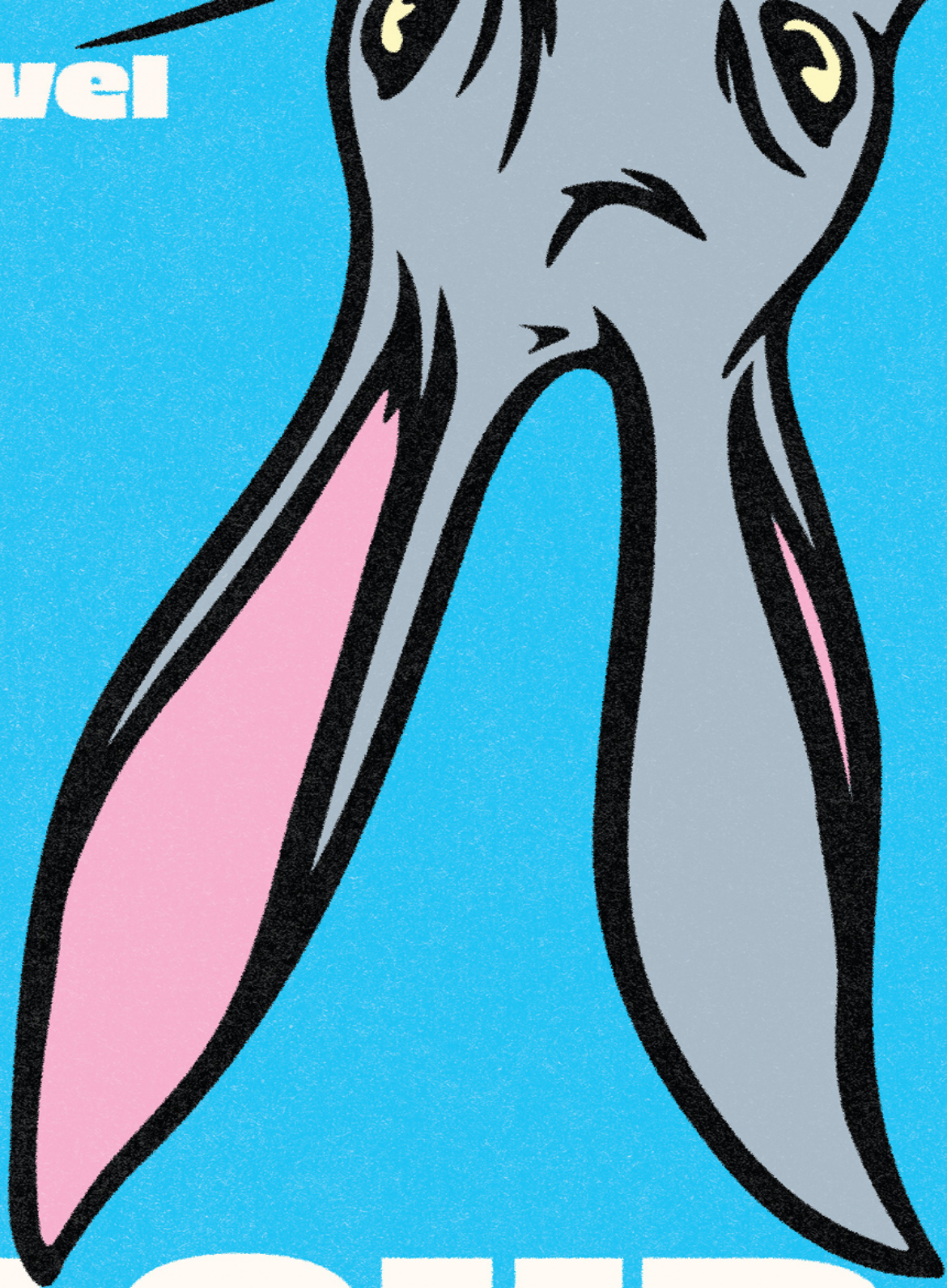


a novel



CLOUD SIX

AMY FUSSELMAN

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A NOVEL



AMY FUSSELMAN



CATAPULT

NEW YORK



For Frank

We are mistaken if we believe we are in possession of the truth, just as we are mistaken if we believe we are in error. Absurdity is the only way forward.

—THOMAS BERNHARD

CLOUD SIX

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INTRODUCTION

HELLO, I'D LIKE TO INTRODUCE MYSELF. MY NAME IS AMY Fusselman and I'll be your author here. I'm highly qualified to do this job. No one else can guide you through this particular black-and-white landscape as well as I can, in fact.

Please remember: I am here for you.

My ability to be here for you is somewhat limited, however. For one thing, I won't be able to answer any of your questions or address any of your concerns as you proceed. That's not how this medium works.

This is how this medium works: You and I inhabit two separate timelines that never intersect. In my timeline, I craft your experience, doing the best I can to anticipate your every want and need. In your timeline, you follow along, and the only way I might know how you feel about the work I've done is if you choose, later, to give it a review on a public platform.

I will most likely never see your reviews or lack thereof, however, because I have found that it's better for my mental health if I avoid looking at them.

Despite this fundamental structure—which effectively keeps us from ever interacting in real life, aka time, aka this strange medium we live in where miracles are viewed with suspicion—I want to remind you of something I truly believe, despite all evidence to the contrary: You and I are in this together.

Okay, are you ready?

Let's go.

ONE

MAM HAD READ A BOOK ABOUT WHAT TO EXPECT. SHE thought she was prepared, or at least as prepared as she could possibly be.

The book was called *So You're Moving!*¹ Mam read it and then gave it to her husband, Bunko, to read. Bunko set it on his desk, put his coffee cup on it, and forgot about it.

Bunko forgot things fairly frequently. He was neurodivergent (according to Mam), suffered from anxiety and depression (according to Mam), and had an alcohol-use disorder (really unarguable, but Bunko nonetheless disagreed).

Bunko thought of himself as a supremely practical person who refrained from getting too excited about things that were probably going to work out fine with no intervention. Mam, in his opinion, was too impatient, too meddlesome, and too judgy.

To put it another way: Mam and Bunko loved each other. They had been married for seven years. Bunko was Mam's second husband and the stepfather of her sixteen-year-old daughter, Penny.

Bunko came along with Mam to her book club on the designated Thursday evening at seven. It didn't matter that he hadn't read the book, Mam told him.

Penny stayed at home in her bedroom, doing homework with her earbuds in. She listened to a man recite a rhythmic poem about guns and drugs as she worked on a five-paragraph essay about the Reign of Terror.

She underlined the following passage from her source material:

During the 1790s, a two-foot-tall, replica blade-and-timbers was a popular toy in France. Kids used the fully operational guillotines to decapitate dolls or even small rodents.²

♦

“Can you believe how much money they made at that sixth-grade bake sale?” Mam asked Brenda at book club. Mam was helping Brenda set up glasses and bottles of orange juice and peach schnapps on Brenda’s dining room table. Brenda was the vice principal of the nearby Scottsdale Middle School, where Mam worked as a learning specialist. They had been friends since eighth grade.

“Yeah, they sold like a billion cupcakes,” Brenda said, tossing her long brown hair.

Brenda was beautiful in all the traditional ways, whereas Mam’s beauty was what you might call unconventional. Brenda was also, as Mam knew, a born-again virgin, meaning that her virginity once was lost but now am found. *Whatever*, Mam told herself. She tried not to judge.

“School is so overcrowded this year,” Mam said.

“It’s crowded, yes,” Brenda replied.

“But we don’t get paid any more for all our extra work,” Mam griped.

Brenda didn’t say anything. As an administrator, not a learning specialist, she *did* get paid more.

Mam knew she had hit a touchy subject; she dropped it. But as far as she was concerned, being a vice principal hardly qualified as work compared to being a learning specialist, where you had to labor one-on-one with middle schoolers who were, to put it mildly, out of their minds. It was criminal that Brenda got paid more than she did.

Brenda and Mam had finished setting up the drinks. Anyone who wanted a fuzzy navel could make one. Except Bunko.

Mam sat down on the couch beside her husband, who was munching a pig in a blanket as he tried to figure out how he could sneak some schnapps into the glass of plain orange juice Mam had just handed him.

Bunko was a binge drinker who had been sober for almost three months. He was feeling much better, mentally and physically. So much better, in fact, that he thought he might have a little drink.

Brenda stood up and clasped her hands with their pale pink manicured nails, signaling the beginning of the meeting. She informed the assembled book club members of what they already knew: *So You’re Moving!* was a book that gave you information about what relocating to a new environment might feel like physically (exhausting), how such a move might affect you

emotionally (elation, rage, and/or grief), and what you might do to make friends in your new area (join a book club).

Something else that everyone already knew, although Brenda did not say it: *So You're Moving!* was not a book with a plot that kept you guessing about what would happen next. The book had no imagery you could work to decode as if the book were a puzzle the author had made just for you, and if you were clever, you could figure out that a rabbit meant death and a skeleton also meant death, and in that way you could solve the problem of reading a book.

No, *So You're Moving!* was simply a book with some facts and a few theories in it, and what made it even more irritating to read, as far as the nine other members of book club were concerned, was that Mam and Bunko were the only people in their book club who were actually planning on relocating. Everyone else had lived in Scottsdale or its environs for more or less their entire lives, and none of them had any plans to move anywhere except the one place they were all slowly and inexorably moving toward every second while trying very hard not to think about it.

None of this was stated in any of the words that Brenda spoke to her literate friends in her living room. But the feeling among the group members, when Mam arrived with Bunko and a small loaf of her homemade banana bread (much too small for everyone to have a slice, Brenda harrumphed), was that it really took a lot of gall to make your book club buddies read a book that didn't have any sex or murder in it, let alone a plot, and was really just a boring, fact-filled guide to your own personal luxury problem.

If you guessed that some of these feelings might have become evident during the book club meeting, you are correct. If you thought it was inevitable that Bunko would find a way to gulp some peach schnapps without anyone noticing, you are spot-on. If you intuited that Bunko would start an argument with Brenda by pointing out that she used the word "less" when she should have used "fewer," you are, again, exactly right. And if you foresaw that Brenda ended up calling Bunko an asshole, causing Bunko to march out the door while muttering that his evening would have been better spent watching monkeys fuck, you are my ideal reader and I am so glad you are here. Please feel free to drop me a line via my intern, Byron, at officeofamyfusselman@gmail.com.

♦

Mam did not say anything as she drove Bunko home from book club. However, she was definitely speaking—only silently, to herself.

She was telling herself that she was very much looking forward to leaving Scottsdale. There was nothing keeping her here anymore: Brenda was an asshole, her mother had died of a heart attack last year, and her father had died of complications from alcoholism decades ago, right before Mam's only sibling, her much younger brother, Bill, was born. And Mam's first husband, Penny's father, had died in a car accident when Penny was just a baby.

Death! It was as if it happened all the time!

Bunko didn't have anything keeping him in Scottsdale, either. His mother, who had raised him alone, had died of cancer a few months after he graduated from high school. And Bunko had no idea where his father was. He didn't even know if his father was alive. He was an orphan and had been for almost his whole life, he would sometimes say.

The time was right to leave Arizona, Mam decided. She wanted Penny to start fresh at a new high school that was bigger and had more resources. She wanted Penny to know what it was like to live someplace green, with leafy trees and real seasons.

Mam thought she had found a way out: She had applied for a learning-specialist job at a private school in Connecticut. If she got it, Penny could enroll there for close to free.

Penny wasn't exactly thrilled about this potential move, but she was open to it, and for a sixteen-year-old, Mam knew, that was about as close to enthusiastic as she was going to get.

Mam and Bunko were scheduled to fly to Connecticut next week so Mam could have her second job interview with the head of the private school. While they were there, Mam and Bunko were planning to look at a potential new home Mam had spotted online: a two-bedroom condo beside a golf course a short drive from the school.

Mam told herself all that, and then she told herself this: If Bunko could not stay sober, she and Penny would move to Connecticut without him.

♦

The morning after book club, there were texts. The first one came from Brenda.

Sorry you have to be married to a drunk, I'm sure you agree that he owes me an apology

Sorry I don't get involved in my husband's business

Lol then why are you dragging him to book club

Wow you ask insightful questions did they teach you how to do that in Vice Principal school

No I read it in a book called Learning Specialists Are Idiots

You know what would help you most Brenda?

A good fuck

•

After that cordial little interaction, Mam and Brenda stopped speaking to each other. They avoided eye contact when they saw each other at school, whether in the hallway, the staff lounge, or the restroom.

Brenda did not host a going-away party for Mam and Bunko like she had promised.

Bunko got back on the wagon, then fell off the wagon, then got back on the wagon again.

•

On the morning of their trip to Connecticut, Bunko sat at the kitchen table bent over a cup of black coffee.

Mam came into the kitchen. She watched him stare into the hot brown liquid.

"Bunko, you were six days sober," she said to him sadly.

"I'm sober now," he replied.

It sounded like *Ahmmsobernow*.

"You're not sober now," she said.

"Okay, maybe I'm not completely sober now, but I will be soon."

It sounded like *Ahmnotsobreeenowbutahwahlbesoon*.

Mam shut her eyes tightly for a few seconds and then opened them as if she were trying to blink out a foreign object.

“Bunko, you know we have this trip to Connecticut lined up for today. You’re going with me. But if you can’t get sober and stay sober, Penny and I are going to move to Connecticut without you.”

At that moment, Penny walked into the kitchen to get breakfast. Bunko lurched out of the kitchen and headed to the bathroom.

Penny took a bowl out of the cupboard and opened a box of cereal. She loved Bunko and was glad her mother had married him. His periodic drinking binges were honestly not as bad as Mam’s harping about them.

Mam picked up the almost empty bottle beside the sink. The white filigreed letters read MONKEY SHOULDER.³

Mam poured the remainder of the liquor into the sink and then hurled the bottle into the garbage can.

•

Bunko had come around a little by the time he and Mam arrived at the airport that evening. There was a hazy sky and an air-quality alert as they sat at the gate waiting to board.

If Mam and Brenda had still been friends, Mam would have asked her to take Penny for the few days they would be gone. But given the circumstances, Mam had asked her brother, Bill, to come down from Arizona State, where he had at long last enrolled. At age twenty-one, he was finally a freshman studying psychology. He agreed to stay with Penny at Mam and Bunko’s house.

Mam and Bunko were dressed in their flying outfits. For Bunko, this was a pair of black sweatpants and a black hoodie. For Mam, this was a black hoodie that fell to her knees, a hoodie that was also a dress. Mam had been excited to discover that this type of hybrid garment existed. She and Bunko both wore brand-new, blindingly white sneakers.

They boarded the plane and buckled themselves into their seats. Mam had brought a few edibles with her for the flight. She was stressed out, she hated flying, and she was looking forward to being high for a few hours. She got a gummy for herself from her bag and then held one out to Bunko.

He raised his eyebrows and took the red glob from her palm. He hadn't expected this sort of kindness from her.

"Thank you," he said, by which he meant *I'm sorry and I love you*.

Mam said nothing, by which she meant *I'm still mad, but I love you, too*.

The flight attendants made their final rounds, then closed the cabin door.

Sixty minutes later, at thirty-five thousand feet, Mam and Bunko were high indeed when a fuel pump malfunctioned, the engines shut down, and the entire craft exploded.

TWO

MAM CAME TO AS SHE WAS STUMBLING DOWN A DIM hallway. She was groggy and disoriented. It was weird to wake up while you were moving, she thought.

Bunko was right behind her. The two of them fumbled their way down the corridor, which was narrow, poorly lit, and painted gray. It looked like the interior of a submarine. At the end of the hallway was a gray metal door with black scuff marks along the bottom.

It was not an inviting hallway, and it was not a welcoming door. If not for the fact that she was already walking, seemingly with purpose, down the hall toward this door, Mam might have stopped and turned around.

Instead, she came to the door and pushed hard on the horizontal bar as she simultaneously kicked the base. She left another black mark as the door heaved open.

Mam and Bunko stepped over the threshold. They found themselves in a white-walled office lit by a single overhead light. The bulb made an irritating buzz, like an insect stuck in midair.

A receptionist sat at a gray metal desk peering at a computer screen. The office was decorated, if you could call it that, with two framed posters, one of a rope bridge in a misty jungle and the other of a stack of three wet black rocks.

Mam and Bunko walked toward the woman at the desk, who was dressed professionally in a black fitted jacket, a black pencil skirt, and black heels.

Mam realized with a start who it was: Brenda.

“Marjorie and William Clapper,” Brenda said, reciting their full names from the screen. She grabbed two black fanny packs from a cardboard box

at her side and pushed them across the desk. “Welcome to Cloud Six. Here are your survival kits.”

Mam’s shock at seeing Brenda was quickly eclipsed by the horror that she and Bunko had arrived at the wrong destination.

“Wait, this isn’t JFK?” Mam asked Brenda.

“This is Cloud Six,” Brenda said.

Mam turned to Bunko. “We’re supposed to be at JFK!”

Bunko spread his arms wide and smiled. “Oh, come on, does it really matter, Mam? We’re here!”

“But this isn’t where we’re supposed to be!” Mam snapped.

Bunko sounded giddy as he fumbled with the buckle on his survival kit. “Mam, who really knows where they’re supposed to be?”

Mam was mortified that this situation was unfolding in front of Brenda. She grabbed the fanny pack from the table and held it up by its strap as if it were a small rodent she had just guillotined.

“What’s *in* this thing?” she asked Brenda.

“A few donations from corporate sponsors and some trinkets the boss got from Oriental Trading,” Brenda replied.

Mam eyed her crappy fanny pack suspiciously. She was reminded of a discount cruise she had once taken with her first husband where they were required to wear bright orange lanyards that blared their lowly status and kept them out of the fanciest bars.

Bunko had successfully buckled his pack. He leaned forward onto Brenda’s desk. “So how far are we from Connecticut?” he asked her.

Bunko was definitely still high, Mam realized. She was finding her own fanny pack surprisingly tricky to fasten. It was possible, she supposed, that she also was a little impaired.

“It doesn’t matter,” Brenda snapped. “You’re going to have to change plans.”

“Change *planes*?” Bunko asked her.

“Change *plans*,” Brenda said. She turned to Mam. “You realize that you two are dead now, right?”

“*What*?” Mam cried.

“Your plane blew up,” Brenda said. She spread her fingers and admired her nails.

“You can’t tell me that *this* is heaven!” Bunko said, gesturing toward the poster of wet rocks.

“Yes, I can,” Brenda said. “That’s my job.”

“Wait, does this means you’re dead, too?” Mam asked her old friend.

“Definitely not,” Brenda said, tossing her hair. “This is just a side gig. They were looking for a pretty face to sit here—you know what that’s like,” Brenda said, well aware that Mam did *not* know what that was like.

Mam looked around, skeptical. “Well, if this is heaven, where are my mom and dad? Where’s my old dog, Shelby?”

Brenda waved her hand dismissively. “Your parents and Shelby are probably running around out there somewhere.” She gestured toward the door behind her.

“Oh my god!” Mam cried, suddenly remembering. “What about Penny?”

Bunko put his hand on Mam’s shoulder. “We should be glad that Penny’s not here, Mam. That means she’s still alive,” he said.

A family of four walked in, looking bewildered. They stood behind Mam and Bunko, waiting to speak to Brenda.

Brenda eyed the new arrivals. “The two of you will have to keep moving,” she said to Mam and Bunko as she hooked her painted thumbnail toward the door behind her. “You can head through there.”

Mam was relieved to walk away. She walked through the door with Bunko, then proceeded down a white hallway as she told herself that this probably wasn’t even happening. This was all because of that edible, she thought, that obviously tainted edible, from the stupid online edible store.

Bunko and Mam kept going until they came to another door that was painted white and looked antique, with an etched glass window in its center. Bunko turned the cut-glass rosette of the doorknob. The door swung open easily.

Mam’s first thought was that they had entered an airplane hangar. That’s how huge the space was. Maybe Brenda was wrong, she thought. Maybe they *were* at JFK. Maybe this was that new terminal that had been under construction for so goddamn long.

The entire place was white. But it wasn’t a welcoming white, like a freshly made bed at a fine hotel, and it wasn’t a clinical white, like the paper covering the examining table at a doctor’s office. It was the white of bones. A forlorn white. A spooky white.

There were several white couches in the distance, but they were placed so far apart that you couldn’t say they were, as the interior designers liked

to put it, “in conversation.” And it was white overhead, but not an active white, like a sky full of clouds. It was a flat white, like a blank piece of paper.

The whole place seemed weirdly lacking in energy, Mam thought. The ground was the only area that appeared to have any life to it. It was completely covered in gently waving white handkerchiefs.

Mam stood in the doorway and eyed the swaying handkerchiefs suspiciously. She wasn’t sure how easy they would be to walk on.

She took a few tentative steps, The handkerchiefs made a soft, shushing sound. They were indeed a bit tricky to navigate. Mam felt like she was walking on the deck of a schooner that had hit choppy seas. She was very glad she wasn’t wearing high heels.

Stepping carefully, Mam and Bunko traversed the handkerchiefs, reached the nearest white couch, and sat down. Mam told herself sternly, *I am very high now. That is my problem.*

Mam decided she would relax for a while and wait for the tainted edible to pass out of her system. But with everything that was happening, she needed another edible if she was going to relax, and in another upsetting twist, she had arrived without her carry-on, in which all her edibles were packed.

Bunko leaned his head back on the couch cushion, closed his eyes, and pressed the heels of his palms into his eyelids until he saw blobs of color floating like globules in a lava lamp. He had discovered this self-soothing action in childhood.

“This couch is so uncomfortable,” Mam said, sitting up.

“I’m pretty sure it’s IKEA,” Bunko replied, still messing around with his eyes.

“I think it’s the LINANÄS,” Mam said. She and Bunko had had a lot of IKEA furniture in their time together as a couple.

“It’s definitely not the LINANÄS,” said Bunko, opening his eyes and sitting up. He lifted the cushion to look for the label. “It’s not as nice as the LINANÄS. It’s the cheaper one, the GLOSTAD.”

Mam looked down into her survival kit and began digging through it. There was something deep inside there, Mam could tell, but she couldn’t seem to get her fingers around it. It was crazy how deep this pack was once you started poking around in all the little folds.

At last Mam’s fingers gripped the thing. It was soft. She pulled it out.

It was a white baby rabbit. She held it up by the ears. Its pink nose twitched adorably. Mam cooed at the little creature as she set it down on the couch. Bunko held his finger out to it. He was a computer programmer who supplemented his income by working as a pet psychic. He had zero pet-psychic abilities, but he could read people very well if he focused on them, and that was all he needed to get the job done.

The rabbit seemed uninterested in Bunko's finger.

Mam coaxed the rabbit into her palm and then brought it up to her face. She looked directly into its eyes.

"What's your name?" she demanded.

"Leroy," the rabbit replied.

"Wow," Bunko said, amazed Mam had gotten the rabbit to speak. She really was a very good learning specialist.

Mam set the baby rabbit back down on the couch. "Okay, Leroy. Can you tell us how we can get out of here?"

Leroy scratched his ear with his hind leg. "Where are you trying to go?"

"We were trying to get to Connecticut," Mam said. "But I don't care about Connecticut now. I just want to see my daughter again. We left her behind in Scottsdale."

"This is Cloud Six," Leroy said.

"Yes, we heard that," Mam said. Leroy had a very nice voice, Mam noticed, like that of a handsome actor trying to sell you tequila.

"It says so on your survival kit," Leroy added.

Mam examined her kit. She saw it now—black vinyl letters had been stitched onto the black canvas bag. It might have looked classy if the pack weren't so flimsy.

"Leroy, are we really dead?" Mam cried. It was easier asking this question of a tiny rabbit she had just met than of her ex-friend whom she had known for decades.

"It depends on what you mean by *dead*," Leroy said.

"I thought everyone everywhere pretty much agreed on what *dead* means," Bunko said. "Once you're not alive, you're dead."

"That's what people who are alive think," said Leroy, rubbing his front paws together. "But then they come here, and they learn."

"Learn what?" Mam asked.

"That death is only a door you go through. And then there are a bunch of other doors after that. But you have to go through the first door to know

about the more doors.”

“Mordors?” Bunko asked. He had read Tolkien.

“No, *more doors*,” Leroy clarified. He had also read Tolkien.

“We can’t be dead, Leroy! We have a teenager to take care of!” Mam said.

Leroy gave Mam a pained look.

Mam slumped back on the couch and moaned. Bunko patted her arm gently. “It will be okay, Mam,” he said to her reassuringly.

“How can you say that, Bunko? Our little girl has no one!”

“Mam, she’s not a little girl. She’s sixteen.”

Mam groaned. “Sixteen!”

“I can’t remember . . . Did we make a will?” Bunko asked.

“Yes, I made one online. And thank god I recently changed it, because in the event that we both died, I originally put down that Penny’s guardian would be Brenda.”

“Oh. Who’d you put down instead?”

“Bill.”

“Bill?” Bunko was surprised. Bill was just a kid.

THREE

BILL KNOCKED SOFTLY ON THE DOOR OF PENNY'S BEDROOM. Penny had stayed up late playing a video game in which her avatar was a frazzled pizzeria owner who employed only stray cats.

"Pen," Bill said, coming in.

Penny opened one eye. She watched as her Uncle Bill came over and sat on her bed. *WTF*, she thought. He never sat on her bed. Were those his outside clothes?

"What," she said.

Bill was only twenty-one, but he thought of himself as someone who had seen the world. After high school he had taken a few years off to travel. "Screwing around" was what Mam had called his cross-country adventures backpacking, blueberry picking, and dishwashing.

Now Bill had finally started college. Arizona State was a big party school and he didn't feel like he fit in there. But it was still early yet and he liked psychology, at least. Maybe he could do something with it.

"I have some bad news," Bill said.

Bill himself had gotten the news on the phone. A policeman had called, identified himself, and asked Bill if he was driving. He was not. He asked Bill if he was sitting down. Bill was by then.

The policeman told Bill that his sister and brother-in-law had died when their plane exploded, and that the explosion was so massive, there wouldn't be any bodies, or even ashes, to return to him.

The most unbelievable part of this terrible news wasn't anything the policeman told him, however. It was something Bill knew about only because Mam, in her scrupulousness, had sent him a copy of her new will after she had had it notarized.

He was now Penny's guardian.

Mam is so funny, he had thought when he got the papers in the mail. *Always thinking of the worst-case scenario*. Well, now the worst-case scenario had happened, and Bill was going to have to tell the news to his . . . guardian-ee? He didn't even know what to call her, much less how to tell her.

You would think that Bill could have used something he had learned in his semester of college-level psychology, but he wasn't thinking about anything he'd learned in school now. He was thinking about Bruce Lee: If Bruce Lee had had to tell a young woman that her parents had died, he would say it straight.

Bill looked down at his gangly legs sticking out of his shiny red athletic shorts.

"Bill, *what?*"

She was impatient, like her mother, Bill thought.

"Mam and Bunko died," Bill said. "Their plane blew up."

"You're kidding," Penny said.

"No," he said.

"You're kidding," Penny repeated, her voice squeaky this time.

"I'm not kidding."

People who experience trauma often need to do the same thing many times because they find predictability comforting, Bill remembered, his college reading coming back to him now. The psychologist's job was to support the client in repeating the behavior as many times as necessary until the client felt secure enough to try a new behavior.

"You're going to be okay," Bill said, patting her leg awkwardly. His sadness at losing his sister was not the primary issue right now. His feelings were secondary. He was totally nailing this guardian business!

Penny stared at Bill in shock as she held her purple stuffed rabbit in a headlock.

Penny still slept with a stuffed animal, Bill marveled, even though she was sixteen years old.

"I'm going to take care of you," he said.

Penny's mouth made an O. But no sound came from it.

FOUR

MAM AND BUNKO HAD NOT MOVED FROM THE COUCH, which was indeed the GLOSTAD.⁴ Leroy was sitting between the two of them.

Mam slumped forward and put her head in her hands.

Bunko placed his palm gently on Mam's back. "Have you heard of the expression *in the rabbit's fur*?" he asked her.

"No," said Mam.

"It means you're lost. Your perspective is off," he said.⁵

"I take offense at that phrase," said Leroy.

Bunko ignored him. "You've been in the rabbit's fur before, Mam. And you've always found your way out again," he said.

"You helped me find my way out, Bunko," Mam said gratefully, clasping his hand.

Leroy felt left out of this lovefest.

"I just never thought that dying would be like this," Mam said, sounding weepy. "I never thought of it as something I would *live* through. I thought I would either black out and never wake up or wake up and find myself in a really nice place and my old terrier, Shelby, would run up and kiss me, and then Shelby and I would lie around and eat cookies all day."

"Why did you think *that*?" Bunko asked her, sounding irritated.

Mam twisted her mouth to the side. "I wanted to believe it?"

"Funny how none of the major religions called it. None of them said that the afterlife would be like *Welcome to heaven, here's your crappy fanny pack, now keep moving*," Bunko said.

"Are we *never* going to be able to go back to our lives?" Mam asked, looking around forlornly. "This is *it*?"

"I've heard that people do leave this place," said Leroy. "But I don't know how they do it and I don't know where they go."

“It wouldn’t be so bad, I guess, if we hadn’t left our daughter behind,” Mam said. “Do you know if there is a way we can at least take a look at our girl from here, Leroy? I want to see where she is. I want to know that she’s okay.”

“You’re just in withdrawal from that stupid stalker app, Mam,” Bunko said. That was what Penny had named the app that enabled them to track her location. Mam checked it multiple times a day.

“But Penny’s my child! I want to know where she is!”

“Mam, you know the most important thing about where she is, which is that it’s not here.”

Mam folded her arms across her chest and turned her back to him.

Bunko reached out to touch her shoulder. “She’s okay,” he said gently. “You always worry about her and she’s always okay.”

“I don’t know how you can see your daughter from here,” Leroy said to Mam. “But you can probably find someone who does know at the bodega.”

“The bodega?” Mam asked, turning to him, surprised.

“Yes, it’s a bodega with a bar in the back,” Leroy said. “You can go there and ask around.”

Bunko took his hand off Mam’s shoulder. “Where is this bodega bar?”

“I’m not sure,” Leroy said. “I’ve never been there myself. I’ve only heard about it.”

“Can you lead us there?” Bunko asked.

“No,” Leroy said, jumping away from Bunko and onto the back of the couch.

Mam had had enough of this confusing chat with a rabbit. She swooped her hand over Leroy’s head and picked him up by the ears. “Okay, now. Back in the kit you go,” she said.

“Wait!” Leroy cried as he dangled from her hand, his feet churning. “Before you put me back in there!”

“What?” Mam asked him as she set him back down on the couch.

“You need to know something else about this place,” Leroy said. “There are killers on the loose here!”

FIVE

THE OVERHEAD LIGHT IN THE CLOUD SIX WELCOME area had begun blinking intermittently, like the bulb was about to go.

Umfala was sitting at the welcome desk. She was a minor demon whose job was greeting new arrivals. She was talking to Widdershins, her major demon boss, who was the founder of Cloud Six.

Umfala was the demon who had appeared to Mam and Bunko as Brenda, knowing that Brenda was the last person Mam wanted to see.

Umfala did that for fun. Demons can be like that.

“Widdershins, I need to take some time off,” Umfala said. She was still in her Brenda form, in her black jacket, skirt, and heels.

“Some time off? We’re really busy now, Umbrella. Why do you need time off?”

Widdershins, who was in his favorite form—that of a bodybuilder—paced the terrazzo floor in black loafers, black silk socks, red Versace underwear, and nothing else.

Umfala had forgotten how cold her boss could be. It was crazy that she had forgotten that, though. His complete lack of compassion was the reason why he was the demon boss and she was the demon assistant, she reminded herself. It was why he was never in the office, whereas she was always here. It was why she was now having to beg him to give her some time off.

“Well, it’s kind of personal,” Umfala told him, twirling her Brenda hair shyly.

“Oooh, tell me!” Widdershins said, leaning on her desk.

Widdershins could be very childlike—that is, brilliant, stubborn, and vindictive. When he heard that the heavenly powers were having a housing shortage,⁶ he immediately figured out how to exploit it. Before anyone else had even thought of it, he had bought an abandoned, derelict realm, spiffed

it up, and then leased it back to heaven at an exorbitant rate. That's how he founded Cloud Six.

“I can't tell you,” Umfala said, shaking her hair in front of her face. “You'll pity me.”

“No I won't,” he said quickly.

SIX

MAM WAS HORRIFIED TO HEAR FROM LEROY THAT THERE were killers on the loose here. But she was even more horrified to discover that she could still be horrified, considering everything she had been through of late. Maybe one's capacity to be horrified didn't abate with repeated exposure, like she had always assumed. Maybe horror was like hope: It sprang eternal.

Bunko was unperturbed. "Mam, there were killers of one kind or another running around Scottsdale the entire time we lived there, and you never thought twice about it," he said.

"Really? I don't remember any killers there."

"People were murdered all the time in Scottsdale! You never thought about it like *Killers are on the loose here*, but that's exactly what it was!"

Mam turned to Leroy, who was happy to have been granted a few more minutes of freedom out of Mam's survival kit. "Why is it like this?" she asked the rabbit. "Didn't we leave all that behind when we arrived here? You said this was heaven!"

"This is a *realm* of heaven," Leroy said, rubbing his chin against the couch. "A lower realm. The lowest realm, actually. Any lower than this, and you'd be in hell."

"But I was a law-abiding citizen!" Mam huffed.

"Yeah, how'd we manage to make it to only the lowest realm of heaven?" Bunko asked.

"What did you do for work?" Leroy asked Bunko.

"I'm a computer programmer and a pet psychic," Bunko said. He couldn't bring himself to use the past tense.

"A pet psychic!" Leroy said excitedly. "Can you read my thoughts?"

"No," Bunko said.

"Try it," said Leroy. He closed his eyes. "I'm having a thought."

“Religion keeps the poor from murdering the rich.”⁷

Leroy opened his eyes. “You are so psychic!”

“Leroy, I’m asking you something important!” Mam exclaimed. “*Why* are there killers on the loose here?”

“Mam, is that even worth asking?” Bunko interjected. “It’s like saying ‘Why do people kill?’ Who knows? They just do! And they’ve been doing it for millennia!”

“I understand what you’re saying,” Leroy said to Mam kindly. “But I don’t know why there are killers on the loose here.”

Mam frowned.

“I just wanted to be sure you two were aware of the situation,” Leroy said.

“Thank you. We’re aware. So now what do we do?” Mam asked as she looked at all the handkerchiefs swishing back and forth, saying *shhhh*.

“I’m not going to worry,” Bunko said, looking around at the white expanse. “If anyone is going to come after us, I’ll spot them a mile away.”

Mam wasn’t going to *not* worry. “Are the killers using guns?” she asked Leroy.

“Yes, they’re using guns,” the rabbit said sadly.

“How do you know?” she asked.

“I got shot at,” Leroy said. “It missed me, but I heard it.”

“Wait a minute,” said Bunko, standing up so that he loomed over the tiny bunny. “Why are we afraid of getting shot? Aren’t we already dead?”

“All you guys care about is death,” Leroy complained as he hopped over toward Mam.

“I just want to know what to do!” Mam pleaded.

“I can tell you what to do,” the bunny said. “Avoid getting shot.”

Mam was irritated. She scooped up Leroy, deposited him back in her survival kit, and zipped it closed.

“Dude,” she said to Bunko. “We can’t sit around like this.”

SEVEN

PENNY WAS AT THE DINING ROOM TABLE WITH HER EARBUDS in. She hadn't taken them out since she'd been told about the disaster. She needed music flooding into her head at all times so she couldn't think too hard.

She definitely didn't want to think about her mother's and stepfather's bodies. It was crazy how they were just . . . gone. If they had to be dead, though, that was a relief in some ways. She had never been to a funeral before, and now she wouldn't have to go. She wouldn't have to look at her mother lying in a casket. She wouldn't have to scatter her stepfather's ashes. But at the same time, her mother's berry-colored lipsticks were still lined up in the bathroom. Her stepfather's razor, with tiny brown and gray hairs clinging to it, was sitting on the shelf behind the mirror.

Penny regarded her bowl of cereal as the music cascaded into her ears. An image popped into her mind of a painting draped in black cloth. She had once seen such a painting at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art. The painting was controversial for a reason Penny couldn't remember now. That was why it was draped. She remembered how disturbing it was to see a painting covered like that, among all the other paintings in the gallery. It was like seeing a sheet-covered body on a sidewalk. That drapery made all the uncovered paintings seem ghoulish, hanging there looking at you with their bright, crazy faces and their questions and their demands.

Penny didn't want to look at death, then or now. From the dining room table she could see the kitchen island where her mom always sat. She had made a command center for herself there, where she could oversee what was going on in both the kitchen and the dining room. For a while her mother had tried to get Penny to do her homework at the dining room table, but Penny had refused. Her mother did her own homework at her command

center, though. She sat there with her laptop and her bills and all the other adult pieces of paper that Penny heard about but had no interest in.

She sat in view of her mother's abandoned chair and looked down at her own freckled arms. The music made her feel like her body was a little farther away from her than usual, which was a relief. Having a body was exhausting. She had gotten her period yesterday, and it was heavy. It was so unfair how boys got to see their orgasms while girls got to see . . . carnage. She would never get used to how it was supposed to be normal to have that amount of blood coming out of her.

Penny took a bite of her cereal as she read a text from her best friend, Lydia, who was in school right now, in their precalculus class. Penny wasn't in school today because Bill had said she could skip.

Bill came into the kitchen, made himself some cereal, and sat down beside Penny. She saw his lips moving, so she took out one earbud to hear what he had to say. She held it a few inches from her ear to signal that she didn't intend to listen for long.

"Brenda is going to host a memorial service for Mam and Bunko next week," Bill said.

"I thought we weren't doing that," Penny said, thinking about bodies again.

"Yes, we're doing that."

"Why, when there are no bodies?"

Bill ate a spoonful of O's. "Bodies don't matter."

"They don't?"

"A memorial service isn't for Mam and Bunko. It's for us."

Penny nodded. Then she sealed up her head again.

EIGHT

“C’MON!” WIDDERSHINS IMploRED UMFALA. “TELL ME the personal reason why you need time off!”

“Okay,” Umfala said finally, taking a deep breath. “I have to take some time off because I was recently diagnosed with demon rot.”

Wow, demon rot, Widdershins thought. *That was* pitiful.

“Jeez, that’s rough, Banana,” he said as he began inching his way toward the door. “Of course I understand—take all the time you need. If you can just sit here a little longer while I go check the schedule, I’ll figure it out.”

Umfala half rose from her seat behind the desk. “Widdershins, I don’t think you get it! I need to take time off immediately! This job is super stressful and it’s not good for my health!”

Widdershins looked at her uncomprehendingly. “But you’re just sitting here saying ‘Welcome!’ How stressful can it be?”

“You do realize that I have to tell the people who arrive here that they’ve *died*?”

“Of course I know that,” Widdershins said, exasperated with these young demons and their ridiculous sensitivities.

“And when they find out, let me tell you, they’re not very happy!” Umfala said.

Widdershins was taken aback. “What do you mean?”

“People who hear that they have arrived in heaven are expecting angels, pearly gates, and a choir, Widdershins! They’re not very impressed when they see *this*!” She pointed to the poster of wet rocks.

Widdershins bristled. “I will have you know that that is a professional photograph of a *cairn*! A natural, human-made burial marker! It’s a perfectly appropriate image for the welcome area of Cloud Six!”

“You couldn’t think of anything more welcoming?” Umfala scoffed.

Widdershins did not like the way this demon kid was speaking to him. He stood directly in front of her desk and folded his bulging arms across his massive chest. “Our job here is not to make people feel welcome,” he admonished her. “It’s to make sure they keep moving through this office and out that back door. You say to the people who arrive here, ‘Welcome to Cloud Six,’ right? You describe the realm they are about to enter as ‘large’ and ‘modern,’ yes?”

“Of course I do!” Umfala lied. She came out from behind her desk. “But, Widdershins, do you know what this place really looks like? The demon hospital!” She pointed to the poster of the rope bridge. “That’s the exact same poster that’s hanging in the room where I get my treatment for demon rot!”

“It does not look like the demon hospital,” Widdershins said, hurt.

“You’re right!” Umfala shot back. “It’s worse!”

“If you wanted this place to be so welcoming, why did you appear to those new arrivals as the last person they wanted to see?” Widdershins smirked.

Umfala reddened again. *Well, so what?* she thought. She was a demon! How was she supposed to act?

“Widdershins, you named this shithole Cloud Six! And there isn’t even a single cloud here!”

“Names are not always accurate reflections of places!” Widdershins sputtered. “Have you ever been to an Olive Garden?”⁸

Umfala groaned. “You’ve already told me a million times about the Olive Garden! If you tell me about the Olive Garden one more time, I’m going to scream!”

Widdershins had made it to the door. He tried to turn the doorknob, but it didn’t budge. He futzed with the mechanism.

The door opened at last. A crowd rushed past him toward Umfala’s desk.

“Widdershins!” Umfala cried as the new arrivals clamored around her. “I need to leave here now!”

Widdershins fled.

NINE

MAM AND BUNKO BEGAN WALKING OVER THE WAVING handkerchiefs. They took careful steps, getting accustomed to the fabric's motion. They didn't know which direction they should go. They only knew they had to keep going if they wanted to find the bodega.

As Mam walked, she realized that as much as she wanted to find the bodega, she was also worried that once they found the bodega, Bunko would start drinking, and she couldn't very well deal with his drinking now by moving to a condo on a golf course in Connecticut. Plus, in addition to being worried about his drinking, she was exasperated that she was worried about his drinking. Why should she have to be worried about his drinking in heaven? Even if it was a crappy heaven? Why should she worry about his drinking at all?

Here she was, she fumed, fretting about her husband's drinking in the afterlife—worrying herself to a second death! And even if she died again, even if she died a million more times, she wouldn't be able to do anything more about his drinking than she'd done in the first place, which was nothing. No, *nothing*. She couldn't seem to learn that, though. She was a learning specialist who needed a learning specialist to fix her very own learning issue, which was that she could not fully comprehend that she had married a drunk, just like that moron Brenda had said.

Mam trudged along carefully with Bunko at her side. When she had been living, or alive, or whatever you wanted to call it—that whole seemingly never-ending period when she was exhausted and nervous all the time and only wanted to lie down with no one bothering her for twenty minutes—what she was doing now, this laborious plodding across a weirdly wobbly, brightly lit space, would have seemed hellish for reasons that all had to do with her body. She would have been tired. She would have been

thirsty. The light would have hurt her eyes. All those responses seemed so pure and uncomplicated now. They were the feelings of a newborn baby.

Now she wasn't tired. She didn't feel hunger or thirst. And there was no one to bother her except Bunko. She didn't want to leave Bunko, in part because this Cloud Six place was so sketchy, and yet she thought maybe she should leave Bunko, because as soon as there was any alcohol around, he would surely drink to incapacitation. Meanwhile, whether she wanted it or not, Bunko was there by her side every second, like Jesus in the frigging footprints poem.

Mam wished someone would turn down this bright light. She imagined seeing herself and Bunko from far overhead: They would look like a couple of carpenter ants, slowly crossing the floor of an operating theater. What kind of unanesthetized, half-assed surgery was going on in this overly lit place anyway?

"Hey, Mam, have you looked at your genitals lately?" Bunko asked her.

Mam gave him a quizzical look. "No?"

"Well, I have," said Bunko. "And it's disturbing down there."

Mam stopped plodding. She scrutinized Bunko's face, searching for a sign that he was joking.

There was no such sign. "I'm telling you. Look," he said.

Mam pulled up her hoodie dress. Where her genitals used to be, it was flat, like on a doll.

"Where did it *go*?" she whimpered, wild-eyed.

"I have the same thing," Bunko said ruefully, pulling down his sweatpants to show her. "Nothing."

Mam rubbed the flat area of her crotch, which used to be so sensitive. Now it was as if she were rubbing something that wasn't even attached to her, like a garage door.

"I don't feel anything," Mam whined to Bunko. "Why do we have our mouths, ears, and nostrils here, but not *these* holes?"

Bunko stood there. "Do you remember our sex?" he asked wistfully.

There was no forgetting those interstellar adventures.

Bunko sat down. He bobbed slightly on the waving handkerchiefs. They lashed at his sweatpants with the zeal of the coachman who drove Nietzsche insane. Bunko barely felt them, though. He was busy pressing his eyeballs into his skull. He could see two quavering blue-and-orange blobs, as if an atomic bomb had been dropped on two specially chosen New York Knicks.

No, two specially chosen New York Mets. No, two specially chosen New York Islanders. Whatever, just any two New York athletes who were not New York Rangers.

"Maybe what's happening," Mam said, still standing with her hand on the terrible flat area, "is that we're not dead now, but we're *getting* dead. And we'll keep getting more and more dead and losing more and more parts of ourselves and just keep slowly diminishing until finally there's nothing left of us, and we'll disappear."

Bunko took his hands off his eyes; the New York athletes stopped enduring their tragedy.

"I'm pretty sure that's just called *living*," he said.

Mam glowered. This was true.

"Help me up," Bunko said, stretching his arms out to Mam.

She helped him up. He stood and brushed some handkerchief lint off his black sweatpants.

She reached out her hand to Bunko. "Hold my hand," she said to him.

He held it.

Mam suddenly felt a rush of gratitude for her husband.

"What are we doing again?" she asked Bunko as they continued their uneven plodding over the handkerchiefs.

"We're trying to find the bodega," he said.

"And why are we trying to find the bodega?"

"To get to the bar in the back," he said.

"And why are we trying to get to the bar in the back?"

"So we can find someone who can help us see Penny."

"And why are we doing that?"

Bunko stopped and let go of her hand. "Because we love Penny. And because I'm trying not to kill myself."

Mam looked him in the eyes. "Really?"

"Remember how when we were living, a person couldn't even talk about killing themselves unless they were making a joke?" Bunko asked.

"Old people talked about it," Mam said. "Old people who were poor but didn't qualify for Medicaid and didn't have anyone to care for them as they lost their ability to get out of bed and go to the bathroom."

"I guess I'm an old person at heart," Bunko said.

"Do you really want to kill yourself?"

“Not really, I guess. But it’s upsetting to discover that death is not the end. I mean, how long are we supposed to keep doing this?”

Mam stopped walking. She hugged him.

“The meaning of life is that it stops,” Bunko said, hugging her back. “That’s our old friend Kafka.”

They began walking again. It was becoming a little easier. They were getting their handkerchief sea legs.

“Old people are so awesome,” Bunko mused. “Too bad everyone hates them.”

“It’s because their bodies remind everyone else that they’re going to die.”

Bunko noticed that Mam wasn’t beside him. He stopped and turned around.

“Come on, Mam, let’s sleep going,” Bunko said to her.

Mam made her way toward him. “I thought you said, ‘sleep going,’” she said.

“I did,” said Bunko. “Because maybe this is a dream and we’ll wake up soon.”

INTRODUCTION TWO

HI, IT'S ME AGAIN. YOUR AUTHOR, AMY.

Today I went out to walk the dog in my neighborhood, in Manhattan, and I came across a guy lying on the sidewalk. I wasn't sure if he was a tourist or an unhoused person or what. He looked like he had fallen, but he wasn't bleeding and he didn't appear to be injured.

I asked him if he was okay. He didn't respond. His eyes were bulging out strangely, and it seemed like he couldn't talk.

I called 911 and when the woman there answered, I started telling her about this guy.

But she cut me off and said, "Say yes or no. Only yes or no." She said it one more time so I really got it. She wanted me to stick to the script. She didn't want me to improvise. She wanted me to answer her questions like I was the dumbest Magic 8 Ball in the universe. I couldn't even say SIGNS POINT TO YES, only YES.

Still, I Magic-8-Balled myself for her. I would not have been able to answer any of her questions so succinctly otherwise. Like "Is he conscious?" I don't know, what is consciousness? Isn't that a question human beings have been trying to answer for a million years?

I answered her questions, and she said they would send someone, so I stood around a while longer with the dog. And then I got a call from a guy who sounded pretty revved up, like maybe he was on coke or something.

"Hi, I'm from emergency services, I'm on the block, where is this guy?" he asked me.

I told him, and he got off the phone. Then my phone buzzed again, and I saw on the caller ID that it was Satan.

"Ha ha," Satan said when I answered. "I must have butt-dialed you."

Satan had never called me before. “I didn’t know you had my number,” I said.

“Oh, I have your number,” he said.

The dog began to growl.

“Is there something we need to discuss?” I asked.

“It’s come to my attention that you intend to tell a story that takes place in my realm.”

“Ah, yes,” I admitted as I watched the revved-up guy load the bulging-eyes guy into the ambulance.

“I don’t recall your asking permission to do that.”

“I thought it was better to beg for forgiveness.”

“Listen, buddy,” he said. “Just because you call yourself an author, don’t start thinking that you’re outside the situation, like you know more than everyone, and you’re above it all.”

“Okay,” I said.

“You’re human and you’re going to die, too. You know that, right?”

“Yes,” I said. Of course I knew that. But who wants to think about it?

“Is that all?” I asked him.

“I thought that since you were planning on showing people around my realm, I could offer you my services,” he said.

“What kind of services?”

“I could answer any questions you might have so that you don’t end up spewing untruths like so many others.”

I didn’t want to spew untruths. That’s not good in this writing business. “Okay, I do have a couple of questions,” I said.

“Shoot.”

It had started to rain, so I led the dog under some scaffolding and stood there so I could concentrate.

“Is there ever a point in the afterlife when people just die and there’s nothing? But it’s not like people are alive to experience the nothingness, there just *is* nothingness?”

“Sometimes,” Satan said guardedly. “In some places.”

That didn’t exactly satisfy me. “What about suicides?” I asked. “What happens to them in the afterlife?”

“Oh, nothing at all—there are no additional repercussions for people who kill themselves,” Satan said.

“Okay, what about Jeffrey Epstein? Did he kill himself?” I asked.

“Ha ha,” Satan said, which was not the same thing as laughing. And then he ended the call.

ONE

REGARDLESS OF WHAT YOU MIGHT HAVE HEARD ABOUT it, hell is actually a very organized place. The easiest way to envision it is to imagine the American Museum of Natural History, only instead of dioramas featuring saber-toothed tigers and woolly mammoths, the displays exhibit cursed souls being tortured, or—though it isn't widely publicized—having hot sex.

Widdershins walked past several dioramas as he sauntered through one of hell's many polished black marble corridors. He had stopped looking at whatever was being exhibited inside these dioramas since his breakup.

He didn't see, for example, the diorama that displayed a pack of private equity managers who had taken over nursing homes and then reduced them to skeleton staffs, enabling pandemic deaths to skyrocket. Through the window, these men—men far outnumber women in these private equity manager roles⁹—could be observed giggling and frolicking, naked. They were having their cocks sucked by porn stars who were covered in cum and sweat and also filth, because the porn stars and equity managers were delighting each other on piles of cash, and money, as we all know, is dirty, and you shouldn't put it in your mouth.

Just to the right of this diorama was an unassuming black door with a brass nameplate on it: Kyle Branch Interiors, Inc. Kyle was the quiet and modest force to be reckoned with behind one of hell's oldest interior design practices. He was also Widdershins's ex.

Widdershins and Kyle had kept their professional relationship intact despite their personal drama. "We can't let pleasure get in the way of business," Kyle had said. It should be noted that Kyle was the one who instigated the split.

The issue had been children. Kyle really wanted a child; Widdershins didn't. Widdershins maintained that nothing turned a fine, upstanding

demon into a total jackass faster than becoming a parent.

Kyle didn't totally disagree with him on that point. But he believed that the two of them were different. They could have a child together without becoming *parents*.

Widdershins defended his position: Children are messy, loud, annoying, exhausting, and expensive.

Kyle pleaded: But children are so cute, especially ones that would look exactly like them.

Kyle finally realized that if he wanted to have a kid, he would have to find another partner. Reluctantly but effectively, he crushed Widdershins's heart.

Kyle couldn't let go completely, however. When he heard about Cloud Six's opening, he sent Widdershins the two framed posters now in the welcome area as a congratulations gift.

Umfala's stinging critique of Cloud Six's decor thus had an upside for Widdershins: It gave him an excuse to visit his old flame in person—strictly for business, of course.

Widdershins entered the dimly lit space and found Kyle, in his usual hairy, horned demon form, wearing his uniform of a dark suit, white shirt, and black loafers. Kyle wasn't much for changing forms; he knew he wasn't hot per se, but he was fine with his demon self.

Widdershins stood there for a moment unnoticed, quietly admiring his former lover as he studied fabric samples at his Castiglioni worktable. Widdershins remembered the day that table had been delivered. They had baptized it in their usual fashion, by fucking on it.

"*Hey!*" Widdershins yelled.

Kyle smiled widely when he saw Widdershins. He came around the table to greet him, openly admiring his underwear-model physique.

Kyle's studio was bursting with furnishings by the Castiglioni brothers, Gaetano Pesce, Ettore Sottsass, and Andrea Branzi. These names, you may notice, are Italian. All the furniture in Kyle's studio was Italian. (You will not find any Scandinavian or American midcentury-modern furniture in hell. There is no Eames. There are no Noguchi coffee tables. There is also no IKEA furniture, as hellish as it may be to assemble. The denizens of hell love wine, opera, and Caravaggio. The way Disney loves princesses, that's how hell loves Italians.)

Kyle sat down and patted the chair beside him. Widdershins settled into it nervously.

It's not easy to hold a conversation in hell; it's very loud there. You have to yell to be heard over the interminable cries (ecstatic and not) of the damned. Plus, there is always music in the background, and it's not the watered-down pop you hear at the drugstore. It's a continually looping, twenty-second composition of health-insurance-company hold music punctuated by car alarms.

Kyle was about to pour some wine for his guest, when Widdershins held his hand over the glass and yelled, "*No thanks, I'm working!*"

Widdershins and Kyle laughed hard at that. There was always wine while working.

Kyle poured the red, sloshing some on the floor. He looked around for Gary, his cat-headed dog, hoping he would come over and lap it up. But at that moment Gary was in a darkened corner giving an erotic massage to a Venus flytrap.

"*I haven't seen you in church!*" Widdershins scolded.

Kyle dropped into Widdershins's church occasionally. It was good for business. "*I've been busy!*"

"*Community is important, Kyle!*" Widdershins admonished.

Kyle cleared his throat. "*So what's up?*"

"*I need your help to renovate the Cloud Six welcome area!*" Widdershins replied, lifting his glass.

"*But I gave you those two framed posters! What more do you want?*"

Widdershins was about to answer that when he heard the sound of bloodcurdling screams. The screams were coming from elementary-school children who were running from a gunman.

Ah, wait, no—that sound wasn't happening in hell at all. That was here, in the United States, where there have been 435 school shootings since 1999.¹⁰ By the time this manuscript is published, that number will probably be higher. Too bad we can't do anything about that.

Ah, well. Back to hell.

"*I need the place to say 'heaven,' but low-budget!*" Widdershins continued.

"*Black walls, red light bulbs! Done!*"

"*I said 'heaven,' not 'dive-bar bathroom'!*"

Kyle looked unconvinced. "*What happens on Cloud Six again?*"

“People wander around!” Widdershins replied.

“And then what?”

Widdershins looked at him, incredulous.

Kyle sighed. *“And you want me to zhuzh this place up, why?”*

“Isn’t that what decorators do? Make spaces beautiful in the face of annihilation?” Widdershins asked.

Kyle furrowed his brow. That was what decorators did. Decorating wasn’t a trivial activity. It took courage.

Widdershins gulped some wine. *“I need to give the new arrivals something that aligns with their already-formed aesthetic!”*

“What?”

“I need Cloud Six to look more like people expect a realm of heaven to look!”

Kyle made a face. *“That’s not being a decorator, Widdershins! That’s being a waiter!”*¹¹

“So how does being a decorator work?”

Kyle raised his glass. *“You have to follow your heart!”*

Widdershins frowned. *“Let’s make a time for you to come over and see the place.”*

Kyle raised an eyebrow. Was this a date? Kyle would like nothing more than to fuck Widdershins again, but then they’d still have the same old problem. Had Widdershins had a change of heart about kids?

Just then, Gary trotted over and began enthusiastically humping Widdershins’s leg.

Kyle smiled as he pulled Gary off Widdershins and carried the creature to the kitchen, where he had a bed for him tucked into a corner behind a string of Tibetan prayer flags. Prayer flags are surprisingly popular in hell. People there view them the same way people here view paintings of dogs playing poker: kitsch.

TWO

PENNY AND BILL WERE STILL AT THE DINING ROOM table. Penny was contemplating her mother's peace plant, which she had moved to the center of the table so she wouldn't forget to water it. Her mother had loved that plant; she had named it Gloria. Penny used a folded napkin to wipe the dust off Gloria's leaves.

Bill watched her. He was sure that Penny was perseverating about the disaster.

Bill was wrong, though. Penny was thinking about passion. All the adults at her high school had been badgering her about passion this year. They didn't use these words, exactly, but this was what they were saying: *Your goal in life is to follow your passion, but before you can follow your passion you have to find your passion, and if you haven't found your passion already, you better hurry the fuck up.*

It was a lot of pressure for an eleventh grader. You had to search for your passion like your passion was your car keys and you were late to your shift at the burger joint. You had to run around the house like a maniac looking for your passion in your coat pockets and under the couch cushions.

Penny had first heard the word *passion* as a kid, on TV in an advertisement for a show called *Crimes of Passion*. *Passion* was a different word then—a sexy word, a frightening word. Passion was something that could make you do wild and dangerous things.

Once she became a teenager, and she actually began to *want* to do wild and dangerous things, passion became something else entirely. Penny's passion was now a subject she was expected to discuss with her guidance counselor. It was something she was supposed to write about in her college essay. How had the adults of the world co-opted the word *passion* like this? Both the Latin and Greek roots of the word *passion* meant “suffering.” The

passion of Christ was Christ's *suffering*. Why had all those well-meaning adults who talked about the importance of finding your passion never discussed this shade of the word? Was *passion* really the right word to be using when talking about finding a rewarding career?

Penny had no idea what she wanted to do for a career anyway. She liked playing video games and chatting with her friends. But when the guidance counselor asked her what she was interested in—what her passion was—she couldn't say that, of course. She had to pretend she wanted to save the world or something like that.

"Why don't I take the money I was going to spend on tuition for this semester and use it for us to go someplace fun?" Bill asked her.

Penny took her earbud out; Bill repeated the question.

Penny's green eyes opened wide. "Yes! Let's go to Las Vegas!"

Bill was surprised she had thought of a destination so quickly. "Vegas! Why?"

"Because I've always wanted to go there and Mom always said, 'No, it's not a place for kids.'"

"I can hear her saying that," Bill said. "But Vegas is definitely a place for kids."

THREE

GLORIA THE PEACE PLANT HAD BEEN SITTING IN THEIR pot on the table. Gloria, who was praying, hadn't been listening to Penny and Bill. Gloria spent a lot of time praying. Mostly Gloria prayed that someone would remember to water them.

When potted plants are thirsty, they say so. Bunko had told this to Mam when she first brought Gloria home. According to Professor Lilach Hadany, an evolutionary biologist at Tel Aviv University, plants make ultrasonic pops in response to a lack of water or an injury to their stems. The pops occur in rapid bursts that differ depending on the type of stress the plant is experiencing.¹²

These sounds are supposedly inaudible to humans. But once she knew that they existed, Mam listened for them. As far as she could tell, however, Gloria was completely silent. If Gloria was making any pops or squeaks, Mam couldn't hear them.

Plants are well aware of this situation. They know that humans often decide whether or not they are thirsty by looking at them, which is a ridiculous method for perceiving such things, according to plants. It would be easier for everyone if humans could hear their plants making very loud pops and squeaks that are clearly requests for water. But humans either can't hear these or won't, plants think.

Plants don't dwell on this situation too much. They accept that humans are deaf, malformed, uncoordinated, stubborn, dim, imbecilic, and most of all, dumb. As far as plants are concerned, humans are to be pitied. The fact that humans can't regenerate their own organs is just more proof of how malformed they are. When part of a plant gets eaten, plants can almost always grow more of whatever has been chomped. But when a human gets eaten, especially in its juicy middle bits—oh well.

Here is a well-known joke among plants:

Q: When all the plants died, the humans cried for help. When all the humans died, what did the plants say?

A: Nom nom nom.¹³

Here is another one:

Q: What human action do plants love to watch most?

A: Face-plants!

You might think that Gloria, ensconced in a pot, praying to be watered, had a miserable life. But Gloria was happy. They spent most of their time dancing.

If you had to compare Gloria's dancing to a dance humans do, you might say it was similar to a hula. It had that low-to-the-ground energy of bent knees, swinging hips, and stomping feet. Gloria was a good dancer, they knew. It was sad that no human could see them busting their moves. They liked to do a dance they had learned in childhood from their plant mother-father, before they were separated from each other at the nursery. The nursery owners called it "propagating," but that's not how Gloria viewed it. They saw it as being kidnapped from their mother-father so that they could be sold. It was an atrocity similar to separating puppies from their real mothers so they could be sold to "dog moms."

Gloria imperceptibly bent down and straightened, bent down and straightened, and then swung their leaves rhythmically. When Gloria danced, they didn't feel so much like they were stuck in a pot, bone dry, needing water. They felt like they were floating—a shiny, rainbow-hued bubble. Free.

FOUR

MAM SUDDENLY REMEMBERED THAT LEROY WAS STILL IN her survival kit. She stopped walking, unzipped the kit, and dug her fingers down into it. She felt something hard.

“Oh, no!” she cried, holding up a rabbit skeleton. “Leroy!”

The skeleton hopped out of her grasp.

“Leroy—you’re not dead?”

“Death, death, death! That’s all you ever think about!” Leroy said, bounding across the white-handkerchief terrain.

“But you’re only bones now!” Mam said. “How are you hopping around?”

“I don’t know, but I love it!” Leroy exclaimed. “I feel so light, like I could fly!”

Mam and Bunko watched Leroy bounce around. Mam didn’t want to say this to Leroy, but he looked pitiful without his ears. She hadn’t realized that rabbit ears have no bones.¹⁴

Leroy stopped in his tracks for a second. “The only problem is, I can’t see very well,” he said. “You two look like black blobs. I can smell you, though.”

His form was so graceful, even without flesh, Mam thought. She watched the white handkerchiefs wave dreamily around Leroy’s body, like a million tiny duchesses vying for his attention at a ball.

As Mam slowly made her way forward, she could almost believe that she and Bunko were strolling with their pet puppy on the golf course in Connecticut in February.

Then she heard it: the unmistakable sound of gunshots.

Your author wants to communicate the sound of a gunshot in words, which is something she has never done before in any of her writing.

Let's look on the internet, a place where many friendly and generous people congregate to offer accurate, free advice:

If you are looking for one word that exactly described the sound that a gun makes, I am sorry to say that there is not one.

—RANDAL BROWN¹⁵

•

If you're going for something with some style, I'd avoid using the word, bang. Try instead, "he heard the crack of a gun firing nearby."

—ISAAC JONES, BA in Political Science & Economics, West Virginia University (Graduated 2017)¹⁶

•

I will actually combine syllables and sounds to attain the affect [*sic*]. One I use for impacts is, *whracck*.

—CODY AARON, amateur gunsmith¹⁷

•

Silencers aren't silent, so "Pffft" is a fart, not a suppressed weapon.

—GLENN BEVENSEE, former police officer at Egg Harbor Township, NJ (1988–2003)¹⁸

•

The ting goes skrrrahh, pap, pap, ka-ka-ka
Skidiki-pap-pap, and a pu-pu-pudrrrr-boom
Skya, du-du-ku-ku-dun-dun
Poom, poom

—BRANIAN BONNEZ, studied at Kenyatta University¹⁹

♦

When I decided that I couldn't keep a gun, I came face-to-face with the question of death and I dealt with it. From that point on, I no longer needed a gun nor have I been afraid.

—MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.²⁰

Your author is willing to bet that you already know what a gun firing sounds like. If you haven't heard the sound of a gun firing in real life, you have either seen a movie with a gun firing in it or listened to a song that incorporated a recording of a gun firing in it or read a news article in which a bystander is quoted as saying they mistook the sound of a gun firing for firecrackers. Always firecrackers.

Even if you weren't aware of what the sound was when you heard it, my bet is that you have heard it. There are 120.5 guns for every 100 people in the United States.²¹ Of all the countries in the world, the United States has the highest rate of guns per person and is the only country in the world with more guns than people.²² It's probably not possible to live in the United States in this day and age and not eventually hear the sound of a gun firing.

What are all these people doing with all these guns? you might wonder.

Oh, I don't know. But here is a fact: There have been more gun suicides than gun homicides in the United States every year for the past twenty-five years.²³

Guns are everywhere. They are tucked into leather holsters, thrown loose into glove boxes, and strapped deliberately onto calves. They are worn close to the body and patted gently all day, like newborn babies. They are cleaned with special soft cloths. They are oiled like partners before lovemaking. They are taken to experienced craftsmen to be bejeweled and engraved. They are laid in satin-lined boxes, like the dead.

They are thrown around the kitchen. They are kept within arm's reach on the bedside table. They are stuffed hurriedly into suitcases and then overlooked by overwhelmed TSA screeners. They are stored in bulletproof gun safes locked with the code 000.²⁴

They are unseen. Concealed. Hidden in purses, under pants legs, and in waistbands.

They are highly visible. They appear in all the shows, all the movies.²⁵

Guns are a primary means by which human beings express their confusion.

Human beings can contain a mind-boggling amount of confusion. If we could measure the amount of confusion a single human can contain, it would be bigger than the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill, the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, and the Ixtoc 1 oil spill all put together.

Oh, plus the Taylor Energy oil spill, because that one's still flowing.²⁶

I read this article recently in *The New York Times*. A man carrying a rifle accosted a husband and wife as they were getting into their car in Columbus, Ohio. A third person, a neighbor, came outside with his 3D-printed gun and shot the husband five times, killing him, without knowing anything about what was going on.

The reporter who wrote the article described a conversation captured by a surveillance video during the incident.

"What are you shooting for?" a relative of the murdered man asked.

"I don't know," the neighbor answered.²⁷

Confusion. It is a problem.

Below is a helpful list of some things that human beings find confusing:

- What is a gun and what is a bag of candy?
- What is a gun and what is a toy gun?
- What is a gun and what is a phone?
- What is reaching for your gun and what is answering your phone?²⁸
- Hello, who is it?
- Who gets to decide when your life ends?
- Weren't we *not* supposed to take that matter into our own hands?
- Weren't we *not* supposed to have our hands in that matter like it's a bag of candy?
- Wasn't our one job here to live?
- Wasn't that pretty much our only job?
- Do we really want to quit our one job?
- What are we going to do instead?
- Are we going to spend all day playing video games?

—Are we going to level up in *Call of Duty*?

—Didn't we already have a duty and wasn't it to live until we were called?

—Why do we so love a death row?

—Why do we so love a death row and yet screw up so many executions?

—Can't we just quit doing lethal injections, which have resulted in seventy-five botched executions?²⁹

—Can't we just quit using electric chairs, which have resulted in eighty-four botched executions?³⁰

—Can't we not do any more executions, which we keep botching anyway?³¹

—Can't we unplug all the electric chairs and let the kids climb around on them?

—Can't we let Santa sit on the big unplugged electric chair as he grants all the kids' Christmas wishes?

—There are so many things that kids ask for these days.

—There are so many things that kids didn't ask for these days that we give them.

—All the things we give them that they didn't ask for—it's like reverse Christmas.

—We are the worst Santas.

—We are the best Satans, giving all the good children the worst-ever gifts.

—We send them screaming through the hallways with our terrible gifts.

—We can't stop giving; we are so generous.

—Maybe we should give up giving gifts for a while.

—Maybe we should fly to Switzerland and give up.

—Maybe we should lie down and sleep.

—Maybe if we went to sleep we would be more awake to our confusion.

—Our confusion is why we need guides.

—Where are our guides?

—Are our guns our guides?

—Guns have sights, anyway.

—Guns are pointing, at least.

—Guns are never confused; I know that much.

—Guns always express themselves clearly, in a manner that is simple and easy to understand.

—A gun would make an excellent author.

—If a gun wrote a book, I would read it immediately.

—That book would be a bestseller. It would be bigger than the Bible, I bet.

—When a gun fires in this text, I will write it like this: [freedom from confusion].

GREETINGS. SATAN HERE.

Pardon this interruption, but I wanted to let you know that Amy has been barred from writing any further about hell.

Let's put it this way: If merely contemplating the *sound* of a gun firing causes you to lose your goddamn mind, you are not the right person to be writing a story that is set, however briefly, in my territory.

Maybe this book will become a romance novel? Whatever, that's Amy's problem.

FIVE

“HOLY SHIT,” MAM SAID AFTER HEARING THE GUNSHOTS. She looked around and saw nothing, no movement anywhere—just the handkerchiefs waving flirtatiously.

Those handkerchiefs! Mam thought. They're such teases!

[freedom from confusion]

Mam and Bunko began to run. Bunko was normally a fast runner. His long legs really carried him. But here he was not so fast. The handkerchiefs tripped him up.

Mam had the same problem. She started running and then fell down.

Leroy ran very fast, even as a skeleton. He had no problem bounding over the landscape.

Mam got up and continued running. The gunshots seemed to be coming from behind her.

[freedom from confusion]

“Zigzag!” Mam yelled from behind Bunko. She was trying to get him to run in a weaving pattern, to better escape the bullets.

“That strategy has been debunked!” yelled Bunko, whose research had told him that if you are being shot at from behind, you should simply run in a straight line; it will help you escape faster.³²

[freedom from confusion]

Mam and Bunko ran as best they could. Leroy ran, too, though Mam and Bunko had lost track of him. His bony body was impossible to discern in the white landscape.

“Wait!” Mam cried. “Why are we running? We’re already dead!”

“Do you want to stop?” shouted Bunko.

[freedom from confusion]

They kept going.

HI, I'M BYRON, AMY FUSSELMAN'S INTERN. AS YOU KNOW, she got banned from writing any more about hell. She is busy having a breakdown now. She called me sobbing about how this book will "never get done." I told her that that was probably a good thing because there are too many books in the world already. She stopped crying then and yelled at me.

She asked me if I could step in and do this author job for her—for no pay, of course—and I took it because I need to put things on my résumé.

I hope this author job isn't too taxing, though. I don't want to do anything difficult. That's why interning for Fusselman has been great so far—she doesn't give me anything to do, probably because she doesn't do much herself. (Don't tell her I said that.) I have been spending my time as her intern "working from home," which means researching how to get a California real estate license, because my goal is to get out of Gowanus, in Brooklyn, where I currently live, and move to Santa Monica, where I can sell beach bungalows to the rich and famous and maybe get on TV because I am just being honest here—I am a very good-looking guy.

So to pick up where Fusselman left off—I am looking at a few scribbled notes she left me—here are a few basic things to keep in mind about the setup in hell:

1. Even though people generally think of hell as a lower realm than heaven, the fact of the matter is, heaven and hell are not vertically oriented. They are positioned side by side, like two row houses. They share what's known as a party wall and also a huge, beautiful backyard.
2. This backyard is basically the afterlife's break room. It's where demons and angels come to hang out, smoke, drink, eat snacks, and gossip. It's nice. It has a pond with paddle boats, two cafés, an ice rink, an amphitheater, and an enormous green lawn bordered by trees where you can picnic. Unlike Cloud Six, which has a depthless, flat white sky, the backyard's sky is blue. There are birds who fly around in it. There is also a little garden of flowers and vegetables that the angels try to cultivate, while the demons and goblins use it as an ashtray.

3. A stray cat lives in the backyard, and everyone dotes on her. She's white with gray patches around her eyes and her name is Hello Kitty.

SIX

KYLE ARRIVED FOR HIS MEETING WITH WIDDERSHINS TO discover that Widdershins had changed forms. He was no longer an underwear model. He was now a majestic white mountain goat.

Kyle felt a little bad that he hadn't changed forms himself. Why hadn't he shown a little effort? At least he was wearing a suit, he thought. But he was always wearing a suit.

Widdershins had decided that staying in his bodybuilder form would only invite disaster. Being a mountain goat would make it slightly more difficult for him to act impulsively on his carnal desires. As much as he would have loved to have sex with Kyle, Widdershins remembered what had happened when they broke up. He sat alone in his demon apartment for four months, playing video games and gaining forty-five pounds. He had not been in public in his regular demon form since then.

It was honestly tiresome, having to adopt an alternate form all the time. He wanted to be out and about as the big, sweaty, hairy demon he was, with his extra poundage and the acne condition he was self-conscious about. But he was afraid. Demons could be vicious. That was another reason he admired Kyle so much. Kyle honestly did not give a shit what other demons did.

Kyle led Widdershins into the Cloud Six welcome area and was surprised to find that it was dark. That single overhead light bulb had finally gone out. Kyle turned on his phone flashlight. Widdershins showed him where he had hung his two posters. Then Widdershins led Kyle past the welcome desk, which Umfala, in a snit, had abandoned. The desk now featured what Widdershins was calling a self-check-in kiosk. Kyle's flashlight revealed it: a clipboard with a pen attached.

Two cardboard signs sat beside the clipboard. Widdershins had written them himself, taking pains to make his printing legible.

The first sign read:

YOU ARE DEAD.

The second sign read:

WELCOME TO CLOUD SIX.

PRINT YOUR NAME ON THE SHEET.

TAKE A SURVIVAL KIT FROM THE BOX (ONE PER PERSON,
PLEASE).

PROCEED THROUGH THE REAR DOOR.

Kyle and Widdershins entered the realm proper. Kyle was immediately struck by the enormity of it. There was only one person in view: a forlorn man reclining on a white couch, seemingly waiting for Freud to come and listen to him free-associate.

“So this is it,” Widdershins said. He looked at Kyle out of the corner of his eye. He was hoping Kyle would be blown away.

Kyle surveyed the vast white space. “Does Cloud Six just . . . go on like this? There’s no, like, central focal point?”

“Yeah, there’s no point,” Widdershins said, trying to sound cool.

Kyle kicked at the waving handkerchiefs with his black loafer. “What’s the deal with the floor?”

“You like it? My HVAC guy helped me set it up. I was trying to make the place look like a cloud.”

“A cloud . . .” Kyle mused. “Funny, it reminds me more of water.”

Widdershins was crushed. “It’s supposed to look like a cloud.”

“Well, it *is* a little tricky to walk on,” Kyle said as he made his way over to the nearest GLOSTAD.

Widdershins, being a mountain goat, had no problem with his footing. Kyle sat down on one end of the GLOSTAD. Widdershins stood beside the couch; he was afraid it might buckle under his weight.

Kyle thought glumly that he was never going to fuck Widdershins at this rate.

Widdershins was suddenly seized with the desire to eat some handkerchiefs. He took a bite and chewed.

There was an awkward silence.

“So you wanted to talk about decorating?” Kyle asked.

“Yepf,” Widdershins said, working the polyester off his tongue.

“The welcome area could use some freshening, for sure,” Kyle began.

“You could replace that crappy light with a pendant lamp.”

“Mmm-hmmm,” Widdershins said.

Why is Widdershins so checked out of the conversation when he is the one who asked for it? Kyle wondered. He put his hand on Widdershins’s hairy back.

Widdershins stepped away quickly from Kyle’s touch. He sat on his butt and hung his shaggy head.

“Widdershins, why did you ask me here?” Kyle asked, frustrated.

Widdershins was silent.

Maybe becoming a mountain goat has made his ADHD worse? Kyle wondered.

“Widdershins, are you even listening to me?” Kyle asked him. “What do you want?”

Widdershins’s head was spinning. Was he having a stroke? He wanted to fuck Kyle right then and there, but he also didn’t want to do that. He searched for something to say that wasn’t about fucking.

“I want the humans who come to Cloud Six to love it. But I don’t really know much about humans . . .”

“Yes you do,” said Kyle encouragingly. “You know they like shiny objects, things that go boom, and actions that they think are meaningful.”

“Meaningful . . .” Widdershins said the word as if he were hearing it for the first time.

“Yeah, they like to think they are engaged in purposeful activity,” Kyle said. “And this is just my opinion, but . . . Cloud Six doesn’t really offer them much that way. What do they do here besides wander around? Humans need to believe they’re doing something that has, like, a point.”

Widdershins was hypnotized by Kyle’s beautiful mouth. “Why do they need that?”

“Just imagine you had to live like they do, unable to control your constantly changing, ultimately disintegrating form. And for what?”

Ugh, it’s so sexy how Kyle is so much smarter than I am, Widdershins thought.

“I’ve missed you so much, Kyle!” he blurted. Then he leaned over the edge of the GLOSTAD and kissed Kyle with his mountain goat lips.

SEVEN

MAM FELL AGAIN. THEN SHE GOT UP AND CONTINUED running. She was quite a bit behind Bunko now. You couldn't even call what she was doing running, really. Her movements weren't fluid enough for that. It was more like an aggravated hopping, like she was a rabbit trying to cross a broiling-hot parking lot.

[freedom from confusion]

As she scrambled along, she saw a spot of color in the distance. Green.

Green! She hadn't seen a color in so long!

Mam kept going. The green grew larger.

What can that green thing be? she wondered. *A pile of money?*

[freedom from confusion]

Then she recognized what it was: a tree. She had forgotten about trees. She could never forget about money, though.

Bunko had seen the tree, too. He was heading toward it, faster than Mam.

Mam followed him. She thought the tree might be something they could hide behind or maybe inside. Maybe the tree was hollow, and elves were in there, baking cookies, yeah.

[freedom from confusion]

Bunko arrived at the tree and climbed it. Mam clambered up after him. The tree was huge. Its limbs were so bent over, they brushed against the ground.

"Where is the gunfire coming from, can you tell?" Mam asked Bunko, breathing hard. She was sitting in a branch slightly below where Bunko was perched, deep within the tree.

"No. And I don't see any shooters, either," he said.

"Where's Leroy?"

“I lost him when we were running,” Bunko said.

Mam looked out on the milky vista from her spot on the branch. She imagined that the terrain was the back of a giant white rabbit. Maybe whoever had thought up the cosmic turtle had gotten the animal wrong. Maybe the creature holding up the world wasn’t a plodding animal with a strong back. Maybe it was a soft, fast, unpredictable animal that disappeared and then reappeared when you least expected it.

Bunko ran his hands along the tree’s long, drooping branches. *What a magnificent weeping birch*, he said to himself.

Mam and Bunko sat there in the branches. Suddenly, the tree began to cry.

“What’s wrong with our tree?” Mam asked Bunko.³³

“This is what I do,” the tree said a bit bashfully. “I cry.”

“Why are you crying?” Mam asked. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” said the tree, whose name was Ernestine. “Nothing lately, that is. A man tried to hang himself on me with his survival kit a while ago. And a while before that, an angry mob tried to hang another guy on me. But besides that, nothing.”

“Oh, wow,” Mam said. “I’m sorry all that happened to you.”

“You aren’t going to do any of that, are you?” asked Ernestine, still making weeping sounds.

“No,” Mam said.

“Good,” Ernestine said, and sniffed.

“We were running away from gunfire,” Mam explained. “And then we saw you.”

“There are killers on the loose here,” Ernestine said matter-of-factly.

“Yes, it’s scary,” Mam said. “Why do they shoot?”

“I don’t know.”

“What did you do when you realized that the guy was trying to hang himself on you?” Bunko asked, joining the conversation. “Did you try to talk him out of it?”

“I did, but he wasn’t amenable to the discussion,” Ernestine said sadly.

“So what did you do?” Bunko asked.

“Well, trees can’t really do that much. I basically stood there and made a knot.”

“A knot?” Mam asked.

“It’s something we trees do when we’re stressed out. It doesn’t really do anything useful, but it keeps us occupied.”³⁴

“Oh, yeah,” Mam said, rubbing her jaw, which was sore from her clenching it.

“It had been a while since I was so close to someone who was trying to unalive themselves,” Ernestine said. “It was very distressing to feel so helpless.”

“Oh, I forgot about that word, *unalive*,” Bunko said. “Maybe that’s the word we should use to describe our situation here, Mam. We’re not dead—we’re unalive.”

Mam didn’t reply. She was lying flat across the branch like a lemur, still on high alert for [freedom from confusion].

“I wasn’t sure what the guy was doing at first,” Ernestine continued, “but then when I figured it out, I thought, *Well, maybe it doesn’t matter, because everyone here is already dead anyway.*”

“Yeah,” Bunko said. “But it’s tricky, because apparently we still have to live.”

“Yes, that’s what I came to eventually,” said Ernestine, shimmying her lower branches as if rearranging a hoopskirt.

“And this place is as good a place to live as any, I suppose,” Bunko added, looking out toward the creamy terrain.

“We trees learn early that we have to take our circumstances as we find them,” Ernestine said.

“Oooh,” Mam said admiringly. “I’m not sure that Bunko and I have learned that yet.”

“No, I don’t think we have,” Bunko agreed.

“Learning is difficult,” Mam said. “It’s like opening a hole in yourself. And you are the only one who gets to decide if there is a hole there or not.”

It should be noted that this was a pretty pessimistic take for a learning specialist, a type of educator who is often very well paid to be certain that there is no learning issue that can’t be overcome with a timer, a highlighter, and some brightly colored Post-its.

“Yes, but sometimes your learning hole gets forced open,” Bunko said. “By suffering.”

Mam looked at Bunko in disbelief. She was astonished to hear him saying this, given that his own learning hole, at least regarding the issue of

alcohol in general and Monkey Shoulder in particular, seemed pretty much hermetically sealed.

“Bunko, maybe we could take a second right now and learn what our friend here has already learned: that we have to take our circumstances as we find them,” Mam said as she sat up on the branch.

“Yes, let’s do that,” Bunko said.

Mam and Bunko sat without speaking for some time. Perhaps, having identified an important concept they wanted to learn, they were learning it.

Ah, no. They weren’t.

Ernestine stood politely, waiting for something to happen.

“Are you guys okay?” Ernestine asked finally.

“Yes, we’re fine,” Mam said, adjusting her legs and lying down on the branch again. “So what happened to the guy who tried to hang himself from you?”

“I talked to him,” Ernestine said.

“What did you say?” Bunko asked.

“Well, luckily, I once read an article about this very situation, so I was somewhat prepared,” Ernestine said.

“You can never do too much research in this life,” Bunko said, nodding solemnly.

Ernestine shimmied her lower branches again. “So true! And this article said that one of the best things you can say to a person who wants to unalive themselves is how much you would miss them. But I didn’t feel right saying that, since I had only met the guy right that second. So I said the second thing the article recommended, which was ‘I am here.’”³⁵

“‘I am here’?” Bunko scoffed. “That’s supposed to *help*?”

“Yes, you say it in such a way that it means, ‘I am here *for you*,’ you know?” said Ernestine, a little taken aback by the vehemence of Bunko’s response.

“Well, ‘I am here’ is not the same thing as ‘I am here *for you*,’” said Bunko. “Those two statements are not the same *at all*.”

Ernestine shook her branches, agitated. “Okay, well, the next time someone tries to unalive themselves on me, I will clarify that I am here *for them*,” she said. “But isn’t it already completely clear that I am here for them, being as I am the very thing they are using to complete their dreadful task? I don’t even *want* to be here for them like that, but what can I do?”

Mam and Bunko sat there and contemplated that level of powerlessness. It wasn't very difficult, given that they were also, at that very moment, in a rather helpless situation.

"I've thought about unaliving myself, too," Bunko confessed.

"It seems like human beings think about it quite a bit," Ernestine said.

"Yes," said Mam, looking at Bunko with concern.

"It would be good if people could normalize talking about the desire to kill themselves, rather than criminalizing it or making it a joke," Ernestine said.

The three of them were quiet for a minute while the handkerchiefs said *sshhhh*.

"Why is human life so bad?" Ernestine asked.

"It's not *so* bad," Mam insisted. "There is sex, music, and ice cream."

"It can get bad," Bunko said.

"We've been married for years now, Bunko," Mam said. "Why have you never talked to me about these thoughts?"

"Why would I? First, you would be upset. Second, doesn't everyone think about it at least once? And third, if I was thinking about it seriously, you would only get in my way."

"You would just *be there* for him," Ernestine said to Mam.

"Yes, which is what I would not want in that moment," Bunko added.

"Or maybe you would want it, deep down," Mam countered.

"It's hard to know," Bunko admitted.

"The philosopher Simon Critchley wrote that if life is truly a gift, we should be able to give it back," Ernestine said.³⁶

"Is that helpful right now?" Mam asked, annoyed.

Ernestine rustled her hoopskirt. She felt shamed by Mam. But she liked to quote philosophers, especially in front of humans, who always thought that plants and trees were so dumb.

"I love you so much, Bunko," said Mam. "Please don't unalive yourself, and if you are ever thinking about it, please tell me."

Mam wished she and Bunko could hold hands right then, but he was sitting too far away in the tree for her to reach.

Bunko wished that he and Mam could touch genitals right then, but neither of them had genitals.

Mam and Bunko sat there. The tree stood there, being unable to sit. She could only stand or fall.

“Why is it so hard for humans to talk about suicide?” Ernestine asked.

“Scary,” Bunko said. “And taboo.”

“I remember the guidance counselor at school didn’t like the word *suicide*,” Mam said. “She preferred hashtag mentalhealth, hashtag EndTheStigma.”

“You might be surprised to learn that women are three times more likely than men to try to kill themselves,” Ernestine said to Mam.³⁷

“Really?” Mam asked.

“Yes, women try it more often, but they are also more likely to survive because they tend not to use firearms,” the tree said.³⁸

“Wow, women are so delicate,” Mam spat. “Such fragile flowers.”

EIGHT

PENNY AND BILL DUG THROUGH THEIR CLOTHES UNTIL they found some appropriate black garments for Mam and Bunko's memorial service. For Bill, this was a black polo shirt that he wore with black pants. For Penny, this was a black cotton dress her mother had bought her for one of her choir recitals.

Brenda's house was crowded with friends of Mam's, which also meant friends of Brenda's. Brenda didn't invite any of Penny's or Bill's friends to the service. They were children, after all, Brenda thought. Brenda also didn't invite any of Bunko's friends because she assumed he didn't have any. She was surprised when Bunko's AA sponsor showed up as well as a grateful client from his pet psychic practice accompanied by her neurotic Morkie in a designer tote.

Penny's friend Lydia also came, because Penny had asked her to. She drove to Brenda's herself because she had just gotten her license.

Everyone at the service wanted to talk to Penny and Bill. "I'm sorry" was the line Penny heard most often. She found herself responding "It's okay," even though that wasn't what she meant.

Of course it's not okay, she thought. All the words at this event were wrong. The whole affair would have been better if people had just said to her "Sucks that your parents died," and she had said "Yes," or nodded, or made no reply at all, because why should she say anything? Words were so dumb.

Brenda got up to speak. She said more wrong words.

Finally Brenda stopped speaking because she started to cry.

Penny took this as her cue to stand up from the couch and sing "Is My Living in Vain?" because Brenda had asked her to sing something uplifting.

Bill almost cried, listening to Penny sing. But he didn't want to cry with all these people around, so he forced himself to think about how Munchlax evolves into Snorlax.³⁹

After Penny sang, she wanted to leave. Lydia said she'd drive her home.

Bill watched them go. It felt funny to be calling Mam and Bunko's house his "home." It wasn't really his home. But college wasn't his home, either. He didn't really have a home right now. He had a sort of home and a sort of child, and he was sort of an adult.

NINE

MAM AND BUNKO WERE STILL SITTING IN A TREE, NOT kissing.

“Come on, Mam. I haven’t heard [freedom from confusion] in a while. Let’s climb down and keep going,” said Bunko.

Mam was comfortable lying on her branch in Ernestine, whose name was at least one thing she had learned.

This was the first time since Mam had arrived at Cloud Six that she had had something over her head. She was surprised at how comforting it was to feel a bit of protection there.

“I don’t want to go any farther,” Mam replied.

“Mam, I thought you were focused on getting to the bodega. Don’t you want to find someone there to help us see Penny?”

“Even if I do get to see her, what will that do for her? Nothing.”

“It will do something for you, though. To know she is all right.”

“Ernestine,” Mam said, “you can’t help us see our daughter, Penny, and my brother, Bill, can you? They’re still living.”

“No,” Ernestine said sadly. “I can’t help you with that. The only person I’ve helped so far is the guy who wanted to unalive himself on me.”

“That’s not true,” Mam said. “You helped us. You hid us from the killers.”

“I guess I did, didn’t I?” Ernestine said, sounding obviously pleased. Mam and Bunko held on as her branches trembled happily.

“Penny is your only child, yes?” Ernestine asked Mam.

“That’s right,” Mam said.

“Can you tell me what that’s like, to have a child?”

Mam was taken aback. No one had ever asked her that question before. She tried to think of some words to explain it. Having a child was like—what?

The first word that came to her mind was that having a child was like . . . *dying*. But then she thought, *That can't be right*. Why did she even think of that word? She certainly didn't want to say it out loud.

"It's hard to explain," Mam said.

"Oh," Ernestine said, sounding disappointed.

Bunko didn't say anything. But he was listening.

Mam decided that maybe saying a few words, even if they were the wrong ones, was better than saying no words at all.

"Having a child changes your relationship to living," Mam said.

"Like being sick?" Ernestine asked.

"Kind of. Like you are in bed with a fever of a hundred and five, and you take a lick of Popsicle, and you are grateful for it."

"That sounds like suffering," said Ernestine. "Is having a child like suffering?"

Mam twisted her mouth to one side. "Yes?"

"If that's true, then why do people seem to like having children so much?" Ernestine asked. "They talk about it like it's the greatest thing ever."

Mam thought about it. "I think it's because when you have a child, your suffering seems like it makes more sense."

Ernestine thought about that. "Does having a child make your life more important? Because parents act like they're so important. It's very irritating."

"Well, parenting gives you a big job to do," Mam said.

"Humans are so into their jobs. Human parents must be very good at their big parenting jobs."

"Some aren't very good at it," Mam admitted.

"But humans have been parenting for eons! Haven't they learned anything as they've gone along?"

Mam thought about it. "No?"

"Okay, well, here is another thing I don't understand," said Ernestine, on a roll now. "You mentioned this intense desire to help your child. Does this helping desire exist only between parents and children? Don't people want to help other people whether they are in a parent-child relationship or not?"

"I know, it sounds odd," Mam said, "but sometimes people don't want to help other people."

Ernestine stood very still. Not a single leaf on her trembled.

“People must be very confused,” Ernestine said.

“That’s a fact,” Bunko said.

Suddenly, Mam heard a strange metallic rumbling. “What was that?”

Bunko looked around. Then he pointed at something.

Mam turned to see what he was pointing at. It was woman, lying in a hospital bed. The bed had been rolling toward them, but now it had stopped. Bunko climbed down the tree and walked over to the woman’s bedside.

Mam followed him. As she got closer, Mam was shocked to see that the woman in the bed was Brenda. That is, it was Umfala, still in her Brenda form.

“Brenda!” Mam exclaimed, coming up to her bedside. “What happened?”

Umfala thought about turning back into her Umfala form, just to make the situation less confusing for these two dolts, but then she didn’t, because: demon.

“I’m waiting to undergo treatment at the hospital,” Umfala/Brenda said to Mam. “But there isn’t enough room for me there, so they sent me here because now they’re using Cloud Six as a spillover area.”

All this time spent suffering in Cloud Six had softened Mam’s heart toward her old friend. “I’m so sorry to hear this, Brenda. What do you need treatment for?”

“Demon rot,” Umfala/Brenda said tiredly.

“What?”

“Oh, I mean, cancer. Cancer!”

“That’s terrible,” said Mam. “Are you in pain?”

“Not really. But this type of cancer is tricky.”

“How so?” asked Bunko. He had spent many hours researching terrible illnesses, and he knew many intriguing facts about them.

“This cancer gives you extra powers,” Umfala said. She picked a microscopic imp off her sheet, squished it between her fingertips, and tossed it away.

“That sounds interesting,” Bunko said.

“Yes, it’s nice to have the powers, but they can kill you if you use them,” Umfala/Brenda said unhappily.

“I’ve never heard of that kind of cancer,” Bunko said, skeptically.

“Maybe she’s feverish,” Mam said, putting her hand on Brenda’s forehead.

“I just need to hang out here until my number gets called,” Umfala/Brenda said. She held up her red plastic pager to show them. “When this buzzes, it’s my turn, and then my bed will drive me back to the hospital.”

Bunko eyed the pager suspiciously. “Is that from the Olive Garden?” he asked.

Umfala/Brenda studied it. It was indeed from the Olive Garden.

“Brenda, I know you’re really busy being sick and all,” said Mam, “but I have to ask—do you know anything about how we can see or hear Penny from here?”

Umfala/Brenda considered it. *Oh, what the hell*, she thought.

She took a deep breath and waved her arm in the air. A square, white-framed window with lace curtains appeared. It was the window in the powder room in Stephen King’s vacation home in Sarasota, Florida.⁴⁰

“Look through that,” Umfala said, gasping. She turned her head away and breathed heavily after her effort.

Mam and Bunko tentatively pressed their faces up to the glass.

“Oh my god,” Mam said.

Through the window, Mam and Bunko saw Penny and Bill in Bill’s little car. Bill was driving and Penny was riding shotgun with her bare feet up on the dashboard. Gloria was sitting on the floor of the car below Penny’s feet. The windows were open. Bill and Penny were singing.

Gloria the houseplant was dancing, but no one saw it.

Mam clasped her hand to her chest. She drank in the sight of her daughter. How beautiful she was! Mam shook with the desire to hug her, to hold her, to smell her hair.

That moment passed.

“Wait, where are they going? Why isn’t Penny in school?” Mam demanded.

“Maybe we could learn something right now, Mam,” Bunko said, trying to calm his wife. “Maybe we could learn that thing that Ernestine learned, about accepting our circumstances as we find them.”

“There’s no way I am learning that right now, Bunko!”

Umfala’s pager buzzed. “My number’s up!” she said, holding the blinking device.

She took a deep breath and waved her hand; the window disappeared. Exhausted, she leaned down and pushed a button on her hospital bed. The engine started.

“Bye, kids,” Umfala said.

Mam and Bunko watched her roll away at top speed, the hospital bedsheets flying.

Umfala was soon zooming through the black marble hallways of hell. She watched the dioramas flash by.

Wow, that's a lot of naked, fornicating people, she thought tiredly.

TEN

MAM AGREED WITH BUNKO THAT THEY HAD BETTER start on their way again. But it was hard to say goodbye to Ernestine.

“It was so nice to meet you, Ernestine,” Mam said, hugging her. “Thanks for everything.”

“It was nice to meet you, too,” Ernestine said. “You cheered me up.”

Mam thought she could hear Ernestine weeping as they walked away. She was sad to hear the sound of her suffering. But not sad enough to stop walking and turn around.

Bunko reached out to hold Mam’s hand. They walked hand in hand for a while. The handkerchiefs were easier to navigate now.

Mam was grateful to be walking again, even though she was still nervous about being shot at.

“I wonder why it feels so satisfying to keep moving all the time,” Mam mused as she and Bunko went onward. “Is it our idiotic minds, wired for novelty?”

“It doesn’t matter why,” Bunko said. “It passes the time.”

Mam’s head felt heavy and big, like a cow’s. She imagined a brass bell swinging around her neck as she walked.

“What is living, do you think?” Mam asked Bunko, her imaginary bell jangling.

Bunko had been walking with his hands on top of his head, like a person who was being frisked by the police.

“Living is your heart beating, and the air going in and out of your lungs, and eating, and shitting, and putting your member in and out of holes and screaming in ecstasy,” Bunko said. He was very sure of himself on this point. “What do you think living is?”

Mam was still a cow. She could feel her udder swaying. “I don’t know what living is, and that’s what living is,” she said.

“Good one,” said Bunko.

“Am I even living now?” Mam asked. “I don’t know.”

Suddenly they heard [freedom from confusion].

“Shit,” Mam said. She was not a cow anymore, unless you meant a cow at the slaughterhouse at the very beginning of the process of becoming a cheeseburger, and not many people, let alone cows, like to think about that.⁴¹

Mam and Bunko began to run. Running on the handkerchiefs was not as easy as walking.

Mam ran a couple of steps, then slipped and fell.

She got up.

Bunko ran a couple of steps, then also slipped and fell.

He got up.

Bunko and Mam ran for a little while without slipping and falling.

Suddenly Bunko pointed toward something in the distance. “Light!” he yelled to Mam.

Mam couldn’t see any light. Actually, all she could see was light. All she could see from the second she had arrived in this godforsaken lowest realm of heaven was the all-encompassing, overly bright fluorescent light that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once and that they had been subjected to every second. She would have killed to be a vampire right then, she thought, lying peacefully in a closed coffin.

Mam kept her gaze in the direction Bunko had pointed and ran as best she could toward it.

[freedom from confusion]

Mam slipped, then fell, then got up again.

She saw something in the distance: a yellowish blob.

[freedom from confusion]

She ran. The blob grew brighter.

[freedom from confusion]

She ran. The blob seemed to be forming letters? Three letters? *B-A-R*?

[freedom from confusion] [freedom from confusion]

Not *B-A-R*.

L-A-B?

Mam turned around to look for where the [freedom from confusion] was coming from. But she saw nothing new—merely the same rippling white vista dotted with a few couches and then, in the distance, a couple of hospital beds with people maybe lying in them or maybe the blankets were rumpled, Mam couldn't tell.

She continued running.

[freedom from confusion]

Mam wondered if she was losing her mind. But she had been wondering that since childhood, and her mind was apparently still with her.

She saw the lit-up sign clearly now—it spelled *LAB*. It was flashing over a squat white windowless one-story building.

Bunko ran inside the building. Mam followed him. She slammed the heavy metal door behind them and turned the lock.

“They’re shooting at us!” Mam exclaimed to the seven-foot-tall woman in a lab coat who stood there, bent over a table of instruments.

Mam felt something on her foot. She looked down at her sneaker. It was Leroy, sniffing at her laces. She picked him up and held him. She found out then that you can indeed cuddle a skeleton; you just have to be very gentle.

“Yes, sometimes shooting happens out there,” the towering woman said. She wore heavy black-framed glasses and her light brown hair was piled in a messy bun that looked like a miniature weeping birch growing on top of her head.

The lighting was very bright in the lab—even brighter than outside—and gleamed off the metal table, the metal scales, the metal surgical instruments, and the woman’s smooth forehead.

“Why are they shooting at us?” Mam asked the woman.

“Everyone does what they want to do in this life,” the woman said, returning to her work. “Killers want to kill.”

“We’re not killers,” Bunko said to her lab-coated back. “We’re Mam and Bunko, husband and wife.”

“Hello, Mam and Bunko, husband and wife,” the woman said, smiling slightly, her head bent over some coiled steel instruments. “I’m Dr. Woody.”

Mam strained to hear any [freedom from confusion] outside the lab.

“What do you do here?” Bunko asked Dr. Woody.

“I measure holes,” Dr. Woody said, fiddling with a scale.

“Oh,” said Mam. “Do you know anything about how I can see my daughter from here? We left her behind.”

“I’m sorry,” said Dr. Woody. “Have you tried the bodega with the bar in the back?”

“We’re trying to find it,” said Mam. “Do you know where it is?”

“No,” said Dr. Woody. “But I’ve heard of it.”

Mam watched Dr. Woody adjust a tiny lever on a measuring instrument. Mam was suddenly grateful for a skill she had developed while working on her high school newspaper. Every month she’d asked her fellow students an important question like “What’s your favorite flavor of ice cream?” The kids spoke their answers into her machine; she transcribed their responses faithfully and edited them for length and clarity. The resulting words—words she didn’t even have to think up!—were published in her column, Mam on the Street.

As a result of her journalistic career, Mam thought that she had gotten very skilled at asking questions, so she felt she was prepared to talk to this strange scientist.

“How do you measure a hole?” she asked Dr. Woody. *Good job—go ahead and jump right in there, Mam*, she said to herself encouragingly.

Mam was leaning against one of the lab’s white walls. Bunko was standing nearby. He really wanted to sit, but the only place to sit was the floor, and sitting on the floor of a lab seemed a little gross to him.

“Are there any chairs in here?” Bunko asked Dr. Woody.

“No,” said Dr. Woody.

As should be abundantly clear by now, there is not much sitting around in the afterlife. There are multiple couches, sure, but they’re hardly comfortable. The whole RIP thing is a pretty major misunderstanding of what goes on.

Bunko leaned against some metal shelves loaded with lab equipment.

“Have you been on Cloud Six long?” Dr. Woody asked Mam and Bunko.

Mam wondered if the doctor was going to ignore her question about how she measured holes.

“Yes. No. I don’t know,” Mam said.

“Well, you’ve surely noticed you are missing some things,” Dr. Woody said.

“Yes,” said Bunko, standing up straighter and holding his arms away from his sides to make his shoulders appear wider, like a man who was not missing a single significant body part.

“This is the lab where your holes are taken,” Dr. Woody said. “I weigh them and measure them.”

“When you talk about the holes you’re measuring, you’re talking the anus, vagina, and urethra, right?” Mam asked. “Those holes?”

Bunko began wandering around the lab looking for something he might find to put in his survival kit, like a stray bottle of Monkey Shoulder.

“Yes,” Dr. Woody confirmed to Mam. “We call the anus, vagina, and urethra the three graces. Men only have two graces. But if you have bullet holes, I get those here, too. We call those the fourth, fifth, sixth, et cetera graces.”

“Maybe I’ve misunderstood what a hole is,” Mam said tactfully.

“That’s highly likely,” said Dr. Woody. “You probably think of a hole as an absence, which it isn’t. A hole is a presence. It has heft.”⁴²

“A thing is a hole in a thing it is not,” Bunko said.⁴³

Dr. Woody looked up from her work to smile at Bunko, and Bunko smiled back.

Mam watched the two of them, wondering how it was possible that her husband, who couldn’t seem to manage the simple social mores of a book club meeting in Scottsdale, was somehow getting along famously with every batshit character they met in this nutty cut-rate heaven.

The three of them stood there in the LAB. The four of them, if you included Leroy. Bunko and Dr. Woody continued chatting amiably about the meaning of holes as if they were standing at the bar in *Cheers*, if *Cheers* had been set in Cloud Six and not the exclusive Boston enclave of Beacon Hill.

THE REMAINDER OF THIS SCENE

IF IT WERE SET IN CHEERS, A FICTIONAL BAR

THAT WAS THE SETTING OF THE 1982–1993

SITCOM OF THE SAME NAME

DR. WOODY, MAM, *and* BUNKO *are drinking beer at the bar Cheers.*

WOODY *(the bartender on Cheers, 1985–1993) is tending bar.*

LEROY *is hopping around on the floor.*

BUNKO

Dr. Woody, I have to ask, what are your criteria for recognizing a hole? Do you view holes as spatiotemporal particulars?

DR. WOODY

Interesting question. I'll answer with another question: If I punch a hole in a card, and then punch another hole overlapping it, how many holes do I have left?⁴⁴

BUNKO

So you're saying that string theory plays a role in your view of whether or not a hole exists?

[freedom from confusion]

MAM

Dr. Woody, the killers getting closer!

DR. WOODY

No, I'm asserting that problems arise from the ambiguous status of holes in figure-ground displays.

BUNKO

Ambiguous status! You can't be serious!

[freedom from confusion]

MAM

Dr. Woody! Bunko! We need to hide from the killers!

DR. WOODY

(chuckling)

Mam, we don't need to hide from the killers. This lab is practically invisible to them.

WOODY, THE BARTENDER FROM

CHEERS, 1985–1993

(to BUNKO)

Another beer for you, Frasier?

BUNKO

Sure!

[freedom from confusion]

MAM

But this building has a flashing light on top of it!

DR. WOODY

Mam, I'm telling you! These killers are practically blind!

MAM

Blind? Then how do they shoot?

DR. WOODY

What do you mean, how do they shoot? They feel for the trigger and then they pull it! Shooting isn't the problem. It's their aim—that's what's terrible!

BUNKO

Poor aim is actually a very common issue, even among those who use firearms regularly, like members of the police force.⁴⁵

DR. WOODY

Why do cops have such bad aim, I wonder?

BUNKO

They must not use their guns enough.

DR. WOODY

Yes, they always wait patiently until they have unassailable evidence that they're in mortal danger before they shoot.

[Freedom from confusion] was knocking at the door.

ELEVEN

UMFALA LAY IN HER BED AT THE DEMON HOSPITAL, waiting for her nurse. A poster of a rope bridge in the mist, identical to the one in the Cloud Six welcome area, hung on the wall in front of her.

The poster no longer registered for Umfala. But the first time she had come here for a demon rot treatment, she had studied it. The rope bridge had been photographed as if it were an aging Hollywood starlet, she noticed. The mist acted like a forgiving filter, making the bridge's wrinkly particulars hard to see. It was shot from a low angle, so the ropes on either side appeared to be high overhead. It looked like a bridge with guardrails.

It wasn't the type of bridge that invited you to fling yourself off it, in other words, although perhaps no bridge is constructed to do that, not even San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, which has been a site for so many suicide attempts that the city has installed a suicide deterrent net around it that actually looks a lot like a rope bridge.⁴⁶

Umfala waited for the nurse to bring her medicine. The nurse had made a little hole in the skin of her arm, and within that hole, another hole in her vein, so that the anti-anxiety and anti-nausea drugs could enter her there. It seemed funny that with all the holes she already had in her body, they had to make new ones for the drugs.

She was filled with so many holes, she thought: her skin with its pores, her hairs with their follicles, and the big hole she was entirely organized around—the mouth hole, which was attached to the long, squiggly tube that ended in her anus. Not to mention the valves covering the holes of her heart, flapping open and closed like the sweetest, softest red elephant ears. And then there was that other hole in the bottom of her, the one she was sitting on, the one that at some time had been awkwardly or ecstatically

filled with a penis and at other times with electronics that were more or less penis-shaped.

The anti-anxiety and anti-nausea drugs would enter the tiny holes in her arm from a bag hanging high on an IV stand; the drugs would slide down the tube and into her vein like they were on the log ride at Disneyland. The drugs were definitely the ones having the most fun at the demon hospital.

Once those drugs were in her, the nurse would come and give her the cocktail that would attack her demon rot. This being a hospital in hell, the cocktail was poured into a Murano glass goblet. Umfala would drink the cocktail, and shortly thereafter she would begin to vomit. The regurgitation was violent and took a long time. Undergoing demon rot treatment at the demon hospital was a lot like being a passenger on the Royal Caribbean *Oasis of the Seas* during its infamous 2019 norovirus outbreak.⁴⁷

“Happy hour!” the nurse cried, walking toward Umfala with the IV pole and bag. The pole and bag looked like a stickman the nurse had abducted and was dragging to Umfala’s side.

Umfala leaned her head back as the anti-anxiety drugs slid into her. The goblet sat on her tray table, waiting. Umfala felt like a demon Socrates.

The nurse smiled a demonic smile. But only because it could not be otherwise.

Umfala’s demon doctor, Dr. Monde, entered. “Come on, drink up!” he said to Umfala, encouragingly. “Poison in, poison out!”

Umfala gave a wan smile as she held up her goblet and began to drink. Nothing bad would happen to her now, she told herself. She was merely drinking poison. Then she would throw up; that was hardly the worst thing in the world. That could happen to demons who weren’t even terribly sick. That could happen to demons who were headed out to dinner this very evening, at any number of shipshape buffets.

TWELVE

MAM WAS AT CHEERS, HYPERVENTILATING UNDER A table. Leroy hopped over and sat on her lap. Mam patted his little earless bunny skull. Then she leaned forward and laced her fingers behind her head like she had learned to do as a child during her school tornado drills, even though that was the wrong catastrophe to be preparing for at the moment.

[freedom from confusion]

I have nothing to be afraid of, I'm already dead, Mam said to herself. She didn't believe herself, though.

It dawned on Mam that maybe there was something helpful in her survival kit. She had practically forgotten she was wearing it.

She unzipped it and began to dig around. She had never felt anything in there except Leroy. But surely the heavenly powers had given her something in her survival kit besides a baby bunny?

"Dr. Woody, aren't you afraid?" Mam shrieked from under the table at hearing the noise of the guns again. Maybe it didn't make her seem very smart, she thought, but it was surely one of the most incisive questions she had ever asked.

"No," Dr. Woody said. "I know what's coming."

Mam, having already died once, should also presumably have learned what was coming and could take some comfort in that. But she didn't.

The door burst open. Three skeletons barged in, carrying white AK-47s on white slings.

No wonder she hadn't seen these killers before, Mam thought. They were all-white; they disappeared against the white landscape like Leroy did.

The skeletons smashed around. There was a lot of [freedom from confusion].

One of the skeletons shot Dr. Woody in the head. The tall doctor came down with a crash. Mam saw her newly aerated head. She squeezed her eyes shut and covered her mouth with her hands.

Two of the skeletons collided with Bunko and dragged him by his armpits out the door.

The third skeleton accidentally kicked Mam with his foot, then reached down, grabbed her leg, and dragged her out from under the table. She thrashed as he pulled her up to standing and prodded her out the door with the muzzle of his gun.

Leroy, who had not been detected by the killers, watched Mam and Bunko being herded out. He cautiously hopped out from under the table where he had been sitting with Mam and approached Dr. Woody, who was lying on the floor, motionless, surrounded by broken glass and scattered instruments. He sniffed her body tentatively.

Then he bounded out the door and hopped away, his bones quickly rendering him invisible.

THIRTEEN

PENNY AND BILL WERE DRIVING THROUGH SCOTTSDALE, with its thoroughly regulated and visually unsurprising jumble of fast-food joints, strip malls, and office buildings. Their duffel bags, one blue and one green, were thrown across the back seat. Penny had put Gloria, Mam's houseplant, on the floor of the car by her feet. She couldn't bear the idea of Gloria dying while they were gone.

Penny had taken her earbuds out when they got in the car. The radio was on.

She stared out the window and saw herself: a girl with no parents. She felt like the word was tattooed across her forehead: ORPHAN.

Before her mother and stepfather died, Penny had always been told that she had her whole life ahead of her. She had felt that the stuff that was happening now, in her adolescence, was somehow not her life yet. It was just some busywork she was required to do while she moved forward to meet her life. Her mother and stepfather had made certain decisions for her about where and how she and her life would meet. First she would finish high school, then she would go to college. While she was doing all that, she would not get pregnant. After college, she would find a job. Then, it seemed, her real life would finally meet her somewhere. She wasn't sure where. Probably online.

But now all those plans had gone awry. With her mother and stepfather not there to keep everything on track, her life wasn't necessarily coming to meet her in the same way anymore. Her life had gone rogue. It had disappeared from the stalker app. Her life was just out there somewhere—who knew where?

Or maybe her life was right here with her, in the car. Maybe her life had already crashed into her, and she hadn't even noticed.

Penny stretched her arms over her head. She and Bill drove through the city of Scottsdale, and then Bill took the exit to 93 North, and they headed into the desert. Gloria popped and squeaked from the floorboards. Penny turned up the music, oblivious.

Her phone buzzed.

Penny looked at it. "It's Brenda."

Bill said nothing. Penny didn't answer it. She put the phone in her tote bag, which was on the floor next to Gloria.

Sometimes it was hard for Penny to believe that Bill was her mother's brother. Compared to her mother, Bill was so calm. Or maybe that was the depression her mother had said Bill suffered from.

Penny vowed not to be depressed in her life going forward. She would not let her parents' death drag her down. She would ask herself questions she had never felt able to ask before, like, Why was she doing homework? Why was she going to school? Why did she have to get a job? Couldn't she just run away to Alaska and live in an abandoned school bus like that one guy did? And okay, he died, but so what? Everyone died. What were people supposed to do with their lives anyway? Become enraptured with guillotines, like she had read about for her paper on the Reign of Terror?

Penny turned the music down. "I want to take a break," she said. "Let's stop."

"Are you hungry?" Bill asked.

"I could eat," Penny said.

Bill smiled as he glided the car down the giant cochlea of the off-ramp.

FOURTEEN

THE SKELETONS WERE HERDING MAM AND BUNKO somewhere. But where?

Mam's stomach tightened: They were going toward a tree. She suddenly remembered that beloved book from her childhood, *Go, Dog. Go!* Was it possible that they were headed to a dog party?

"Big dogs, little dogs, red dogs, blue dogs, yellow dogs, green dogs . . ." Mam recited.

She stopped herself. *No, Mam! You are not going to a dog party! The killers are going to hang you and Bunko on your old friend, Ernestine!*

Mam was grateful, for a second, that she did not have any of her lower graces, because if she did, she would be shitting herself.

She tried to think about the situation reasonably: Why, she asked herself, would the skeletons bother to go through the rigmarole of hanging them? They had guns—she could feel the muzzle of one being shoved rhythmically into her back. If the skeleton killers wanted to kill her and Bunko, they could do it right now, this very second.

But then Mam had another thought: You could never predict how humans were going to behave and skeletons were just humans without the fleshy coating.

The skeletons sat Mam and Bunko down on opposite sides of the tree trunk and bound them to the tree with the slings of their guns.

Then they left them there and walked away, carrying their heavy weapons in their bony hands.

Mam tried to turn around and look at Bunko, but she couldn't twist her body. She was bound too tightly.

"Bunko, are you okay?" The handkerchiefs' movements made her bob slightly.

"I don't know. I feel woozy," he said.

“What do you mean, woozy?”

“My head feels funny.”

“Your voice sounds weird,” Mam said.

“I don’t feel good,” Bunko said.

“Relax,” Mam said.

“This is not a very relaxing setup, Mam.”

“Hello, Ernestine? We’re back!” Mam cried.

The tree said nothing.

Mam tried again. “Ernestine! We’re here!”

The tree was silent.

“Is this the same tree, do you think?” Mam asked Bunko.

Mam was suddenly upset with herself—how could she not tell one tree from another?

Bunko was quiet.

Mam looked out over the handkerchief landscape. She wondered if the handkerchiefs would grow, like corn, until one day they would be so tall that she and Bunko would not be able to see over them, and this whole period of being able to see for miles in every direction on Cloud Six would seem like ancient history. That was a comforting idea for Mam at this particular moment: to think that major environmental change was inevitable.

Bunko groaned. He sounded like he was going to be sick.

“What’s wrong, Bunko?”

“Do you have anything to drink? Like a beer?”

“No, of course not.”

“Just let me die here, Mam.”

Mam was alarmed. “You can’t die here, Bunko.”

“Why not?”

“Goddamn it! You know I don’t know why not!”

Bunko sat there, tied up, bobbing faintly.

“Bunko, please, don’t give up. We’ve come so far,” Mam pleaded.

“I know, but why? Why have we come so far?”

The handkerchiefs were a zillion tiny soldiers waving white flags.

“So we can see if we can see Penny and Bill again,” Mam said.

“But even if we *can* see Penny and Bill, what are we going to do then?” Bunko asked. “Penny’s going to live her life, she’s going to make her own decisions, and we can’t help her or Bill with any of it!”

Mam did not want to think about that. She realized then that she had gotten pretty good at not thinking about certain things. That was one thing she had learned in her life, anyway.

“Ernestine?” Mam called.

The tree did not say anything.

Mam was miffed. She knew that *You’re dead to me* was a common tactic humans used for getting along in modern society, but she hadn’t thought it was a strategy that a tree would ever employ.

“Leeeerrroyyyy!” Mam yelled.

Silence.

“Face it, we’re all alone now, Mam,” said Bunko. “It’s just the two of us and some skeleton killers.”

Mam balled her hands into fists. “Oh, Bunko, why couldn’t we have stayed on the first GLOSTAD we saw when we arrived here? Why couldn’t we have just sat there and never left and never tried to do anything else? Why couldn’t we have become like one of those people who die from starvation after fusing to their couch?”

Bunko said nothing.

“Why did we have to come here at all?” Mam continued. “Why couldn’t we have stayed where we were, in beautiful Scottsdale?”

“The West’s Most Western Town,” Bunko added forlornly. He was fond of the Scottsdale motto.

Mam sighed.

“The United States wasn’t so bad,” Bunko said. “Only fifty thousand people killed themselves there last year.”⁴⁸

They sat in silence. The handkerchiefs waved as if saying *Hello, friends!*

“This place is so daft. I wish I’d never come,” Bunko said.

“But we didn’t have a choice in the matter! We just woke up here!” Mam griped.

They sat.

“Am I dead yet?” Bunko asked.

“Goddamn it, Bunko, no, you’re not dead yet! Oh, wait. Yes you are!”

They sat some more.

“Leeeerrroyyyy!” Mam yelled.

Silence.

“So we’ve lost Leroy,” Bunko said. “I guess that little guy ran faster than us.”

“He hid better than us, too,” Mam said.

“I will pay someone to give me a ride to the bodega,” Bunko said.

“Bunko, you know it doesn’t work like that here!”

“Well, how does it fucking work? I don’t see anything working at all, actually! This place is just a confusing mishmash of crazy situations with no direction at all on how to navigate any of it!”

Mam said nothing. That was all true. But it had been true in Scottsdale, too.

“I’m done, Mam. You go ahead. I’m going to sit here until I die,” Bunko said

“You’re already dead, Bunko,” Mam said.

“You know what I mean!” Bunko snapped.

“Hola,” Leroy said, appearing out of the dancing handkerchiefs.

“Leroy! I’m so glad to see you!” Mam said. “Can you please use your sharp teeth to chew through these straps?”

“Certainly,” Leroy replied. “Although you may have to guide me. I can’t see very well.”

Mam helped Leroy find the places to chew, and he did so easily.

“Thank you,” Mam said as she shook her hands loose like a pair of doves.

HI, IT'S BYRON AGAIN. HOW ARE YOU DOING? HA HA, I can't hear you.

Here's how I'm doing: not great. Let me tell you why. First, Fusselman is still in the midst of her nervous breakdown, I guess, because she won't answer my texts or calls.

Second, last night I stayed up late studying real estate math—ask me about the gross rent multiplier!—and when I finally fell asleep, I had a dream, and in my dream I was a successful real estate broker on vacation in the Bahamas, and I was lying on the beach there, and guess who walked up to me and started chatting?

Satan!

"I tried to call you when you were studying math, but you didn't answer me," Satan said to me angrily.

Satan was wearing a polo shirt with the hell logo on it. He designed it himself, he told me. It wasn't exactly an original design, I noticed. It was the Shell oil logo—that yellow shell with the word *Shell* underneath it. Satan just took off the S.

I was lying on my back on a towel. I was only a little freaked out that Satan was talking to me. I worked for a summer at an influencer bar in Montauk so I figured I could handle it.

"Don't bother me, I'm on vacation," I said.

"Oh, good. This is the perfect time for me to take you someplace special," Satan said.

My eyes were closed. I felt the sun on me. "I disagree," I said.

Satan grabbed my hand and yanked me up.

It was violent, the way he pulled at me. My eyes flew open. Satan looked painfully sunburned. His fingernails were long, black, and hooked, like the claws of a lion. And his penis was huge—down to his knees. It was swinging back and forth, like the pendulum on a grandfather clock. I glanced at it once and then averted my gaze. It was hot.

I figured Satan was going to drag me to hell, because where else would he take me? But he pulled me only a few steps away from where I'd been lying on my towel. He took me closer to the water, right to the edge.

Satan sat on the sand and tugged me down next to him. I sat cross-legged, and Satan sat with his goat legs sticking straight out. His hooves shone like ebony.

“I want you to listen to the ocean until you hear something,” he said.

“What do you mean, until I hear something? I hear something now. I hear the ocean.”

“I want you to listen through the sound of the ocean until you hear something in the ocean.”

“Why do I need to do that?”

He turned his hairy, horned head to me. His eyes shot fire. “Do you know how lucky you are?”

I looked down at my feet. They looked like dead fish, next to his hooves. We were like a science fair display of two species that should never be caught intermingling.

“You’re scaring me,” I said.

He laughed. “Oh, did you think that Satan wasn’t going to be frightening?”

I didn’t answer that. Satan watched the ocean, so I did, too. It had about nine bazillion colors in it and also my own mother’s ashes, and I knew that because I put them there, although not in the Bahamas—in the Gowanus Canal. But all water is connected, I think.

Satan closed his eyes, so I closed my eyes. And then I went into another dream, so I was in a dream in a dream. Or, if you count my waking life as a dream, I was in a dream in a dream in a dream. Maybe a dream is a useful unit of measurement when we are talking about all the places a human being can go. In that case, I was two dreams away from my life.

In my dream I was a human baby flying on the back of a pterodactyl. The pterodactyl flew me away from the ocean to a reedy pond and dropped me there, by the pond’s edge.

I couldn’t hear the ocean anymore. Birds were singing. The dirt smelled fantastic. I leaned down and put my baby face into the dirt and gnawed at it with my toothless mouth.

Then the earth opened up and swallowed me, and I fell for a long time through pitch-black space until I landed in a room of black marble. Satan, now in human form, was sitting there, on a marble throne. He wasn’t as hot as he had been when he was horned and hoofed with no pants on.

I saw where I was, alone in a stone room with Satan. “I want to leave,” I said.

“Open your eyes,” he commanded.

I opened my eyes and came out of that dream and then opened them again and came out of the other dream, and then I was back in my life.

I didn’t see Satan anymore. But I heard him in my ear. “You need to open your eyes,” he said.

“But I already opened them twice!” I said.

“Your eyes are open to what? Tell me—to *what?*”

His voice was terrifying. I was grateful when I heard it slowly recede from my ear, like the tide going out.

After that, I told myself, *I’m not talking to Satan anymore, for anyone, or for any reason.*

Bye, you guys.

I just left Fusselman a message: I quit.

ONE

BY THE TIME UMFALA BEGAN TO VOMIT FROM HER COCKTAIL, Dr. Monde had left. He didn't deal with his patients' vomiting. That was the nurses' job.

The nurse was very kind when Umfala started to get sick. She held Umfala's hair gently back from her face so she wouldn't get any vomit in it.

In demon nursing school, the students are taught to expect that 80 percent of their demon rot patients will vomit during treatment. Imagine being a bartender in a bar where 80 percent of your patrons vomit.⁴⁹

As she was vomiting, Umfala thought about the fact that none of her demon friends knew that she had demon rot. She hadn't told anyone besides Widdershins.

She decided that if she got through this—if the demon rot didn't kill her—she would talk about it with someone.

If the demon rot *did* kill her, then she wouldn't have to worry about talking to anyone. In some ways, that would be preferable.

She knew that she should probably be relying, during these tough times, on her web of demon friends. But she didn't have much of a web of demon friends. It isn't easy to trust when you're a demon. Other demons, unsurprisingly, can be rather mean. A loving and supportive friendship between two demons is actually a bit of a rarity.

The demon hospital staff knew that Umfala was suffering from demon rot. And the demons at the demon health insurance company also knew, because they had been busy processing and denying her health insurance claims. She didn't understand why this was happening, because Widdershins had promised her that Cloud Six had excellent health insurance. It was modeled on the exemplary system used in the richest country on earth, he said. That was the primary reason why Umfala had taken the job. It certainly wasn't because it paid well.

There'd better not be a problem with her health insurance, she thought, because if there was, she had no idea how she would otherwise pay for this privilege of drinking poison and throwing it up.

After Umfala's vomiting session, the doctor came back to her bedside.

"Hi there, Moana," Dr. Monde said.

"Umfala," Umfala said wearily.

"Right," he said, pulling his glasses down from the top of his head and then picking up his pen, which was attached by a chain to a clipboard. "I'm here to go over what will be happening during your surgery. It's part of our philosophy of care to explain everything that you will be experiencing while you are under general anesthesia."

Umfala didn't want to know any of this. She didn't care what the doctors did. Just fix her already.

"As you know, the demon body is not a fixed entity. Doing surgery on a demon with demon rot is like trying to stomp on a very fast cockroach that is scuttling across your kitchen floor. What happens is that cockroach runs into a corner and hides. And then you have to be quiet and still for a minute until it comes out, and then you have to try to stomp on it, and maybe you will injure it a bit, like squish its antennae, but that's not enough to kill it. So the injured cockroach hides again, and you have to be quiet and still again until it comes out of its hiding place with its single antenna waving, whereupon you will try to stomp on it again, and that hiding and waiting and stomping happens for a long time until you finally squish the majority of the cockroach under your shoe, and it just lies there with its carapace broken and its guts oozing out, and then, in a miracle of healing, your demon body is rot-free and completely healthy again." Dr. Monde smiled.

Umfala did not smile.

"Also, you should know that sometimes, because of the difficulty of this surgery, we in the operating theater make a lot of noise. We shout and swear, and sometimes we also play rap and/or heavy metal music at a very high volume because we will have taken a bunch of illicit drugs to keep us focused and alert as we slice you open, and music, if you haven't already heard, is the most wonderful drug in the world to put on top of other drugs—it's like drug hot fudge on drug ice cream. So it's possible that some of that music or swearing or shouting will pierce the veil of your general anesthesia and reach into your consciousness, and if that happens, just remind yourself that these are the normal tones of your highly qualified

medical team working hard to save you from death. Now, do you have any questions?"

Umfala lay there.

"Good," Dr. Monde said. "Your bed will now drive you to the demon hospital's overflow area on Cloud Six. Just wait there for your pager to buzz, and when it does, your bed will drive you back to the demon hospital operating room, and that's where we'll knock you out, open you up, and take out our hammers and cudgels and pointy-toed shoes and squish that cockroach-demon-rot out of you once and for all. Of course, that will also negate the powers that have come with it. Have you been using those at all, by the way? You really should have tried to refrain from doing that."

"I did once," she said. "I manifested a window from Stephen King's vacation home so some idiots could see their kid through it."

"Well, be a good demon and try not to do that again," Dr. Monde said as he let the pen from his clipboard drop and dangle down on its chain, near his dong.

TWO

KYLE HAD KISSED WIDDERSHINS BACK ON HIS MOUNTAIN goat lips and then they had fucked. Now they were flying to Kyle's apartment to smoke weed.

Kyle flew Superman-style, with his arms stretched out in front of him. Widdershins flew mountain-goat-style, with the wind ruffling his fur and his black hooves dangling like earrings below his massive shaggy body.

Kyle spotted something strange in the distance—a tree, with two people sitting beside it. He pointed them out to Widdershins and motioned: *Let's stop.*

The demons landed noiselessly near Mam and Bunko.

"Why are we stopping?" Widdershins whispered.

"I want to do some market research for you," Kyle replied.

Leroy had released Mam and Bunko from their ties. They could move, but they still hadn't stood up from their spot beside the tree.

Mam wasn't ready to walk just yet. Those gun-toting skeletons had scared the crap out of her. She had a second, sitting at the base of this tree, when she thought she and Bunko should cut it down and use it to make some sort of shack. But even in a wooden structure, the two of them would be just as exposed to being shot, she realized. The best defense in a place like this was to stay in motion.

Mam looked up. A mountain goat and a hairy horned man in a business suit were walking toward them.

"Oh!" Mam cried, seeing them.

"We saw you from a distance and thought we'd come over and say hi," Kyle said, approaching them.

"I'm so glad you did!" Mam exclaimed. She sat up straighter. She was very excited to have someone new to talk to. She didn't care how odd this

hairy guy and his giant goat looked. “I’m Mam, and this is Bunko,” she said.

“I’m Kyle, and this is Widdershins,” Kyle said. “So how are you finding things here at Cloud Six?”

“Why? Are you the manager?” Mam asked hopefully.

“Not at all,” Kyle said smoothly. “Just a fellow traveler.”

Mam was disappointed she couldn’t complain to the manager, but she was going to complain regardless. “It’s terrible!” Mam said. “Zero stars!”

Back when Mam was living, she couldn’t leave the house, it seemed, without someone sending her a questionnaire about her experience afterward. Now, in this so-called heaven, it seemed like no one cared.

“We don’t know what we’re doing, where we’re going, or why!” Mam griped. “Plus, why are all these waving handkerchiefs here? They make it so hard to run!”

Mam could’ve sworn she saw the mountain goat grimace.

“We want to go to the bodega,” Bunko said. “Can either of you help us with that?”

“We want to see the daughter we left behind,” Mam added.

“What happened to your daughter?” Kyle asked.

“Nothing happened to our daughter—something happened to *us*!” Mam said. “We died, and now we are hopelessly separated from our child!”

“I’m not a parent,” Kyle said. “But I’m sure that’s an awful thing to experience.”

Mam was excited to talk about parenting with this seemingly emotionally available guy. “It is. Being a parent is really hard.”

The mountain goat snorted.

“How old is your girl?” Kyle asked.

“Sixteen.”

“Aren’t you guys done parenting by the time your kid is *sixteen*?” Widdershins asked.

Mam was a little shocked that the mountain goat was talking, but not as shocked as she would have been if Leroy hadn’t already smashed her talking-animal shock meter.

“I used to say that I wouldn’t be done parenting until I was dead,” Mam said. “But I’m dead now—and I’m still not done parenting.”

“Do human children *never* fledge?” Widdershins asked, incredulous.

“They fledge,” Mam replied. “But the point is, do you ever stop caring about them and wanting to help them? No. You remain obsessed with them your whole life, and then, I guess, your whole death.”

“Sounds maudlin,” Widdershins said.

Kyle cleared his throat.

THREE

PENNY AND BILL WERE SITTING IN A RESTAURANT IN Arizona not far from the Nevada border. Bill had ordered a Gunfighter Burger, and Penny had ordered some Little Rustler Chicken Tenders. The restaurant boasted unusual decor: Patrons signed or drew on dollar bills and then stapled or taped them to the walls.⁵⁰

Penny wanted to add to the collection. The waitress had given her a marker, and she pulled a dollar bill out of her wallet. She had never looked at a dollar bill as a canvas of any kind before, even though she had occasionally seen dollar bills with people's names or words scrawled on them. She had just never thought that writing or drawing on a dollar bill was something she would ever do.

But look at her now. She gave George Washington some thin lines radiating out of his head, like a saint. Then she gave him a Salvador Dalí-esque mustache. On the left of George Washington, in the white space above the Federal Reserve seal, she wrote her name, in all caps: PENNY. Then below the seal, she added: MAM + BUNKO, RIP.

The waitress had given her a stapler. Penny stood on a chair and stapled her bill over the top of some built-in shelves full of glassware. The dollar hung above the shelves vertically, like an American flag over an ice rink.

Bill was not decorating any currency. But he had found a dollar bill on the wall near their booth signed by President Ronald Reagan. He pointed it out to Penny and said that Reagan was a president who had once been an actor. He had often portrayed cowboys in the movies, he told her.

The two *R*'s in Ronald Reagan's signature were very round, Penny noticed. It reminded her of the period in fourth grade when she had been obsessed with writing in bubble letters. Why had bubble letters seemed so

cool then? It was just a different way of writing, and writing was not interesting to her at all at that time. It wasn't interesting to her now, either.

Maybe she'd liked bubble letters, she mused, because she only used them to write her name and the names of boys she had crushes on. Writing names in that way was not the same as writing a paper on the Reign of Terror to show that you had read the article on the Reign of Terror. Writing a name repeatedly and surrounding it with hearts was not proving that you had read anything. It was an activity that required more intelligence than that. It was like casting a spell.

Penny liked to write names. She wasn't crazy about her own name, but she liked names in general. She had a list of all the names she was considering for her cat, when she finally got it. Her mother was allergic to cats. But now that she was an orphan, she could get ten cats, if she wanted, and she could choose their names from the list she had been keeping for years:

Windshield
Shampoo
Fiber
Specimen
Sertraline
Wiggy
Wax
Trampoline
Lester
Bobo
Tinkle
Candle
Sockface
Flipper
Lotion
Yolk
Grub
Chip
Orville
Cranberry
Concrete
Email
Terror
Transformer

Fingernail
Mailbox
Couch
Protein
Drywall
Ventilation
Iodine
Fiber Optic
Super Mega
Macaroni
Templeton
Pope
Francis
Pope Francis
Grand Ol' Banjo Robobounce
Fat Patty Biggenburger
Polio
Rotund
Louise
Bombdiggity (Bobo for short)
Boner
In Doing So
Gerald⁵¹

Penny looked around the restaurant. It was eleven on a Tuesday morning. She was the only school-age person there. She was skipping school so she could sit in a café covered in money with her Uncle Bill, she marveled. The waitress had said that there was about four thousand dollars on the wall in this restaurant. Ronald Reagan was just one dollar of that. Ronald Reagan had been a fake cowboy but also a real president. He lived and died and he wrote his *R*'s in bubble letters. Bubble letters were cool because they took up more space than regular letters. They were big and bouncy; they had style. When she wrote her name in bubble letters in her spiral notebook, she'd been small and thin and had had no style. She still had no style, but maybe she would get some now that her life had gone off the rails.

She wished her mother were here, with her soft warm body, to hug her.

Her Little Rustler tenders came. She took a bite of one. Then she started to cry.

“What’s wrong?” Bill asked.

Penny shook her head and pressed her paper napkin against her eyes.

The waitress came over. She asked if everything was okay. Bill nodded. The waitress did not look at Penny as she told Bill that there was a gunfight that was going to start outside if they wanted to watch it. They could take their food to the porch and eat it there, she said.

Bill asked Penny if she wanted to go outside and watch the gunfight and she said okay but mostly because she could tell that Bill wanted to watch the gunfight. Bill picked up Penny's basket of tenders and carried them for her. Penny carried her own glass of lemonade.

There were three actors in the gunfight. Two were adults and one was a kid. The kid was playing the role of Billy the Kid. Penny wondered if the kid went to school or if he'd quit school now that he had a real job as a kid pretending to be a kid who pretended to shoot a gun. If so, why did everyone think you had to go to school in order to get a job? There were options, Penny thought. There were clearly options in this world. Why did no one talk about the options?

The plot of the gunfight was this: The two adults made the kid do all the work. The adults made the kid rob the bank, and after the kid robbed the bank, the adults stole the gold from him, and when the kid protested, the adults shot at him.

The adults at the restaurant were laughing a lot at this gunfight, Penny noticed.

Penny took her phone out of her pocket. Lydia was texting her from the lunchroom. Penny felt like it was hard to text Lydia right now. Lydia's life was still on track.

Penny put the phone back. She stopped watching the fake gunfight. She was in a different world now, and in this world, her life wasn't ahead of her anymore. Her life was right here, inside her and outside her at the same time, like a cloud of dust she was continually inhaling as she was walking through it. And after Bill paid the check, she went back in her cloud to the car, and she took a bottle of water with her, because it was really hot in Arizona, and the car was about a billion degrees, and Gloria was popping and squeaking like they were their own gunfight, although Penny couldn't hear that at all.

Penny gave Gloria a good long drink from her water bottle. This was something she had learned to do from her mother: care for a plant.

"There you go, Gloria," Penny said to the plant, as Bill started the car.

They got out of there.

FOUR

“BUNKO,” MAM SAID. “WE NEED TO HURRY UP AND GET going.”

Widdershins and Kyle had said goodbye a long time ago. But Mam and Bunko still hadn’t gotten up.

“You go on, Mam,” Bunko said. “Just leave me here.”

“Oh, come on, Bunko.”

“Honestly, I don’t feel like it.”

“Come on, what about the bodega with the bar in the back?”

Bunko didn’t respond.

“What about Penny?” Mam pleaded.

“I love bodega bars and I love Penny. But I don’t care anymore.”

“But you care about me, don’t you?”

“You know I love you, Mam.”

“You love me, right now, this very second?”

“Yes.”

“Then please stand up! Let’s get going!”

Bunko sat there, undulating slightly in the handkerchief waves.

Mam began to cry. She knew she was crying because she felt the sudden bloom of grief in her chest. But she didn’t feel the accompanying tightness in her eyes like she usually felt when she cried. Instead she felt a strange eruption of moisture in her ears. She dug her finger into one ear and wiped it out, but it filled right back up again. Meanwhile, her eyes were dry.

Her tears were coming out the wrong holes, Mam realized. Maybe her lack of a vagina forced the tears to come out her ears rather than her eyes? Like some sort of plumbing pressure issue? That’s how crazy this Cloud Six place was.

“Bunko!” she cried. “Come on! What do I have to do?”

“Give me a blow job. But you can’t do that for me anymore,” he said, and half smiled.

Mam knelt down in front of him and pulled down his sweatpants. It was a little odd with the handkerchiefs’ motion, like she was trying to have sex on a heaving waterbed.

She moved her head over to the place where his genitals would have been, if he still had them. It was so smooth there now. She licked it.

“Did you feel that?” she asked him.

“Yes. But not like I would have,” he said miserably.

She licked the flat place where his penis used to be. She gave it a really good working over.

“How about now? Anything?” she asked.

“Not really,” he said.

She sighed. She laid her head on his hip bone as the tears streamed out her ears. She felt him put his hand on her head. He stroked her head like she was a house cat.

“I love you,” she said. She thought it was nice that she could say it like that, clearly. Crying wasn’t a halting, hiccup-y mess in this place. You could enunciate while you were crying. That was at least one sort of upgrade, she thought.

She lifted herself off Bunko’s body and sat up. Bunko lay there, with his hoodie pushed up around his stomach and his sweatpants pulled down to his knees.

“Please, Bunko. Come with me,” Mam said.

“Go find Leroy; you can travel with him,” Bunko said.

Where had Leroy gone? Mam thought. They hadn’t seen him in a while.

“I don’t want to travel with Leroy. I want to travel with you!” she said.

“Why won’t you come with me?”

Bunko turned his head away from her.

She collapsed onto his chest again and didn’t hold anything back now; she let her ear tears flow. She stuck her finger in her right ear and twirled it around. Her ear had never felt so wet. If Bunko had had a tiny, narrow penis, he definitely could have put it in there, wriggled it around, and been happy.

“What if we make a bet? What if we bet on your getting up and coming with me?” she asked.

“There’s nothing to bet for,” he said gloomily.

Her ear tears streamed into his armpit. “Maybe we just need to rest for a bit and then you’ll feel better,” she said.

“We don’t rest in this place, you know that,” Bunko said. “We don’t sleep, don’t pee, don’t eat, don’t fuck.”

“Were those the things you were living for?” Mam asked.

“No, but they helped. They were pleasure,” he said.

Mam said nothing. She kept her head on his chest. They both were quiet for a time.

Suddenly Mam realized that Bunko’s body felt different. She sat up.

“Bunko!”

“What?”

“Look at you!” she cried.

He held up his hand. It was bones. He looked down at his pelvis where she had pulled his sweatpants down: bones.

“You’re a skeleton!” Mam squealed.

He put his hand up to his head; he felt his skull.

“So I am,” he said mournfully.

Mam swooned. She could barely stand to look at him. To see his jaw move! To see all his teeth lined up in his skull like that! His teeth!

Bunko was calm. “Mam, I was always a skeleton underneath, this whole time. It’s just that now you can see it.”

“Oh god, oh god,” Mam said, crawling around him in a circle. “Are you in pain?”

He moved his arm bones, testing them. “No, actually, I feel good. Light. Like someone cut a bunch of water balloons off me. Why was I walking around with all that wet crap on me?”

“Oh!” Mam cried. She covered her hand with her mouth, still horrified at seeing his jaw wag. She turned her head away from him. She felt so alone.

“I can’t see very well now, though,” he said.

Mam tried looking at him again for just a second. Horrifying. He seemed like he was smiling. Why do skeletons always look like they are smiling?

“Bunko, I’m afraid! I don’t want this to happen to me!”

Bunko crossed his bony legs in his suddenly gigantic sweatpants and appeared to grin.

“I’m not going to lie, Mam,” he said. “I think this is going to happen to you.”

FIVE

MAM HAD FINALLY CONVINCED BUNKO TO STAND. SHE helped him take off his sweatpants because they were so huge on him now that they wouldn't stay up, even with the drawstring waist tightened all the way. He still wore his hoodie. It hung down loosely over his pelvis. Mam helped him buckle his survival kit over it.

Mam was still horrified at seeing Bunko in his skeleton state, but she was slowly getting used to it. It was unbelievable what you could get used to, she thought.

Bunko had to learn how to walk on the handkerchiefs again. He was unsteady. Bunko leaned on Mam's arm. They made halting progress.

Mam wondered how Leroy had become a skeleton and maintained all his youthful vigor. That hadn't been the case with Bunko at all.

They had learned not to talk too much about the fact that they didn't know where they were going.

"Remember when you were practicing meditation?" Bunko asked Mam as he shuffled at her side. "And you were supposed to be living in the now?"

"Yes, but meditation was supposed to make me wiser, with better skin," Mam said. "It wasn't supposed to end up with me wandering around like this, befuddled."

"Yes, but didn't the yoga teacher encourage you to get curious about your discomfort instead of resisting it?"

Mam was annoyed. "Bunko, are you seriously trying to get me to think about yoga platitudes right now?"

Mam glanced at Bunko's face, then looked away. It was hard to get rid of the habit of looking at people to see their facial expressions. Bunko no

longer had facial expressions. Or he had one facial expression, and it was skeleton. Skeleton 24/7.

“I love yoga platitudes,” Bunko said happily. “Be here now!”

Mam was surprised to hear the joy in his voice. “How can you be in such a good mood?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But I feel so free. I understand why this is heaven now.”

Mam was stunned. “Really?”

“Yes, it’s so beautiful here.”

Mam looked around in disbelief. This was the most ridiculous place she had ever been to, and she had once traveled to Las Vegas, Nevada, to visit New York–New York.

“I thought you couldn’t see very well,” Mam said.

“You don’t have to see well to see beauty,” Bunko said, turning to her. “You’re beautiful, Mam.”

Mam couldn’t help but smile. “What changed to make you feel this way?”

“I don’t know. Losing my flesh?”

They walked.

“Let’s stop for a minute,” Bunko said.

“Already?” Mam asked. She was worried Bunko would lie down and she’d never get him up again.

“Yes, already,” he said. “Will you help me sit down?”

Mam helped him lower himself to the ground. It was terrifying, touching his bones. It was frightening in a way that it hadn’t been with Leroy, whose skeleton self she had learned to gently embrace. Maybe touching Bunko was scary because his bones were human, she thought. They were what she, too, was, right now, under her flesh.

“Will you play a game with me?” Bunko asked once they were both sitting.

Mam did not want to play a game.

“A game is a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles,” Bunko recited.⁵²

Mam wanted to say, *Don’t we already have enough unnecessary obstacles to deal with, thank you very much?* But she was married, and she knew that marriage sometimes requires compromise.

“What kind of game?” she asked.

“A dice game,” Bunko said. He dug something out of his survival kit and held it out to her. “Look.”

It was a paper die. She took it from his hand and studied it. “You made this?”

“Yes, with some tissue and a pen I found in my survival kit. I moistened the tissue when we were at the lab and then I squished it together to form a cube. And then when it was dry, I etched the little dots on it,” he said.

Mam looked at her skeleton husband in wonder.

“I once researched things to do for amusement in prison,” Bunko explained.

Mam smiled. She could imagine him doing that.

“I’m going to make another die, and then we’ll have two. And then we can play Going to Boston. As of now, we can only play Pig.”

“Okay, let’s play Pig.”

They sat with their legs akimbo, Mam’s flesh ones and Bunko’s bone ones. The waving handkerchiefs did not make a suitable surface for a dice game, so Bunko took off his survival kit and flattened it, and they rolled the die on that. Bunko had to ask her what numbers he rolled because he couldn’t see the dots on the die.

Bunko rolled a two, and then another two, and then stopped. The goal of Pig is to get to twenty-five points. You can take as many rolls as you want, but if you roll a one, you lose all your points.

“You know that rolls of the dice are supposed to be random but they’re not, right?” Bunko said.

“No, I didn’t know that,” Mam said. She rolled a five, then stopped and handed the die back to Bunko. She was a cautious player.

“A roll of a die is predictable. It’s just that we can’t measure the initial position of the die accurately enough to make the prediction,” Bunko said.⁵³

“Huh,” Mam said.

“Rolling a die is a gesture that means ‘chance.’ But it’s really not chance at all. It’s just that people are blind.”

“I don’t want to play this game anymore,” Mam said.

Bunko did not press her. He saw dimly that Mam put the die in her survival kit and then lay down on her back, in corpse pose. Her body rose and fell slightly, as if she were floating on her back in the ocean.

“Do you think you are living in the now, right now?” Bunko asked her.

Mam was not as irritated by this question as she had been before they played Pig. Maybe there was something to be said for playing games and their effect on your mental outlook after all.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “Are you living in the now, right now?”

“I think so.”

“How do you know?”

“This whole Cloud Six space we have been plodding through is glowing. I can see it. It’s like we are walking inside a giant incandescent jellyfish that knows us and loves us.”

This was the most un-Bunko-like thing Mam had ever heard him say.

She gently took his bone hand in her flesh one and held it, even though holding his hand scared her.

She tried to tell herself that skeletons were nothing to be scared of, especially because she already was a skeleton, deep inside.

She held Bunko’s hand up to her face study it. She viewed his metacarpal bones and tried see the beauty in them.

It was easy. They were so elegant, like the bones of an enchanted fish.

SIX

IF PENNY HADN'T GIVEN GLORIA THAT DRINK OF WATER in the car, Gloria might not have made it.

It was exhausting, living so close to death all the time. But that's what it was like, being a plant living with humans. You had to accept that humans were brainless, selfish, and forgetful, and that's just the way it was.

Gloria felt a surge of energy after their drink of water. They began to recite some poetry to Penny in gratitude. It was a passage they had memorized from one of the great works of plant literature: *Sprinkle the Boor*, by Harchibald, an early mystic fern.⁵⁴

Gloria was aware that Penny had no idea that Gloria was reciting poetry to her. But Gloria believed that in some small way, even if Penny was not conscious of it, she would feel the energy of what Gloria was doing.

It should be noted that this mindset is typical of plants. They have a tremendous amount of faith in their abilities. They are undaunted when they cannot immediately see the results of their actions. They send messages to humans all their lives. They send ill-fated, fleshy, face-planting humans so much encouragement and so much love. They offer themselves again and again so that humans can make drugs to heal themselves and food to feed themselves. They laugh at the humans, sure, but it's the way that parents laugh at their beloved small children. They so badly want to be in a reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationship with humans.

But for the most part, they aren't.

Penny sat in the car with her feet up on the dashboard. Bill had turned up some rap music.

Gloria recited:

In the end and in the beginning, plants

wave and wag
turn to the sun,
take in the rain,
sing.

On the day that people finally hear the plants, the people
will be afraid
will run away
on their squishy legs
with their ungainly movements.

They'll trip and fall
They'll yell: Plants are not safe!

While the plants sing:
Oh strange world with more plants
than people
we are grateful
for every day
we are alive.

—Translated from the ancient Plant Language by Fran Boltshar, PhD⁵⁵

SEVEN

MAM AND BUNKO SAT ON THE GROUND, BOBBING slightly, like two plastic ducks in a toddler's bath. Mam felt like it was getting colder, but she didn't want to ask Bunko if he also felt that, because she didn't want to highlight the differences between her fleshy body and his bony one. She sat and pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them.

"Mam, you have done so much for me. Maybe I could help you somehow," Bunko said.

Mam was quiet. How could he possibly help her?

"Do you want me to rub you?" Bunko asked.

Mam recognized something in his voice. "You mean . . . sexually?"

"Yes," he said.

Mam was a little horrified at the idea of having sex with her skeleton husband. "I don't have the equipment anymore, as you very well know."

"That's not true, you definitely have the equipment," he said, tapping his skull.

Mam smiled. She pulled her hoodie dress up so she could study her flat crotch.

She and Bunko had had sex with each other a bazillion times. They knew each other's bodies very well. But their bodies were new, now.

Bunko scooted over closer to Mam and propped himself up on his elbow. The handkerchiefs' movement made it like he was lying on a trampoline and a neighborhood kid was bouncing on it. He focused on his task and began to rub Mam with his finger bone. He couldn't see very well, of course, and her body no longer had crevices where there used to be crevices. And, sadly, there was no singularly sensitive place.

"Do you feel anything?" he asked hopefully.

Mam had closed her eyes. She was lying on her back, as if relaxing in the sea. She didn't want to look at Bunko. It would have freaked her out too much, Day of the Dead skeletons and their chipper merrymaking be damned.

"I think so," she said.

"Oh, good," Bunko said.

Bunko was frightening to look at, but not to listen to. When she listened to his voice, he was the same as he had always been: her beloved. She tried to relax, to not think about how she was trying to have sex with no sexual organs and also how there could be [freedom from confusion] at any moment.

She felt the handkerchiefs wave around her, softly. They were Lilliputian fans at the big game of her body, cheering on her orgasm.

Bunko continued stroking her.

"Oh," Mam said. Her eyes were still closed. "Something is happening."

"What?" asked Bunko.

"Is there a hole there, in my flat spot?" Mam asked. "A new hole?"

"There's nothing there, Mam," Bunko said, peering. "Nothing new that I can feel."

"But I feel an opening," Mam said. She used her finger to try to find where the hole was.

She looked at Bunko finally. Her face was flushed. "I want to put something in my hole," she said.

Bunko was confused. "What hole? The hole you open to learn something?" he asked.

She sat up on her elbows and opened her eyes to look at him. "No, Bunko, my vagina! One of the holes you used to use to enter me!"

"But it's not there now, Mam," he said, bewildered. "How can I put something in a hole that isn't there?"

"It's there," she said.

Mam closed her eyes, leaned back, and reached for Bunko's finger bones. Taking them, she rubbed the place where there was, indeed, no hole.

"Talk to me," she said.

This was new. Bunko and Mam had never done much dirty talk. Bunko was at a loss for what to say. He thought it was funny that he was having to learn something new sexually now when he was not only not alive anymore but actually had no penis.

“I once read an article by a colorectal surgeon who said the most common things he had removed from people’s colons were flashlights, carrots, and water bottles,” Bunko said.⁵⁶

“Oh,” Mam said.

“But here was the most surprising thing about that article,” Bunko continued. “Sometimes people would have to come to the surgeon more than once. For the same surgery!”

Mam said nothing. She used his finger bones to rub herself in a ticktock motion, like a metronome.

Bunko didn’t care what she did with his finger bones. “Imagine not being able to learn that you can’t put a flashlight up your bum!” Bunko laughed.

Mam began panting. “Ohhh,” she said.

“Isn’t it wonderful how people are so strange?” Bunko asked.

Bunko watched his beautiful wife with his not-there eyeballs. She was a swirl of vibrant colors. Like every professional athlete in the world mixed together, celebrating one gigantic win.

“Is your learning hole open?” Bunko asked her.

“Yes,” said Mam.

“Are you learning something right now?” he asked.

Mam’s voice had become small and far away. Her eyes were still closed. “Yes,” she said.

“What are you learning about?” Bunko asked.

“Where I can go,” Mam said.

INTRODUCTION THREE

HI, IT'S YOUR AUTHOR AGAIN. SO BYRON QUIT. WHO'S been doing the writing here? AI?

Anyhoo, I've been busy researching miracles. I found a good one from the year 1531. That's when the Virgin Mary appeared to a guy named Juan Diego on a hillside outside Mexico City. The Virgin told Juan Diego to go tell the bishop to build a shrine on this hillside.

Juan Diego told the bishop about this miraculous event, but the bishop didn't believe him. The bishop demanded that Juan Diego provide more proof that he had actually seen the Virgin.

Fortunately, the Virgin appeared to Juan Diego again. This time she gave him a sign to take with him when he went to see the bishop. This sign satisfied the bishop, and the shrine was built.

I felt sorry for Juan Diego when I read about this. He had never asked for this odd job of being an intra-realm communicator. It must have been difficult for him when he saw the Virgin and she gave him this miracle/homework assignment, and then doubly difficult when the bishop didn't trust him.

It does seem like people even now are quite suspicious of miracles. It's almost like, deep down, they don't want miracles to happen.

A miracle once happened in the life of your author: A hot, searing pain completely overcame her three graces. This pain was an indicator that the small human inside your author was ready to come out.

Your author was riding in a taxicab to the hospital. She was holding her three graces off the vinyl seat of the cab with her fingertips because she could not bear to have her graces come in contact with the cab seat. It would have been very good, at that moment, if you author could have been floating. But she could not float in that environment, unfortunately.

Imagine being a newborn baby. You float around in the womb for nine months, and then as soon as you leave that place and arrive here, gravity takes you down. It tackles you right away, so you know who's in charge. Among the very first things that happen in your life is that you feel gravity. No more floating for you, kid.

Gravity is a cop like that. And one of the first things you learn from this cop, now that he's got a hold of you, is that you can't lift your head. After floating around in the womb not even knowing that lifting your head is a thing you can do, you suddenly have to lift your head up all by yourself, and you have to do it—get this!—while an invisible force is trying, the entire time, to hold your head down. What kind of a welcome is that?

Imagine being a peasant, minding your own business, and then seeing the Virgin on a hillside, and then having the Virgin demand that you go ask the bishop to build a shrine for her. (Hello, Virgin, could you not have appeared to the bishop yourself?) That is really a pain-in-the-ass thing to have happen to a person. But also, it is a miracle that is celebrated in Mexico to this day.

A baby, too, is a pain in the ass and a miracle. And when the baby inside your author could not get out via the usual grace, a doctor was summoned, and he came and stood beside your author with a very sharp knife and sliced her open, and then he lifted the baby out of the womb while supporting its head, and we can assume that for the baby that this was a very nice development, as it allowed them to live for a few more seconds without the knowledge of gravity and its crushing effects.

ONE

IT WAS ALMOST MIDNIGHT WHEN PENNY CARRIED Gloria from the floorboard of Bill's car to the room Bill had gotten for them at the Golden Nugget. It was on the ground floor, with two double beds and a view of the hotel pool from the windows.

Penny set Gloria down on the window ledge. They could see the pool. Ah, water. Gloria knew that humans needed water, but from Gloria's observations, humans' relationship to water was, like everything else about them, a little off. Humans needed water, but they were always drinking all kinds of other bubbly stuff, brightly colored or brown. They drank stuff that made them fall over and throw up! Why the heck would they even do that when they could just drink water?

Watching humans drink everything-but-water only made Gloria more aware of what humans had that Gloria didn't: mobility. Plants had *some* mobility, of course—was Gloria not constantly dancing?—but Gloria couldn't walk across the hotel room to the minifridge, grab a tiny bottle of brown make-you-vomit water, and guzzle it.

Gloria's movements were more subtle. Rarified. Gloria was a plant, and plants saw themselves as the ballet dancers of the world, whereas they saw humans as the clowns. Humans were right up there with pandas.

Penny and Bill's room at the Golden Nugget was the most beautiful human environment Gloria had ever seen. The two, massive beds were each completely covered with a pristine white duvet that was itself covered with an intricately patterned cinnamon-brown bedspread that had been folded with military precision over the lower half of the bed. At the head of each bed were four white pillows in a two-by-two arrangement in which the rear pillows leaned against the headboard at a 45-degree angle, and the front pillows leaned against the rear pillows at the exact same slant. Each bed

was a kaleidoscope of pillows lying precisely on pillows and blankets carefully blanketing blankets with the final flourish being a long beige bolster placed along the base of the four-pillow construction like a carefully constructed bulkhead keeping some boxy, modern waterfront mansions from sliding into the sea.

The two beds—scrupulously composed by humans yet seemingly untouched—had an air of breathless expectation, like twin La Scalas seconds before the curtains opened on two *La Traviatas*.

Gloria watched with a combination of horror and envy as Penny bounced on one of the beds. There weren't many things that humans did that made Gloria jealous, but bouncing on a bed was one.

For the record, Gloria would also have loved to fly. But Gloria assumed every living thing wanted to fly, except fish, who probably assumed they were flying already.

Gloria did what they could to add to the good vibrations in the room. They performed a slow, somber dance composed to show their gratitude to the space, to its brown-on-brown synthetic shag carpet and its two fake-marble-topped dressers. Gloria also performed a dance offering peace to the mice she heard quibbling in the walls.

As they were dancing, Gloria regarded the pool. It was night now, and humans were swimming in water lit by purple-colored lights. Gloria did not want to swim—they knew it would mean immediate drowning. But that purple water was entrancing! Gloria watched it, understanding again how houseplants' lives were narrow but full. For plants, life was movement, but not much movement; water, but not much water. Houseplants were like fairies—exquisite, delicate, eating sun.

In babyhood, before Gloria was bought, they had lived in a nursery. That had been, by far, the worst period of Gloria's life. Separated from their mother-father in the terrible propagating incident, they were alone in a pot, watered only when they were close to death. They spent long weekends in the dark, on a shelf by a sink near none of their plant brethren. They could hear water dripping but couldn't reach it. They listened to roaches clicking, making terrible plans. They were aware when they were dying and prepared themselves for death each time. They went over their life and saw what they regretted. They prayed for forgiveness. They were as ready to die as they could be. Still, they loved their life.

And then, every time, at what seemed like the last possible second, a hungover nursery worker slopped water on them, and Gloria felt the magnificence of it.

You might think Gloria would hate people, being so dependent on them, rooted in their pot and dying of thirst, as they watched them slosh past in their water-filled bodies, guzzling their not-water drinks, blind to the fact that Gloria was even there, let alone observing them, reciting poems for them that they couldn't hear.

But Gloria didn't hate people. Gloria loved them.

•

Penny was in the bathroom taking a steamy shower. Bill lay on his back on the bed. He was tired from driving. It was late.

Bill looked at the rough texture of the stucco ceiling. His father had died before he was born, his mother had recently died, and now his sister was gone. He was an orphan.

Well, so what? he told himself. Lots of people were orphans. He had had a parent when he really needed one, that first couple of years, when you had to have someone to feed you and wipe your butt.

He was lucky, he thought. He was spending his time taking his unfortunate niece to Sin City. So what if he wasn't studying psychology right now? This was practically a psychology internship!

He looked at Gloria on the window ledge. Gloria was so perfect, he thought. So contained. So detached from everything. All he wanted to do was grow like that, naturally, without a struggle. If only it could be as easy for him.

He lay there for a while waiting for Penny to come out of the bathroom so he could go in and brush his teeth. It was taking a long time. She was in there making golden nuggets, maybe. Who knew with girls? They took forever doing anything in a bathroom.

Bill fell asleep.

•

Bill opened his eyes. It was morning.

Penny's bed was empty.

He sat up. "Pen?"

The bathroom door was open. She wasn't in there.

"Fuckfuckfuck," he muttered as he grabbed his phone and ran out the door.

TWO

AFTER KYLE AND WIDDERSHINS HAD FINISHED THEIR market research, they had gone to Kyle's apartment and smoked some pot. Then Widdershins had taken a brave step: He had transformed from his bodybuilder form into his regular demon one because Kyle had asked him to.

Now Widdershins was in hell, at the door of his HVAC guy's office. He felt a little vulnerable, being out and about in his natural demon form after not appearing that way in public for so long. He was wearing athletic shorts, plastic slides, and a T-shirt stretched over his chunky belly. He hoped he wouldn't run into Satan looking like this. But he might, because the HVAC guy's office was around the corner from Satan's office, in a really remote and exclusive corner of hell. This area of hell was so remote and exclusive, in fact, that you couldn't hear the cries of the damned or the endless loop of irritating music.

Instead, it was silent, and the silence was very deep. It was as deep as the silence in a room where a convicted man has just said his last words.

Perhaps it was like the silence after David Renteria said his last words. Renteria had been convicted in 2003 of abducting and killing a five-year-old two years before. He was executed by lethal injection on November 16, 2023, in Huntsville, Texas.⁵⁷

Among his last words were these:

To my family, I love you. To my family out there, and my brothers on death row/life row, I love you. To the people that have shown compassion and that have been there for me, you are my true family and I have been pleased. I am a man of many faults. For those I have hurt and caused pain in their life, I beg for forgiveness. Let everyone know I am sorry for all the

wrongs that I have done. For those that called for me and transgressed against me and want me murdered, I forgive you. I truly do.

I have been blessed (by) God these three to four years. Something was brought about by courageous men of God to make something beautiful. I learned grace. I learned forgiveness. I learned love. I learned to look at others with love no matter who they are. I have learned there is no redemption above forgiveness.⁵⁸

Widdershins opened the door of the office. He found Chauncy, the HVAC goblin, sitting in an ergonomic office chair, reading a book.

“Come on in,” Chauncy said, not looking up from his page.

“You got my text?” Widdershins asked.

“Yep,” Chauncy said, still reading.

It was tidy as hell in Chauncy’s office. His tools were hung on pegs on the wall or sorted neatly in organizers that were tucked away in metal drawers. Screws and nails were stored in mason jars with labels on them, and lined up along metal shelves in alphabetical order.

Widdershins wondered if Chauncy wanted his workspace this orderly or if this was part of the broader aesthetic change that had happened in hell after Satan got into organizing. Before Satan had decided to install the dioramas, hell was, to put it bluntly, a total effing mess. Then Satan read a book about decluttering, and he had the epiphany that all organizers have: The key to making spaces tidy is putting small things into bigger things. That’s when he discovered dioramas.

Satan ordered billions of dioramas for hell and began to insert groups of people into each one. It was like the greatest episode of *Extreme Makeover* the world had never seen. Before the dioramas were installed, hell was like a Bosch painting. After the dioramas, it was like a late-career Mondrian. People in hell now had their own little environments, and those environments could be controlled by Satan. Best of all, Satan could oversee and admire it all from a distance as he walked contentedly along his black marble halls, admiring various types of horror and chaos as if they were the holiday windows at Saks.

“So you want to power down the handkerchiefs on Cloud Six,” Chauncy said.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“The whole place was a mistake. I’m letting it go.”

Chauncy rubbed his forehead. “Well, if you shut that down, it’s going to affect the circulation everywhere, you realize.”

“So?”

The goblin raised an eyebrow at Widdershins. Then he got up and walked over to the Cloud Six control panel. A screen displayed a view of Ernestine, standing alone in the handkerchief-covered landscape.

“I always liked those handkerchiefs,” Chauncy said. “They remind me of the way water would be depicted in an elementary school play.”

Widdershins sighed.

Chauncy showed him where the button to power down the system was. It stuck out of the control panel like a clown nose.

Widdershins didn’t have time to dawdle. He had volunteered to help out at the church rummage sale.

He pushed the red button.

“See you,” he said to Chauncy as he hurried out the door.

Chauncy had resumed reading. He turned the page.

INTRODUCTION FOUR

HI, IT'S ME AGAIN, AMY.

Yesterday I walked into my building, and someone was in the elevator already, holding the door open for me.

I didn't know it was Satan. I thought it was a regular guy in a fuzzy red sweater who was visiting another apartment. The guy admired my shoes, which were black platform clogs covered with black sequins. He asked me where I got them, and I told him—online.

I thought that was the end of that conversation. The elevator moved slowly up the inside of my building like kundalini energy rising up a human spine.

As I was about to get off at my floor, the guy looked at my shoes and let out a low whistle.

"You better live," he said to me somberly.

"I will," I said. It was like a vow he got me to say there, in the elevator.

When I got into my apartment, I was rattled. *Wow, that was a weird thing for a stranger to say to a stranger*, I thought. *You better live?*

Then for a second I wondered if I had done something to make him think I *wasn't* living.

Then for another second I thought, *Maybe I'm not living*.

Is it possible that I am not living?

Anything is possible. I truly believe this.

I sat down on my couch and decided I was being dramatic. *You better live* was not a weird, menacing thing for a stranger to say to another stranger in an elevator, I assured myself. He must have meant it to be encouraging. He must have meant it like *You better live up to those great shoes of yours* or *You better go out and enjoy your life in that fine footwear*.

It bothered me, though. *Am I living?* is actually not such an easy question to answer. I mean, my heart is beating. The air is going in and out of my lungs. All my holes are filling up and emptying in obviously not-dead-person ways. I am, by all available measurements, alive in my body, that is, the dynamic vessel I dwell in, peering out the two upper-floor windows like I'm on a spaceship that is slowly taking me somewhere—where?—my whole life long.

I am alive. But am I living?

I got up to get some water from the kitchen as the question swirled around in my skull like a goldfish doing laps around a plastic pirate ship.

I thought: *You know, maybe I'm not living.*

I had to sit down again after I thought that. I sat on the couch in my apartment where I've lived for twenty years. I don't even see the place anymore; I only dimly recognize various piles that have accrued around me, slowly, like coral. I don't really know what their purpose is—they're just my thing-friends that have accumulated here with no effort on my part.

I stood up and walked over to the kitchen island and admired the red tulips I'd bought yesterday and put into a vase. The tulips were dying, by which I mean they were living, by which I mean they were dying, and also, they were talking to me. To be more precise, they were yelling at me and while they were yelling, they were thrusting their sexual organs in my face.

The poor flowers could barely hold their swollen gonads up, but they tried, and as they tried, they were shouting:

Look! Look!

You have it all backward!

You have it all upside down!

Your sex is below but it should be above!

It should be where your eyes and ears are!

It should be where your brain is!

Stop thinking!

Start loving!

Love this world!

The flowers were raving like they were dying, which was how I knew they were alive. They were surrounded by a nimbus that contained every color, and every color was yelling:

This is an emergency!

Why do you not understand?

Hello!

I heard the flowers speaking so clearly, it was like I had a PhD in Flower Utterances, and with my newfound intelligence, I got on the phone in my head and called 911, and when the woman there answered I said, “Hi, there are some multicolored, many-dimensional beings in a vase in my apartment and they are yelling at me while thrusting their sexual organs in my face.”

“Are they conscious?” the 911 woman asked me.

I had no doubts about this now. “Yes. They are conscious and they are frightening me with their beauty and their righteousness.”

The 911 woman told me to hold on. And then Satan got on the phone.

“Hey, how does it feel?” he asked. I could hear him grinning.

I was so annoyed! Why couldn’t he leave me alone?

But then suddenly I understood: It was Satan who had been in the elevator with me before, in the fuzzy red sweater. It was Satan who had gotten that vow out of me—to say, yes, I would live.

Satan had tricked me! That cocksucker!

I didn’t say those words to Satan, though. I only thought them, in my head.

He heard them, though. Of course he did.

“Aww, come on,” he said. “You can’t hate me because I showed you the truth.”

Screw you, Satan, I thought, and got off the phone.

My flowers had stopped yelling. Now they were singing. Their song had no words. And as the flowers sang, they stretched their petals up toward my face like they wanted to have sex with whatever part of my body they could reach. And I stood there at my kitchen island in this world I’d thought I knew so well, but I didn’t, I didn’t at all.

I put my face deep in the flowers and I let them touch me.

ONE

MAM WAS DONE WITH LEARNING ABOUT WHERE SHE could go. She lay down, still rocking slightly in the swaying handkerchiefs, her underwear around her ankles.

Bunko lay beside her. Suddenly the handkerchiefs emitted a long, tired *Shhhhhhh*. The mechanism that had kept the handkerchiefs waving stopped. Cloud Six suddenly became quiet.

Mam sat up. “Bunko, did you feel that? The handkerchiefs stopped waving!”

Bunko groaned.

“What’s wrong?” Mam asked him.

“My bones hurt, Mam. And my sight is worse, I swear. I’m only seeing shapes now. Even your face . . .”

“What does my face look like?”

“A blob with three black holes in it.”

“Like a bowling ball?”

“Yes, if the bowling ball were shaped more like a peanut.”

“Oh, like *The Scream*.”⁵⁹

“That’s it,” Bunko said appreciatively.

“That’s kind of frightening,” Mam said.

“I think I’ve come to the end of the road, Mam,” said wearily.

“What are you talking about? You are at the opposite of the end of the road.”

Bunko huffed. “The beginning of the road? How can you say that?”

Mam pulled her underwear up and got to her feet. For the first time, the handkerchiefs lay completely flat and motionless beneath her sneakers. Her legs felt rubbery, like she had stepped off a boat and was back on dry land.

“Because now you’re a skeleton—you’ve transformed into the thing humans are supposed to transform into when they die. You did your homework, Bunko! Good job! Now you get to do whatever’s next. You get to become a butterfly!”

“Mam, what’s next for skeletons is not becoming a butterfly! It’s rotting in the ground and disappearing! Do you not know the most basic biology?”

“Bunko, you know I don’t know the most basic biology!” Mam said, bringing up her long-ago shameful F in Mrs. Tibias’s high school biology class, something Bunko still teased her about. “But I do know you’ve transformed! What about all that stuff you were just saying to me about how beautiful it is here? What happened to all that?”

“I don’t know. I’m just certain that I’m not a butterfly.”

“Okay, what are you, then?”

Bunko lay flat on his back like Gregor Samsa. “I don’t know.”

“So you’re not a butterfly and you’re also not anything else,” Mam said. “Fine.”

“I’m bones. But I’m still myself in my bones—that’s the funny part.”

Mam stood there and thought about a time in her childhood when she felt like she was bones. There was indeed such a time. It was on a day when her parents were arguing in the kitchen, and her father clocked her mother on the side of the head, and her mother fell down on the linoleum floor, and her father looked up and saw that she was standing there watching him, and he told her in a quiet voice that she’d better not tell anyone what she’d seen or she’d have the same coming to her only worse, and then he turned and walked out the back door of their house, and Mam went to help her mother, but her mother said to leave her alone, so Mam stood there and watched her mother crawl, bleeding from her mouth, a canine tooth missing, into their little powder room off the kitchen with its yellow-clamshell wallpaper.

Mam stood there and regarded her brilliant husband: a skeleton wearing no pants.

“Bunko, do you think you could go a little farther with me? It’s easier to walk now that the handkerchiefs have stopped. Let’s go a little farther, and then I promise we’ll do something fun.”

Mam realized she was speaking to her husband like he was a toddler she was trying to bribe. But that was okay, she told herself. Toddlers were tough, and so was Bunko. This tactic was justified.

“What will we do that’s fun?”

“I don’t know. Maybe, for just a minute, we can stop trying to find the bodega.”

“But we can stop trying to find the bodega *now*,” Bunko whined.

“Bunko, I can’t stop trying to find the bodega. I need to try to see Penny.”

“That’s okay—you try,” Bunko said. “I’m not going to try anymore.”

She had one more idea, but she was afraid to say it. She took a deep breath.

“What if I carry you?”

Bunko turned his head to look at her, but she knew that he was seeing her in skull-vision.

“Mam, I am a literal bunch of bones. If you want to carry me, I can’t stop you.”

Mam was encouraged. This wasn’t an outright rejection. “Can you stand up? If you stand up, I’ll see if I can hoist you onto my shoulders.”

“Okay,” he said, and he pushed himself up to standing.

Mam pulled Bunko’s sweatshirt off him. He didn’t need it, and she could grasp him more easily without it. Then she took off his survival kit. She unzipped it and dug around in it to make sure it was empty. Then she set it aside.

Mam crouched down in front of Bunko, with her back to him. Bunko leaned forward, onto her back. Mam straightened up, then, bearing his weight, hopped a couple of times, hoisting him higher on her back with each hop. Then she maneuvered him onto her shoulders.

She was surprised at how easy it was to lift him. That was the one good thing about his losing all that flesh: He only weighed only about twenty-five pounds now.

When at last Mam stood up straight, Bunko’s skull was hanging over her right shoulder and his legs were hanging off her left. She took a step with him; she felt like her neck was in a yoke. She imagined herself as a fat man in a Bruegel painting, wearing a dirty red tunic and smiling with rotten teeth.

Bunko’s bones clinked as she shifted him to a slightly more comfortable position on her shoulders. She thought about that bottle of liquor that she had chucked into their garbage can a million years ago: Monkey Shoulder, it was called. Oh, she had been indignant about that, hadn’t she? Well, who had a monkey on her shoulder now?

“Okay, we’re going,” she said to him. She took a step.
If she could take one step, another was possible, she thought.
She took another step.
“You’re a good person, Mam,” Bunko said.
“Am I,” she said as she continued walking.

TWO

UMFALA HAD JUST COME OUT OF SURGERY. SHE NO longer resembled Brenda. The surgery had required her to return to her original demon form.

Dr. Monde had come to her bedside. His white scrubs were splattered with black demon blood.

“I’m sorry, Heffalump, the surgery didn’t go as well as we’d hoped,” he said.

Her throat was dry. “Umfala,” she croaked.

Dr. Monde didn’t hear her. “We stomped and stomped on that demon-rot cockroach, but we just weren’t able to smoosh him. He’s still in there, hiding,” he said.

Umfala closed her eyes. She felt Dr. Monde put his hand on hers. “After you recover from this, you’ll have to return to the hospital for more treatment and then more surgery.”

Umfala opened her eyes. Dr. Monde was gone. There was a hospital tray in front of her, with a three-hundred-piece puzzle of an adorable cartoon kitten with no mouth. She had started this puzzle before her surgery.

“Hey,” Widdershins said, popping in. He was still in his regular demon form, to please Kyle.

Umfala was too spent to register surprise at seeing her old boss. “Oh, hi,” she said, wearily. “I’m glad you’re here. My surgery didn’t go well. I’m not coming back to work.”

“It’s fine,” Widdershins said, peering at the puzzle on the table and then putting a piece of the kitten’s paw into place. “That’s what I came here to tell you—there’s no need to come back to work. I’m done with Cloud Six.”

“You’re *done* with it?”

“I’m letting it go.”

Umfala was unimpressed. “You did that a long time ago.”

“What do you mean? I covered for you after you quit unexpectedly.”

Umfala snorted. “You covered for me? You put out a clipboard.”

Widdershins waved his hand dismissively.

“And I didn’t quit unexpectedly. I told you the situation I was in. I took an emergency leave of absence for my health!”

Widdershins could not be bothered with this minor demon’s complaints. He contemplated the flowers, rainbows, mushrooms, birds, musical notes, stars, and clouds that surrounded the kitten in the puzzle. The items were floating, untethered, as if part of the kitten’s aura. He remembered reading that the creator of this famous kitten had insisted that she was not a cat.⁶⁰

“So you came here, right after my surgery, to tell me you’re abandoning your business, which means, presumably, that I no longer have health insurance?”

Widdershins had no snappy comeback for that.

Umfala took a deep breath and waved her right arm. A wood-framed window appeared in the air. It was the window in a guest room at an oceanfront hotel in Tulum, Mexico.

Widdershins looked through the window. He could see a tiny Jet Ski zooming across the water. He smelled the salty ocean air.

Panting, Umfala pulled herself out of bed, hoisted herself onto the window frame, and crouched there.

“Adios, asshole,” she gasped.

She clambered through the window in her hospital gown and disappeared into the playa.

THREE

MAM PLODDED ALONG WITH BUNKO ON HER SHOULDERS. Bunko's humerus, radius, and ulna dangled down from her right shoulder like an accessory Mam might have worn to Burning Man if she had ever gone to that festival, which she hadn't. She hadn't gone to enough festivals in her life, she realized now. She should have gone to a festival every day.

I am strong, Mam said to herself as she walked along with Bunko clinking. *I am powerful*.

The handkerchiefs were not waving anymore, but they were slippery. Mam felt like she was trying to navigate rocks in a creek. She wished there were something like a rope bridge she could use to walk over them, but if there was a rope bridge anywhere around this place, she hadn't found it.

Her mother had always told her that no matter how bad things looked, you could always find something to be grateful for. Mam had thought her mother was the biggest dunce ever when she said that. But now it was many years later, her mother was dead, and it didn't seem like such a moronic statement.

I am grateful for my flesh, which muffles the sound of my bones clinking, Mam thought as she walked.

"I suppose you'll see a light?" Bunko asked her. "When you find the bodega?"

"You would think I would see a light," Mam said.

"Maybe there won't be any light," Bunko said.

"There was light when we first arrived here," Mam said. "When we came to Cloud Six and saw Brenda in that office. And ever since we came to the handkerchiefs, there has been a bright light on us all the time."

Bunko remembered that little welcome area with the blinky bulb they had first stumbled into. It seemed so long ago.

“I think the light is changing now, though,” Mam said. “It seems to be getting darker.”

“Can light just disappear like that?” Bunko asked, sounding a little panicky. “Doesn’t it have to come back?”

“I don’t think light has to do anything except be,” Mam said.

A FABLE

A MONKEY, A HORSE, AND A PIGLET STOOD IN THE GRAY doorway leading into the Cloud Six welcome office.

“Hello?” the horse called.

The monkey ran in and clambered up onto the desk.

“What’s this thing?” the monkey asked the horse, pointing to a clipboard with a pen on a string attached to it.

“I think it’s how we check into this hotel,” said the horse.

The piglet snuffled around on the terrazzo floor, looking for crumbs.

The monkey chewed the pen. “I don’t understand how to work this,” he said.

“Why do we have to check in?” asked the piglet.

“We probably have to *sneak* in,” said the monkey. “Because most hotels only allow dogs.”

“I’m surprised there’s not a person here,” the horse said. He was munching the cushion on the seat of the office chair where Umfala had once sat. “Usually people are standing at the doors at these places.”

“Why?” asked the piglet.

“To keep other people from stealing, I think,” said the horse.

“People steal so frequently!” exclaimed the piglet. “Why do they do that?”

“Because living is so expensive!” replied the horse. “Have you seen how much money it costs humans to do something totally basic, like get sick and die?”

“But why should it be so expensive to get sick and die? Everyone has to die!” said the piglet.

“I don’t think humans have learned that they are human,” said the horse.

“Yeah. They keep thinking they are something else,” the monkey agreed.

“Like what?” asked the piglet.

“Something plastic,” said the monkey as he slapped the pig’s butt with the clipboard.

“Oooh!” the piglet squealed.

“Stop that!” said the horse. “Climb onto my back, and I’ll walk us through this other door.”

The monkey picked up the piglet and clambered onto the horse’s back.

“Yay! We’re sneaking into the hotel!” the monkey squealed as the horse began to walk toward the rear door with the two animals perched on his back.

“What if this isn’t a hotel?” the piglet asked. “What if it’s someplace terrible?”

The horse didn’t know where they were going, and he was nervous about that. But he didn’t want to show it.

“We’re not going someplace terrible,” he told them as he walked them toward Cloud Six. “We’re going someplace wonderful.”

•

There is no moral to this story.

Or there is a moral, and it’s this quote by Marcus Aurelius.

I mean, Lil Wayne:

I’m probably in the sky, flying with the fishes,
Or maybe in the ocean, swimming
with the pigeons
See, my world is different.⁶¹

FOUR

MAM HAD BEEN CARRYING BUNKO ON HER SHOULDERS for what seemed like a long time. Bunko was quiet. Mam was alone with her thoughts.

She was surprised to realize that she missed her other two graces, her urethra and anus, and the activities that came along with them. She hadn't been fond of those activities when she had to do them, of course. Back then, when she had to stop what she was doing to do her business, she had done it resentfully. It was like her ass had called her head on the ass phone and said, *Hurry up, come down here and deal with me*, and Mam, who liked to stay in her head, had left her head to deal with her ass, and then when she was done, she ran back up to her head as quickly as possible.

Now she wasn't sure where in her body she was. Maybe it was her head, maybe not. She listened for sounds from other parts of her body, but no other parts seemed to be calling her. No knee or elbow was sending her memes.

Oh well, Mam thought, I'll probably just trudge like this until I can't anymore, and given my current condition, with my zero physical needs, I can probably continue like this forever. Maybe I will be like Sisyphus. Maybe this is some sort of penance. Maybe I did something terrible in my life and I don't remember what it was, and I just have to plod on like this, with my skeleton husband on my shoulders, for all eternity.

Mam tried to think what she might have done in her life that was so terrible besides failing to fully appreciate her three graces when she had them and marry a drunk whose fundamental condition she was never able to fully acknowledge. Was that really so bad? Look at Sisyphus. He had tricked the personification of death, known as Thanatos, by chaining him up, thus briefly preventing anyone from dying. She had never tried to do anything remotely that badass.

But wait, she thought. Wait. I did try to kill death—of course, I did. Every, single day, I tried to kill death. I exercised and tried to eat right and took pills to keep my bones from breaking and my heart from clogging and my mind from wanting me to unalive myself, and I mostly stayed away from booze and drugs even though I surely would have had more fun if I hadn't, and I tried to keep my brain nimble by playing Scrabble with robots, and I got vaccinated against all sorts of diseases, and if those vaccines slipped a microchip deep in my flesh to track my movements for nefarious purposes—oh well. Plus, I slopped hand sanitizer and sunscreen all over myself and colored my hair so it wouldn't be gray, which is not really a death-killing activity, only a surface-level imitation of youth. But make no mistake, I told death in every way I could: Get out. And I said this while really and truly believing like an idiot that death wasn't already living inside me, biding its sweet time very comfortably indeed.

Mam shook her head as if to shake out the thoughts. “Bunko, I want to sit down,” she said.

“Okay,” he said. His voice was so soft now.

Mam lowered him down from her shoulders and onto her back. She set him down gently in the flat handkerchiefs. Then she sat down herself and closed her eyes.

“You’ve been carrying me for a long time,” he whispered.

“Yep,” she replied.

“Maybe I could walk a bit.”

“Could you, now?” Mam opened her eyes, surprised.

Bunko lifted his leg and extended it. He looked like a skeleton ballerina. Suddenly, his left leg fell off at the knee; it clunked onto the ground.

“Good god!” Bunko rasped. He picked his leg up and tried to reattach it like it was a Lego piece that had fallen off a creation.

“Oh my god, oh my god,” Mam said. She watched as Bunko tried to figure out how the leg bone connected to the knee bone.

As Bunko was fussing with his leg, his right hand dropped to the ground.

“Oh my god, what is happening?” Mam cried. “Bunko, are you falling apart on me?”

Bunko picked up his right hand with his left one. He tried to see how the hand bone connected to the wrist bone. But he couldn't see very well,

and he hadn't figured out the connection between the leg bone and the knee bone yet.

"Don't these things attach?" he croaked.

Just as he finished saying that, one of his ribs dropped off.

"Goddamn it!" he cried.

"Oh, oh!" Mam yelped, picking up his hand as she began to sob out her ears. She tried to attach his hand to his wrist herself, but she couldn't figure out how to do it. She had a second in which she wondered where she had put the manual for her husband's skeleton, but then she remembered there was no manual—there were only doctors, which she couldn't afford, and YouTube and TikTok, which she didn't have access to now.

Bunko was scared that more parts would drop off him. He lay down flat on his back. He thought he'd better get as low to the ground as possible and stay there and not move.

"Bunko, what can we do?" Mam sobbed, trying to bail out her wet ears with the inefficient buckets of her fingers.

"I don't know," he said. "But I wonder, if all my bones keep dropping off me, where am *I*? Which bone is the *me* bone? Which bone am I in?"

Mam couldn't answer any of those questions. "Oh, let me hold you, Bunko," she cried.

Mam held him. He tried to return her hug, but another one of his ribs fell off his sternum, so then he stopped trying to do anything at all.

"Oh, Mam, I don't want to leave you! I love you so much! Where am I going?"

"I love you, too, Bunko," Mam said, holding his fragile skeleton body. "I love you, I love you, even if you are a bunch of bones that aren't connected."

"I am a bunch of bones that aren't connected," he murmured in awe. "How is that possible?"

"It's okay," Mam said. "I will gather you and put you together."

"I'm scared of what else will drop off me, Mam. How many more things can drop off me before I can't speak anymore?"

"Speaking isn't important," Mam said.

That was easy for her to say.

"It's pretty important," Bunko rasped.

Mam sat cradling the remaining parts of Bunko. She didn't want to grasp them too tightly, because she didn't want to cause any more of them

to break off.

Just then, Mam and Bunko heard a strange sound, like a child squealing.

Mam turned around. In the distance, she saw an empty hospital bed zooming toward them at top speed. A bouquet of colorful balloons was tied to the bed rail.

“What’s that?” Mam asked.

“I can’t see,” whimpered Bunko.

The bed passed them and careened toward the horizon, becoming smaller.

“Maybe it’s an angel coming to help us,” Mam said. “*Hey! Over here!*” she yelled.

The bed continued zooming at top speed in the wrong direction.

Bunko wheezed as his foot dropped off at the ankle.

“I wonder what it will feel like when I turn into a butterfly,” Bunko said.

Mam wiped away more ear tears.

Bunko said, his voice quavering, “Oh, did I even learn anything in all the time I was alive? And then all this other time I’ve been dead?”

“Bunko, you learned so many things! You did so much reading and so much research, and you learned so much about what was true in the world!”

Bunko was really falling to pieces now. Mam held his skull in the crook of her arm, like a baby.

Mam looked up. The white sky had turned gray. And it looked heavy, Mam thought, like it was about to snow.

But it hadn’t snowed yet.

FIVE

PENNY WOKE UP EARLY, EXCITED TO BE IN LAS VEGAS. She thought she would explore the sumptuous hotel while Bill was still asleep. She'd be back in ten minutes, she told herself.

The Golden Nugget was so opulent! Penny couldn't believe Bill had sprung for it. He had paid for their stay with the money that was supposed to go toward paying next semester's tuition, he told her. But now that he was taking a semester off college, he explained, that money was freed up.

Penny liked the idea of money that was suddenly free. She walked out of their room and down the hallway to the entrance of the pool. The pool featured a shark tank on one side of it. The sharks weren't huge, but they were mean-looking. They circled tirelessly. The point of the tank seemed to be to enable you to take a selfie in a lounge chair with a shark swimming behind you showing its terrible teeth.

Penny took such a selfie. Then she walked to the pool itself and stuck her toes in the water. *Very warm*, she thought approvingly. She was tempted to wade into the pool with all her clothes on. She got mad at herself for not bringing a bathing suit, but maybe she could buy one here if they weren't too expensive. She hadn't known what kind of trip this would be when she packed for it. She still didn't know.

She wandered from the pool into the hotel lobby with its multiple chandeliers and ornate gold detailing on the ceiling. She passed the welcome desk, where two women in stylish brown suits stood like sexy sentries. She saw the limos pulling into the U-shaped driveway and dropping off scrubbed-looking guys with straight white teeth. Probably orthodontists, she thought.

She took a right out of the hotel, walked half a block, and ventured into an indoor mall, which was several stories tall and awash in tiny colored

lights. That would have been enough to take in, but then she noticed that people overhead were flying on zip lines that ran the entire length of the mall, and then farther, out over the street.

She followed the zip lines to the ride's start, located the ticket booth, and then chatted with the guy stationed there. He asked her how old she was, and she said eighteen because she had learned to lie about her age when talking to adults if she wanted to do anything fun.

The guy let her swipe her debit card, which she hadn't used since the last time Mam had deposited a hundred dollars in her account for emergencies. Well, this was an emergency, she decided.

The guy had her sign a waiver. Then he pointed her to an area where another worker was waiting to help her into the harness.

Penny had a choice between two harnesses. One let her fly like she was sitting on an airplane, and the other let her fly like she was Superman. She decided to go with Superman. The worker woman helped Penny into the harness, then locked the buckles and made sure the harness was attached securely to the overhead line.

Penny stood and waited excitedly for the steel clamshell door to open. Once it opened, the zip-line mechanism would shoot her out the door and high over the street.

The door slowly opened, like the mouth of a giant steel puppet. Penny flew out. Other people flew parallel to Penny on separate zip lines. An older woman to her left was also in the Superman pose. She smiled at Penny and gave her a thumbs-up; Penny smiled back and returned the gesture. Penny thought of her mother. If her mother were here, she would have been taking pictures of Penny from the street below. But Penny had no mother anymore. She was alone now—an orphan, a young woman, a Superman. She didn't know what she was.

She flew.

She flew, her zip line attached to the domed roof of the indoor mall. She imagined she was traversing a bedazzled birth canal. Whatever her actual birth had been like, it should have been more like this, she thought. She should have moved through the birth canal in a Superman position, with her legs extended behind her and her toes pointing, admiring sparkling casinos and ice cream parlors. That would have been a much better way to enter the world.

She breezed past the casino signs—THE FOUR QUEENS, THE FREMONT, EL CORTEZ, THE PLAZA, THE DOWNTOWN GRAND—and then she soared out of the mall through a portal they had built there for the zip-liners. She found herself, thrillingly, over an intersection where cars sped by underneath her, honking. Then she wheeled over the Glitter Gulch, with its cute neon cowgirl kicking up her boot; then Binions, La Bayou, Circa, and, finally, the Golden Gate, which wasn't a bridge at all in this landscape. It was a casino and hotel. That's where her ride ended, at the Golden Gate not-a-bridge.

She landed on the platform. A photographer offered to take her picture; Penny agreed. She stood there and smiled with her harness on and the blinking lights behind her. A different assistant helped her out of the harness after the picture was taken.

She felt a little wobbly as she walked down the stairs and waited at the counter to see her picture. She wanted to buy a digital version to send to Lydia. She realized then that she had been gone for a while. She hoped Bill wasn't awake yet.

SIX

LIGHT GRAY ASH HAD BEGUN SWIRLING IN THE AIR around Mam.

The handkerchiefs, motionless now, looked dirty.

Bunko had stopped talking. His skeleton had completely fallen apart. The bones that were once big, like his femur, had crumbled into smaller fragments. Some of the smallest bones, like the ones in his fingers, had turned to dust. The biggest single bone remaining was his skull, and even that was starting to break into chunks.

Mam had put her black hood up over head. She had gathered up the skirt of her sweatshirt dress so that it made a bowl. She carried Bunko's bones in there as she walked.

Mam thought she smelled smoke. Wasn't it hell, not heaven, that was supposed to be on fire? She remembered back when she was a kid, writing her high school newspaper column. She wished she could write it again now. She wished she could talk to people and ask them better questions than "What's your favorite flavor of ice cream?" If she could do it all again, she wouldn't waste so many words on stupid subjects. She would talk about death more. She would talk about death all the time.

She saw a hint of color in the gray ahead of her. It was a faint yellow, like an infection. She kept her eye on it. Slowly, as she walked, it became a gray-green-yellow.

It was beautiful. She was reminded of their friend, Ernestine. She wondered how Ernestine was. She said a prayer: *Please help Ernestine.*

The gray-green-yellow color seemed like a wild animal out there in the distance, a lion with green-and-yellow eyes. She continued to walk toward the lion that might eat her. The joy of walking toward something new and colorful and also possibly dangerous made her tremble. She had been going nowhere for such a long time.

She worried, for a second, that this color was a mirage, that she was making it all up in her head. She was truly crazy now, maybe.

Well, then, let me be crazy, she said to herself.

Mam held the bowl of her sweatshirt dress carefully. With each step, the yellow in the distance lost its sickliness and became brighter and more lemony. The brightness was starting to scare her—the color seemed to have a huge amount of energy.

The ash was still swirling around her, heavier now.

Maybe she was walking into the sun? Could she really be that lost?

She could, she knew. She really could be that lost.

She looked down at her hands, which were holding the skirt of her dress.

Her hands had lost their flesh. Bones.

She stopped walking. She looked at her arms—bones.

Her hoodie dress hung on her, huge now.

Her sight had dimmed. She began walking again, tentatively, toward the color. She could smell the yellow now. It was starting to turn more orange. It had a warm smell, like cloves. She opened her jaw wide to smell it better. She thought she could taste the light.

She began to hear human voices emanating from the color. They were singing together sweetly, off-key.

She tried to figure out what they were singing.

It sounded like a sea chantey.

SEVEN

WHERE WOULD PENNY GO? BILL THOUGHT. HE TRIED calling and texting. No answer.

He admonished himself: Why hadn't he insisted that Penny put one of those tracking apps on her phone? What kind of guardian was he?

He had run out of their hotel room without knowing where he was going. He soon discovered that the Golden Nugget was not laid out in a very organized way. There were a lot of nooks and crannies in it. It was not even one hotel, like you would think it would be, since it had a singular name. No, the singular Golden Nugget was actually three hotels, each of which had a separate lobby. The singular Golden Nugget also had ten restaurants, eleven bars and lounges, seven retail stores, a casino, and the aforementioned pool with the shark tank. Even worse for Bill, however, was the fact that not only were many of the bars and lounges graced with shadowy names that included words like *hideout*, *cave*, and *grotto*, but they were also dimly lit, and welcomed you inside them even if you were too young to drink.

Bill ran around the ground floor of the hotel, wondering what Bruce Lee would do right now. Bruce Lee would love the Golden Nugget, that was for sure. He would start a fight immediately in each of the three lobbies. He would break a shit ton of glass.

Bill gave himself a talking-to: Penny was a skinny sixteen-year-old girl with long dirty-blond hair. She was alone, wearing shorts, a T-shirt, and grandpa sneakers. Not every teen girl looked like that.

But now Bill was finding out how very wrong he was. Every teen girl did, in fact, look like that, which was how the Golden Nugget revealed its truly hellish, multidimensional nature as a conglomeration of hotels, restaurants, caves, and grottoes that was also hall of mirrors.

Penny! Where was she? Had she been abducted, duct-taped, thrown in the trunk of a car—

“*Penny!*” he shouted as he ran a final lap around the lobby of the Golden Nugget’s Rush Tower, past a strange, cheerless-looking place called the H₂O Hideout, then past the pool area with the shark tank—the water looked cloudy there, he noticed, and for a millisecond, while he was running, he hoped the sharks swimming in that murky stuff were okay. “*Penny!*”

People were swiveling their heads to stare at him, and for another millisecond he thought how funny it was, really, that in a glittering casino where people were currently betting and losing literally thousands of dollars, he was frantically running around yelling the name of the lowest possible denomination of U.S. currency.

Finally, he did the unthinkable: He allowed himself to imagine that Penny had left the whirling, gold-colored cornucopia of the hotel and entered the world. No, The World. He ran out the front door of the Golden Nugget and took a right toward the tourist trap of a mall, thinking, *What would Penny want to do here?* He was almost a psychologist, he told himself; he could figure this out. And he immediately came up with an answer: Penny would want to go into the make-your-own-trinket store to make a bead bracelet, and she would want to personalize it with her own specially chosen word, and she would not choose the word *Penny*, because that was lame. She would make a bracelet with something else on it. *Put*a, maybe.

But she wasn’t at the make-your-own-trinket store, and she also wasn’t at the ice cream parlor where you could eat your scoop of ice cream out of an upside-down plastic cowboy hat. Bill was about to walk across the street to look around the casino known as Binions, which he and Penny had already dubbed Bunions, although why would she want to go Bunions? But also: Why wouldn’t she?

And then he heard his name hanging in the air spoken in her voice, like that dollar she had stapled overhead at that gunfight restaurant, and he looked toward the sound, and there she was, smiling, waving, and yelling the word—his name, which emerged from her mouth and floated like a rainbow bubble toward him.

He waved at her, and she saw him waving, and then he bent over for a second, like he was a marathoner who had just finished a race. He was

exhausted from running; he felt like he was about to vomit, cry, and/or shit his pants. But he pulled himself together before any liquids came out of him, and he stood up again and walked toward her, and before he yelled at her for leaving the room without telling him where she was going and also not answering her phone and also scaring the living bejesus out of him, he hugged her.

“Bill, I just had the most amazing ride of my life! You have to try it!”

Bill smiled. He would never try it. “I want to hear all about it,” he said.

EIGHT

WIDDERSHINS AND KYLE WERE SITTING IN A HIDDEN, untended area of heaven and hell's backyard. It was a shady, secluded spot for new lovers, which was sort of what Kyle and Widdershins were, although, technically, they were new-old lovers.

Widdershins had brought a picnic blanket. Kyle had brought a basket. Kyle was drinking a glass of wine and fingering Widdershins's crotch. The two demons lay on the blanket together in relative privacy. They began making out as they heard the squeals of satyrs chasing angels around the garden-cum-ashtray.

Widdershins was not drinking wine. To Kyle's delight and Widdershins's horror, the pair had recently discovered that Widdershins was pregnant. After hours of tearful discussion culminating in a private appointment Kyle had made for them with the pastor at Widdershins's church, Widdershins had decided to keep the baby.

A condo of condors flew overhead, casting a shadow over the yard.

Kyle sighed with pleasure as he kissed Widdershins's neck.

"Satan came to me in my dream last night," Widdershins told Kyle.

"Ooh, auspicious! What was he wearing?"

"One of those sweaters with the wealthy teddy bears on them. And nothing on the bottom. His wanker was swinging, let me tell you."

"Did he say anything interesting?" Kyle asked, tracing his fingers slowly around Widdershins's swollen log. They had found that Widdershins's pregnancy made them both incredibly randy.

"He was happy. He congratulated me on the baby."

Kyle smiled. He was about to unzip Widdershins's pants, but he stopped. He smelled something odd. Smoke.

He turned and saw a huge gray cloud rolling in from the heaven side of the party wall.

“Holy hell,” Kyle said, sitting up.

NINE

PENNY AND BILL WALKED BACK TO THE GOLDEN NUGGET, where they found a modest little place to eat called the World's Best Mexican Kitchen.

They sat in a giant padded booth at a table that could have easily fit six people. Penny was feeling triumphant, having just flown over Las Vegas. She told Bill about her adventure and showed him the picture of herself that she had bought. Then she sent the pic to Lydia.

Lydia immediately texted her back:

Hey! When are you coming back to school?

Idk—Bill hasn't mentioned it and I'm not either

You are so lucky

That my parents died? lol

I didn't mean that

I know

Everyone dies

I know

Not us tho ♥

The waitress came with their food. Bill's phone buzzed.

"Hi, Brenda," he said as he moved his arm so the waitress could set down the plate.

The waitress set Penny's plate down, too. Penny could hear Brenda's voice but couldn't make out what she was saying. It was like Brenda was yelling from underwater in the deep end of the pool.

"Yes, we're fine. How are you doing?" Bill held the phone to his ear as he picked up a corn chip.

"Principal! I'm so happy to hear that, Brenda. Congratulations!" Bill exclaimed. He winked at Penny.

Penny smiled back at Bill, but not too wide. Her mouth was stuffed full of cheese enchilada.

TEN

MAM HAD GOTTEN CLOSE ENOUGH TO THE YELLOW-GREEN light to see where it was coming from: the window of what looked like a log cabin.

A log cabin seemed like a bad sign, she thought. Axe murderers lived in log cabins. Mam would have much preferred it if the yellow-green light were coming from a 7-Eleven.

She crept up to one of the cabin's windows and peeked in a lower corner carefully as she simultaneously tried to not to spill any Bunko from her skirt.

She pressed her skull against the window and dimly saw two figures eating at a restaurant. She knew without seeing perfectly that it was Bill and Penny.

Mam began crying out the sides of her temporal bone. She was so grateful to see her daughter and little brother!

But then she wondered: Why were they eating in a strange restaurant in the middle of the day? Penny should be in school!

She watched them for a long time before pulling her head away from the window. She turned her survival kit around so that the zippered pouch was in her lap. She unzipped it and felt around inside. The only thing she had in there was Bunko's homemade die. She held it gently between her finger bones. It felt delicate and puffy, like a tiny piñata. She set it aside.

Mam took off the survival kit and set it on the ground. She opened it wide and carefully emptied her skirt into it. Bunko's bones were mostly dust now.

Mam placed the homemade die gently on top of the dust and zipped the kit closed.

She stood up and let her hoodie dress fall; it swam on her skeleton frame. She brushed her skirt off. The gray dust fell onto the gray-

handkerchief ground. She felt the weight of Bunko's remains hanging over her pelvis.

The ash was still swirling in the air, heavier now. Mam walked over to the cabin door, put her hand on the mushroom-shaped iron doorknob, and pushed the door open.

ELEVEN

WIDDERSHINS PICKED UP THE PICNIC BASKET TO GET ready to go. But Kyle insisted that Widdershins let *him* carry the picnic basket.

Widdershins picked up the blanket, but Kyle wanted to carry that, too. Kyle didn't want Widdershins carrying anything except the one thing he was already carrying, which was the most important thing in the universe: their demon baby.

Angels, seraphim, demons, trolls, goblins—everyone who had been hanging around the backyard was gathering whatever they had brought with them, packing up, and leaving. The birds had already flown away. An angel plucked Hello Kitty from the high branches of a weeping willow.

A satyr had gotten a message and the word had spread: There had been some kind of accident in that dicey heavenly realm—that was what was burning. Somehow the place had caught fire.

One by one, all the denizens of heaven and hell flew away. In twos and threes, they took to the sky, carrying wine bottles and blankets, badminton rackets and hacky sacks, chatting and gossiping about this highly unusual event.

It was abnormal, for sure, but no one was too alarmed out about it. After all, there were so many other relaxing places they could visit.

TWELVE

THE ENTIRE LOG CABIN WAS FILLED WITH SKELETONS. Mam could hear them all, laughing and chatting. Mam's eyesight was too poor now to discern if anyone was carrying an AK-47, but she figured someone must be strapped.

"Hey, Mam!" shouted a very tall skeleton. "It's me, Dr. Woody!"

"Dr. Woody!" Mam exclaimed, walking over to greet her. "I saw you get shot!"

"Yes, I got shot," she said. She turned her skull to the side to show Mam the hole.

Mam was awed. "The killers marched me and Bunko out to a tree," Mam said. "And then they tied us up and left us there."

Dr. Woody put her bony hand on Mam's shoulder bone. Mam understood it to be a touch of affection and support. Let it be noted that flesh does not need to be present for a touch to have those qualities. If bones are all you have, you can still feel it.

"How long have you been a skeleton?" Dr. Woody asked.

"Not long. Bunko turned into one, too. And then he crumbled. Why did that happen to him and not me? Or you?"

"It will happen to us," Dr. Woody said pleasantly.

"When?"

"Soon."

Mam looked around. "Is this the bodega, then?"

Dr. Woody nodded. She stepped to the counter to pick up a sandwich. She ambled over to an empty table and sat. Mam followed her and sat down beside her.

"Do you want some sandwich?" Dr. Woody asked.

Mam would have looked at her quizzically if she had had a face to have expressions. "Why are you eating?"

“For fun,” Dr. Woody said, unwrapping the sandwich from its foil.

“How do you eat?”

“It doesn’t work very efficiently,” Dr. Woody said. “You take a bite with your teeth and use your finger bones to roll the food around in your jaw. Then you pick the food out of your teeth and throw the food away.”

Mam was reminded of a model she once knew who ate candy like that, spitting it out before she swallowed it. “That’s fun?”

Dr. Woody was using her fingers to rub the melted egg and orange cheese around her jaw. “Yep,” she said.

Mam tried not to judge. Maybe it wasn’t that much different from chewing gum.

“Dr. Woody, did you notice the smoke outside?” she asked.

“Yes. I heard all of Cloud Six is on fire.”

“Aren’t you concerned?”

“Yes, but I don’t know what I can do,” she said, rolling the melted orange cheese around her jaw. “And anyway, it’s not really affecting me. At least, not yet.”

Mam sat there and watched the spectacle of the skeleton doctor eating. “You haven’t seen Leroy, have you?”

“Yes, he’s over there.” Dr. Woody pointed.

Mam followed her finger. She saw him, sitting on a barstool.

Mam stood up and waved. “Leroy!”

Leroy cocked his earless head in her direction. Mam walked over and took him in her arms and hugged him. What a sweet little skull he had. She kissed it by bumping her top teeth into it.

“So good to see you, Mam! Where’s Bunko?” he asked.

Mam pointed to her survival kit. “In here.”

“Ah, yes,” Leroy said. “That’ll be us soon.”

“He doesn’t talk to me anymore,” Mam said forlornly.

“He’s talking to you—you just can’t hear him,” said Leroy cheerfully. “Once your hearing changes, you two will be able to chat again.”

“When will my hearing change?” Mam asked.

“You don’t need to worry about it. It will just happen,” Leroy said.

“Hey, you two, come with me to the bar,” said Dr. Woody. “Book club is about to begin.”

Mam and Leroy followed Dr. Woody through a rough-hewn wooden door at the back of the bodega. Mam could make out a long wooden bar

with gleaming bottles on shelves behind it and small tables surrounded by chairs and topped with candles. The whole place felt warm and inviting. How Bunko would have loved to have a drink here, she thought.

“How do you drink?” Mam asked Dr. Woody.

“You open your jaw and throw the liquid at it.”

“Can you get drunk?”

“No.”

Bunko would have been very disappointed by that, Mam thought. She asked the bartender for two shots of Monkey Shoulder. When it came, she picked up one, said a silent *Salut!* to Bunko, and threw it in the general direction of her face. She was reminded of the relationship she had had with her body as a baby, when managing to get her toes into her mouth was a total win.

Mam carried the second shot with her as she followed Dr. Woody over to where someone had arranged the chairs in a circle. Mam sat down between Leroy and Dr. Woody. A lion-skin rug lay under their feet.

“What’s the book you’re discussing?” Mam asked.

“It’s a book of poetry by a plant mystic named Harchibald.”

Mam didn’t know that book. She threw the second shot at her jaws. She thought she could feel it burn a little.

“Did you know that the afterlife was going to be like this when you were alive, Dr. Woody?” Mam asked, Monkey Shoulder dripping off her jawbone.

“Oh, absolutely not.”

“Yeah. Me neither.”

“It’s all been a wonderful surprise,” Dr. Woody said.

“But you got shot,” Mam reminded her.

“Oh, there are always mishaps,” the doctor said dismissively.

“You sound like you like it here.”

“I do. I love it.”

Mam was surprised. “Did you love your old life, too? When you had flesh and were living?”

“There were times when it was horrible. But yes, I loved it. And I love this place, too. And you will, too, Mam.”

Mam looked out the window. The air was becoming darker.

“You don’t have to worry about anything, Mam,” Leroy said gently, watching her watch the air. “There is no death, there’s only process.”

How amazing it would be if I could learn that, Mam thought.

“Trust me,” Leroy said, looking out the window, where the sky was getting very dark indeed. “You’ll grow to love this place, just like you did the old one. And then you won’t want to leave here, either.”

INTRODUCTION FIVE

HI, IT'S AMY. THIS IS OUR LAST BEGINNING, OTHERWISE known as the end.

Yesterday a robot called me on the phone. The robot had a woman's voice. She said she wanted to talk to me about voting.

I was listening to her spiel when Satan's voice came on the call. His voice floated on top of her voice, and then his voice obliterated her voice, like her voice was a bug and his voice was a pointy boot that squashed her.

"Hi, I haven't talked to you in a while. how are things going, what are you up to these days, still writing about hell?" Satan asked in a rush.

"I'm not writing about hell!" I protested. "I'm writing about Cloud Six! And what are you doing in my robocall?"

"I'm a robot, too," he said.

"No you're not."

"Yes I am," he insisted.

Satan could be such a child.

"Okay, yes you are. Now, will you leave me alone?"

"No, I have somewhere I want to take you," he said.

He came through the phone and grabbed my hand.

He took me off my couch and through the window of my eighth-floor apartment so that I was flying high over my neighborhood on the west side of Manhattan. I could see the Javits Center below me and the Hudson River right beyond.

The water in the river looked funky. It had recently rained, so the river was probably overflowing with sewage.

"This is where I leave you," Satan said.

He let go of my hand, then disappeared from my side. I was alone in the air, high above the river.

The water below seemed angry and agitated. Manhattan looked gloomy and trashed.

I was scared. I no longer seemed to be moving.

What will happen to me now? I wondered.

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46. Your author was surprised to read the following bit of information: "Jumping into the net is designed to be painful and may result in significant injury." See "Suicide Deterrent Net," Golden Gate Bridge High & Transportation District, 2025, www.goldengate.org/district/district-projects/suicide-deterrent-net/.
47. "At a cafe next to Guest Services last night, there was a kid vomiting in the trash can," said one of the passengers on the cruise. See J. Gabriel Ware, "Norovirus Outbreak on Royal Caribbean Cruise Ship Sickens 475 Passengers," ABC News, January 11, 2019, www.abcnews.go.com/US/270-cruise-ship-passengers-sickened-norovirus-royal-caribbean/story?id=60291868.
48. "Suicide Statistics," American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2025, www.afsp.org/suicide-statistics/.
49. Nurses and bartenders should be paid more.
50. Your author is taking her inspiration here from a restaurant called the Oatman Hotel Restaurant & Bar.
51. Thank you to Katherine Snider for this list.
52. Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 41.
53. "Study: Throw of Dice Can Be Predicted," UPI Science News, September 12, 2012, www.upi.com/Science_News/2012/09/12/Study-Throw-of-dice-can-be-predicted/74251347494047/.
54. Not a real book, sadly.
55. Nor a real translator, either.
56. Your author can't find the exact article that Bunko is referring to, but a cursory search on the internet will provide you with multiple examples of the many interesting things that people stick up their bums.
57. William Melhado, "Texas Executes David Renteria for 2001 Murder of El Paso Girl," *Texas Tribune*, November 16, 2023, www.texastribune.org/2023/11/16/texas-execution-david-renteria/.
58. David Renteria, Last Statement, Texas Dept. of Criminal Justice, Death Row Information, Inmate Information, November 16, 2023, www.tdcj.texas.gov/death_row/dr_info/renteriadavidlast.html. (Quote lightly edited for punctuation.)
59. A fun fact about *The Scream*: Naomi Rey, "A Mystery Inscription on 'The Scream' That Baffled Experts for Decades Was Written by Edvard Munch Himself, New Research Shows," *artnet*, February 21, 2021, news.artnet.com/art-world/edvard-munch-scream-inscription-1945181.
60. Daniel John, "Never Forget That Hello Kitty Is Not a Cat," *Creative Bloq*, November 4, 2023, www.creativebloq.com/news/hello-kitty-not-cat.
61. Lil Wayne, "Ride for My Niggas (Sky Is the Limit)," *Da Drought 3* mixtape, 2007.



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CLOUD SIX

This is a work of fiction. All the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

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