A siren wailed in the distance, and she let that lull her into a deep sleep full of violent dreams, of dark trees bending in the wind, of rattling shopping carts and prodding tongues and stinging punches, of angry moons and crows prying something loose in her, something hard and knotted.

When the car stopped, she awoke in front of her uncle's house, feverish, sweating. She glanced up and saw her mother in the bedroom window, waving. The house was dark and for a moment Sylvia was confused. Was she waving her away or welcoming her home? Sylvia stepped out into the pitch-black night, felt the earth beneath her feet, the thunderous ocean. A porch light switched on, and when she glanced up, her mother was gone.