Spook Hill

Cely sits in the rental car at the bottom of Spook Hill, and her foot is definitely not near the pedals. The car is in neutral and the windows are down and James is a few feet away, on the side of the road, pits of his polo shirt soaked, because Florida. He holds his phone in front of him and shouts, "Put it in neutral, babe!" over and over, to which Cely keeps responding that it is in neutral, it is. Cely has done what she is supposed to do. She has made a close reading of the stupid sign with the stupid sheet-white cartoon ghost on it and the stupid, made-up legend about an Indian chief and a giant alligator. "Is it the gator seeking revenge, or the chief protecting his land???" the sign says, then adds a businesslike, "Stop car on white line, place in neutral, let it roll back." Cely has done this. Now the car should roll backward, roll uphill, defy natural law. They have driven an hour from Kissimmee. Tomorrow she will go to Apopka. She will go to see her father, whom she hasn't spoken to in nineteen years. But today she is here with James in Lake Wales, which is nowhere, more nowhere than Kissimmee, even more nowhere than Apopka. There is nothing here. Just a few broad, flat ranch houses with their backs turned to the street, as if trying to ignore the minor tourist attraction in their midst—a white stripe across a two-lane road, a racist sign promising a brief, free, spooky thrill. Put car in neutral. Let it roll back.

James has chosen to record the phenomenon "for the gram," but the car doesn't move. It sits there, idling, while James stands there taking unusable video, a beautiful, affable smile on his face, the same one he wears when eating food or having sex or absorbing bad news or doing anything else, the one that makes her want to smack him day after day, more every day. He wears it now as he shouts at Cely to put it in neutral. "It is in neutral," Cely shouts to him again. She pounds a fist on the steering wheel. She leans across the empty passenger's seat still warm from James' ass. She screams curses at him. She knows how to drive, for god's sake. She knows how to put a car in neutral, for god's sake. She slaps the dashboard with both hands over and over, whipping up countless dust particles that levitate as if unbound from gravity. She demands to know why James is like this, why he is always, always like this.

She fires insults of increasing weight and lethality at him through the open passenger side window, and he dodges them with ease. It is an easy thing for him, to pay her no mind. The day before this one, the day after they arrived in Florida, she told him that she often imagines what her life would be like if she'd never gotten together with him, and that every time she does this, that imaginary life looks so much better than the real one with him in it. He just smiled and reached for her hand and said, "I know this is all really hard for you. But I'm not going anywhere." Then the waiter came and he ordered lechon and plátanitos and moros.

James, still smiling, and still recording—why is he still recording?—says, "Babe, it's OK. It's OK, babe. Babe, it's OK." He says it as he steps toward the car, as he reaches for the passenger side door handle, as she orders him to stop recording already. Cely is still shouting demands, the car still in neutral, her foot still not near the pedals as the car, without warning, accelerates, rockets backward up Spook Hill, the engine quiet but the wheels turning like they're on a mission as they zip right over James' foot. She can hear his bones crunch. She can hear each metatarsal go pop, pop, pop. Then James is on the ground, howling. She mashes the brake and the car lurches to a stop atop Spook Hill. Cely grapples with the seat belt buckle. "It's not supposed to work like that!" she yells. "It's not supposed to do that!" Cely looks from James, writhing, to the ghost on the sign above him. She swears she sees it wink at her. She swears she hears the ghost say, "Let it roll back."

The trouble begins before the trip, when James asks Cely what they'll do in Florida. He asks her as they sit in bed, her body curled like an apostrophe over the laptop, credit cards fanned out on the narrow span of 1000-thread-count polycotton blend between them. She is comparing prices, plotting connections in Denver and Dallas and Detroit, brain boiling at the notion that she is about to spend money she doesn't have to go see a man who for nineteen years couldn't be bothered. And James wants to know what they'll do for fun.

He is wearing the black shirt that makes his arms look good. She hates him for this.

"I don't know," Cely says, trying to stay focused on the calculation of baggage fees, finding herself instead drawn to the question. She had, during her time in Florida—which was all of her time until the moment she left for school in L.A., until she planted herself like a non-native palm in the most un-Florida place she could find that would not require her to learn the arcane and unknowable secrets of winter—not thought much about what there was to do. What had she done there? How had she spent her childhood? She can't remember. It is as if eighteen years passed so unremarkably that her brain, deeming the record useless, hit delete to clear space. James, who grew up in Los Altos, on another planet, probably expects her to name a theme park, to speak of alligator wrestling or Cuban food. But Cely has never seen an alligator. And the thought of revisiting any of Orlando's few Cuban restaurants or bakeries—the places where her mother used to drag

her and her brother, where her mother would talk in Spanish, in secret code, over milky coffee to some relative, some tía who would shake a sympathetic head or an angry head or a disbelieving head and say, "Ay, pobrecita"—did not appeal to her.

Perhaps not all the data is missing.

"There's Spook Hill," she says, the words coming to her before the memory. She doesn't have to explain. James is already working the phone, finding the info, declaring that this looks so funny, that they totally have to do this. He watches video of people stopping at the white line, putting their cars in neutral, rolling back. He reads aloud from a National Park Service web page: "A gravity hill optical illusion presents visitors with the feeling of driving uphill when they are truly going downhill." Cely leaves him to his internet, checks the balances on the credit cards one by one.

The trouble begins with the calls from Cely's brother, the peacemaker. It's been a year since their mother died, and that is, apparently, how long her brother decided to wait, out of respect, before reestablishing diplomatic relations with their father. Her brother tests the waters first, describing emails with respectful tones, then a phone conversation, then a lunch at a Steak 'n Shake. Then he sends a selfie from a second lunch, which Cely deletes. When her brother tells her that he is thinking of introducing their dad to his daughters, to her nieces, she lights him up. Why are you going to expose your kids to someone who failed us and failed us and failed us? Why do you think he deserves to know those girls? What did he ever do for you, for them, for any of us?

Her brother reports back a week later. They had a nice visit, he says. Dad brought presents for the girls, he says. Dad would like to see you, he says.

A year later, photos of their father have become a consistent though not quite frequent presence on her brother's feed. Cely is never not surprised at how old he looks—like ten miles of bad road if ten miles of bad road had been firebombed into rubble, gathered into a heap, and molded into the form of a man. He's been through some things, her brother says. He's been sober four years, her brother says. He would still like to see you.

Cely doesn't want advice from James. She doesn't want to talk to him about it. She doesn't talk to him about it for some time, but the not talking to him about it begins to feel like a bowling ball that she has to lug around with her. He is her partner. They live together. He is the person who is supposed to hear these things. She knows what he will say, and that it will be the wrong thing. She knows he will mess it up, that it will be just another opportunity for her to crack her chest open a bit and expose the wriggling insides and for him to accidentally spill something hot on them. She is preemptively pissed.

"I think you should do it," he tells her. She cries, but not because of her dad. Her dad is three thousand miles and two decades away. She cries because James is here, and because he will never, ever get this right, get her right. He holds her against his oak-solid chest,

back straight as she curls in on herself. "I can go with you, if you want," he says. She cannot stop crying.

The trouble begins six months after they move in together. They have graduated and they both have jobs, and this is a miracle. Together they can afford a one-bedroom on the second floor of an old Mid-Wilshire building spattered in pink stucco, topped by a faux castle turret. She was wary. They had been together through the last six months of school, and it had been good. It had been great. But she had always imagined it would end with school, that they would clasp hands, release hands, then magically, tragically drift away from each other, floating on unseen, oppositional forces. Perhaps they would stay in touch. Perhaps not.

Instead he chased her. And he was good at the chasing. He was attentive. He was dogged. He drove her places and made foods she liked and was always game for going on whatever long walk in whatever set of Southern California's hideous, humpbacked hills she wanted. He listened to original cast recordings with her, learned the words and sang along. He told her that he loved her, which freaked her out, caused a blip. They got past the blip. She loved him too, she thought one day, and the thought surprised her. She was waiting in the drive-thru line at In-N-Out, trying to remember if "protein style" or "animal style" was how you ordered a cheeseburger with no bun, when the thought appeared in the center of her forehead, "I love James." And as she sat there alone, inhaling exhaust fumes, stomach clamoring for beef, she felt a warm thrill move down from that spot in her forehead, all the way to the palms of her feet. She loved James. She loved James, and James loved her, and she was happy about it. She called him right away and told him. They made plans to meet up in a few hours for what would, years later, when all scores were final, be judged the fourth best sex of Cely's life. She hung up the phone as she approached the pickup window. She received the burger, bun and all, with ecstasy. And as she sat in the parking lot of the shoe store across the street, ingesting her prize, her molecules vibrated with the knowledge that someone like James could love her, and that she could love him back.

Two weeks later he got offered a job in Fremont, near his parents—a pair of doctors who made a point of calling their only son every day to tell him they loved him, which Cely found creepy. She prepared for the releasing of hands, for the parting of ways. No, he told her. He wanted to stay here with her. And who was she to say no to that?

Then one day in the phony pink castle where she and James live, she opens the mailbox, and inside is an envelope with her name and her address written in ballpoint pen, by an actual human hand. It startles her. She reaches for the envelope and the accompanying junk mail, half of it addressed to previous tenants, with caution. She dumps the flyers and the special offers in the lobby wastebasket. She slides a finger under the lip of the envelope and tears. She pulls out a letter and unfolds it as she mounts the century-old stairs. When

she realizes what it is, her initial reaction isn't anger, or sadness, or joy. She is trying to remember if she's ever received a real letter.

By the time she has topped the stairs, rage sparkles around her. She puts her key in the door like she's trying to teach it a lesson.

She's never seen an AA letter before, but she knows as soon as she reads it that she has now received one. He would like to do what he can to make things right. He is very sorry and knows that these years must have been hard for her. After he left her mom, he fell into alcohol, into other things, and he knows that saying that in no way relieves him from responsibility for his actions.

She tears the letter into pieces.

When James comes home from work, from a job that's beneath him in a field not of his choice, one he took for her and smiles affably through, she tells him about the letter. She does this as she labors at the Harry Potter Lego castle that dominates the small dining room table bequeathed by the couple downstairs when they moved out. She searches for the right piece. When she finds it, she pinches it so hard her fingers hurt.

When James asks if he can see the letter, she tells him it's in the trash, it's shredded, it's gone. James stops helping her look for the right piece. He stares at her until she looks up at him, until she says, "What? What?"

"You shouldn't have done that," he says. "You might not want it now, but you might want it later."

It's the first betrayal, the defining betrayal. She knows from the look on his perfectly symmetrical, earnest face that he doesn't know he has just sealed their fate. They argue after, but it's a mild and unremarkable argument, and she really is just going through the motions. There are no stakes. She knows now that he doesn't understand and that he is incapable of ever doing so. And it may take a year, five years, ten years, their whole lives, but they will not make it. The seed is planted, and she knows it will grow in her and twist round her bones and that she will never trust him now, no matter how hard he tries, no matter how hard she tries.

And she knows he'll never run. He'll never make her feel like she isn't important enough to love. So she makes a deal with herself. She cuts her losses.

When they are done arguing, they hug. They watch a movie together. The boiling in her cools. They go to bed with their limbs tangled and when he says that he loves her, she says that she loves him, too, and she means it. But then as she falls asleep, she thinks she hears him say, "Let it roll back."

The trouble begins when Cely is ten years old—fifth grade, on the cusp of middle school. She is at home, because her mother hasn't taken her to school for two days. She hasn't seen her father in this same amount of time. Neither situation is normal, and neither is

explained to her. It's a Wednesday, but Cely treats it like a Saturday. In the morning, she climbs the pantry shelves to pull down all the cereal boxes so she and her brother can mix them into a deadly cocktail of corn, sugar, marshmallow, can spread a blanket on the floor and sit cross-legged around a salad bowl full of the stuff, slurp room temperature milk the color of a laundered rainbow. They mainline TV. The shows are an unappealing offering of newsmen, judges, and well-coiffed couples kissing in soft light, but there's a thrill in exploring this alien landscape.

Cely's mother has been locked in her bedroom all morning. Sometimes only silence comes from the bedroom, sometimes shouted Spanish directed into the phone. Cely understands almost none of the words. She does understand that her father is gone. She understands that she is doomed.

The trouble begins when Cely is eight years old. In two years, her father will leave. But for now, she is sitting in the back seat of an AMC Eagle station wagon, the vinyl so hot that it burns her legs. She sits with her feet up, her knees pointed to the roof of the car, the heat warming her eight-year-old ass through her shorts. Her mother is standing outside the car with her back turned, muttering. She wants no part of this. You fool around with ghosts, you're inviting the devil into your life. Her brother stands holding their mother's hand, looking like he just missed the last boat to Pleasure Island.

Cely's dad has one hairy, heat resistant arm draped over the bench seat in front. He looks back at her and winks.

"If she's going to wait out there, you may as well climb up here with me," he says.

She wastes no time. She unbuckles herself and claws her way over the seat, ignores how the man-made polymers scorch her forearms and calves. She has been granted passage to a forbidden realm. She will brave whatever trials she must.

She settles into the passenger side, inspects the dashboard, the sideview mirror, the exotic surroundings of an unfamiliar world. She doesn't look outside at her mom, or at the sign with the picture of the ghost on it that her mom stands under.

Her dad reads the story aloud. "Stop car on white line, place in neutral, let it roll back," he says.

Cely asks him if he thinks the legend is real. "Nah," he says, and shakes his head. Then he winks at her again. Her mother turns toward the car, yells something at her father in Spanish, then turns away from them again.

"Do you understand what she's saying?"

"No," Cely says. "I don't think she's happy, though."

"I don't think so, either."

She watches as her dad presses his foot to the brake, grabs the shifter, which juts from the steering column like a rogue tree limb, tugs it toward him, then slides it down, into

neutral, and lifts his foot from the brake. She puts her own hand on the armrest. For the longest moment, nothing happens. Then they start to roll back, up. The earth slopes down and away from them. The sign moves distant. Out the windshield her mother turns around, watches them, lips slowly parting, but saying nothing. Her mother is fighting a smile. Her brother gawks. Cely starts to laugh. Her dad starts to laugh. Her dad lifts his hands off the steering wheel and waves them around, making spooky ghost noises, his eyes wide, and this causes Cely to double over. Her abdomen convulses and her eyes pinch shut. Big bubbles of laughter rise through her chest. She and her father cackle and howl together as they roll back, roll back, roll back.