

Michelle Chihara

## Counting

One.

He sits out on the porch for most of the day. He sits very still. He looks out at the road cut into the sagebrush and at the river beyond and at the sandstone cliffs of this ravine beyond that. The road is dirt, rutted with old tracks. There is chokeberry beneath the thick stands of salt cedars, and then beyond that, the chattering water of Whiskey Creek. I come up from behind him. I put my hand on his shoulder, from the side, since I can't reach over the top of his high-backed rocking chair. He does not flinch or move or seem to notice me at all.

Two.

On the way in here, his father and I stopped at the top of the cliff, looking down. Below me, the bend in the river was wide and tense, stretched, like a rubber band bent around the land. I thought: this will be easy. I will walk up to the cabin and I will walk in like nothing has happened, like he has never been gone and we are not different. I thought: this will be easy, I will turn around and say I have to go back and he will never know I was here. I thought: his father is waiting for me to get back into the car, now.

At the cabin, I sit in a rocking chair and think about leaving.

Three.

Late in the morning, I make breakfast. Before he went away, I was a bad cook. While he was gone, I practiced. Now, I wipe the bottom of the thick, black pan with a stick of butter. I heat it over the flame on the stove, and the butter bubbles and pops. The eggs bubble and pop. I intend to make them sunny side up, but then I think about him not knowing that I have learned to cook and I pinch the edge of the yolk and yellow spills out and I make a kind of semi-scrambled egg. Swirls of yellow in the white. I think, maybe he and his father will notice and judge my eggs. I think, maybe his mother makes really good eggs. I think, soldiers aren't picky.

I serve them semi-scrambled eggs with a smile. His father eats with a pained expression. We talk about the dust on the road and how to keep the cabin warm and whether Bill Cosby will go to Baghdad to entertain the troops. Later, his father drives away and I watch the cloud behind his car hang in the air at the bend in the road for a long time.

Four.

His family can trace this cabin back through the generations, to First Lieutenant Wheeler's topographic explorations of the area in the 1870s. Since the canyons were converted into national parks, no other white men have been allowed to keep houses here. He comes from a long line of military men.

His father gave me a bird book and told me to keep an eye out for Mexican spotted owls. He pointed out the peach trees around the bend, a Navajo orchard that carpets the base of the ravine there, fed by the floodtides from the creek. I spend time imagining them in bloom.

Late in the day, my husband is sitting in his chair and I bring him a blanket and lay it over his knees and he says, thank you. I am surprised. I say, of course. We stand in silence for a while. I look at the blanket: a faded green and white plaid. The cry of a bird, a small broken sound, comes up to us. The salt cedars rustle.

I was worried you weren't talking to me, I say.

He says nothing.

I bite my lip and go inside.

Five.

What do the boys do who have no family cabin in a canyon? Who have no family? I know what they do, of course, I took the bus to meet his father, I waited in the bus station. I saw an old vet from some other war with graying catfish whiskers, an arm band with corps signal numbers hanging from the handle of a shopping cart full of garbage bags and old coats. It was a stupid thought, wondering what they do. They do whatever they can do, based on wherever they come from. But it's also comforting, to think that somehow, I am part of his being better off than others. It could be worse, for him. That's all that I'm trying to say.

Six

Carrying a tray with lemonade and cut cucumber, thinking about what it would mean to be worse off, I bang into a platter that hangs on the wall. It's a thick casserole dish that sticks out so far that when I am rounding the corner it nicks me in the side of the head.

It could always be worse. My head rings but the platter doesn't fall. I steady it with my hand. It's white ceramic with a drawing of sunflowers and tomatoes. It says, Kitchen Home Garden, on it. I try to imagine his mother -- thick, dry, a lioness -- hanging it. I can't. I decide it must have been his father, with the severe gaze and long fingers. A retired officer with sentimental taste.

He does not touch the cucumber. He drinks the lemonade. Out in front of us, the patch of river we can see goes from a blue clouded with brown to a blue slate. He rocks on his chair and I can hear the rhythm of his creaks. They speed up and then slow down to almost nothing. I go inside and straighten the platter on its peg.

Seven.

I serve him dinner on the porch, on a tray. Fried, breaded steak Milanese, salty and greasy, and a pile of green beans, and a roast tomato. Water in a glass. I have poured us both wine, and then left it inside on the counter, unsure whether he would drink wine, and whether if he didn't drink wine, whether I should drink wine.

He smiles when he sees the dinner, a luminous flash across his face and it makes me start, as if he has thrown something towards me, a glass ball, and I am desperate to catch it.

I kneel next to him and ask him if it is the steak that he likes, or the green beans. He twists his lips into a weak reproduction of the smile. He cuts a piece of steak and puts it in his mouth and his movements -- elbow bent, sawing at the plate -- are very normal. Very normal.

I go back inside for the wine.

Eight.

I write a list of all the things he has said:

Thank you.

No, don't bother.

I can do that.

Sleep here, with me.

No and Yes (to coffee).

Oh (about the sunset colors on the rim of the ravine).

No, thanks (to seconds).

and Don't worry so much, J. J.

and once, in the night, in his sleep, Hold it, hold it!

He told me not to worry because I was trying to clean a fish that I had caught in the river. The fish was thin and long and silver and I thought it was a trout only because I don't know anything about fish but I imagine trout are long and thin and silver. I had a book, a fishing book, with a chapter on "Cleaning Your Fish." I was making progress -- gill cavity and guts slicked out, head and skin pulled off-- until I tried to get the vein along the backbone off. It said to slice the membrane that ran along the top of the vein, and then to scrape the blood away from the flesh. But I couldn't find any membrane, and when I tried to slice along the vein, I pierced it and the blood was slicking everywhere. Gross, I said, and then I grunted in frustration, and he said, don't worry so much, J.J. He said this as he walked by on his way to the bathroom and closed the door.

I stared at the door until I heard him flush. He came back out, looked at me without smiling. He went back out to his chair and sat.

I write at the end of the list: If you can say, Don't worry so much, then you can say whatever you want. I write: I could leave you here to stew in this all by yourself. Is that what you want? I write: Are you punishing me? Does this have anything to do with me?

Then I crumple up the list and throw it in the trash.

Nine.

At night, the river stays with me. The slap and gurgle of the water against the rock where I stood. The wind making a slow whistle. A kingfisher lands in the scrub oak above me, its flash of brown and red. Dancing shadows inside the water, between patches of heat when the wind gave up for long enough for the sun to take hold on my skin. When you leave the ocean, you can feel the waves in your body when you lie down, but when you leave the river, when you close your eyes, it's not waves that you feel but the pull of the water, a steady one-direction tug. I close my eyes and I feel the weight of his body far at the other end of the lumpy bed and I feel the river, pulling and slapping.

Ten.

I catch one more fish. The meat is terrible.

Eleven.

I spend time pulling rip-gut brome and cheatgrass out around the base of the cabin. I can't find gloves. My hands are scratched and aching. I have a garbage bag in one hand and just as I'm about to tie it up, it catches on a twig and rips. The seeds fly everywhere. I kick at the busted bag, and cuss, and lean against the cabin. My fingers are so swollen I can't get my wedding ring off. I kick the cabin a few times, sneaker

thudding against dry wood, bruising my toe. I wonder if he hears me. I say, Ow. I keep kicking.

I took the ring off while he was gone. I kept it in a bamboo box by my bed. It's not that I wanted to sleep around on him or anything like that. It was just... wrong to have it on. It was good to have when the guy at the tire place asked where my husband was, because when I told him where my husband was, he looked like he had been caught stealing and gave me a discount. But I looked at it all the time. I was buying groceries, bagging the carrots, and handing the girl the penny to get even change and there it was, my diamond, flashing. I would get distracted. I didn't need reminders. I would be trying to eat dinner with his parents and I could see his mother looking at it, her lips quivering. I wanted to say, It's just a damn ring, it doesn't make me his wife. I do that. So I took it off.

I think his father noticed it was gone when they came to pick me up. We were leaving the house and he was holding a laundry basket full of extra clothes, clothes that I had washed and folded and even ironed, just in case. He pushed open the door open with his shoulder and looked back at me. I had my arms wrapped around a large aluminum drum of butter caramel popcorn, fingers splayed. His eyes grazed over me.

The ring was in my change purse, the whole time. I put it on in the car, surreptitiously, while I was in the back seat, but I didn't catch his father looking at my hands again. My husband used to like butter caramel popcorn.

I leave the garbage bag where it is and stop kicking and walk around to the front of the cabin. He is in his chair. He looks at me. I brush the seedcases and prickly things off my pants. My hands get more scratched. I walk up the two stairs and stand in front of him and say, Well? Then I lie down in front of him, just at his feet, on my back. From here, I can see the rough skin beneath his chin, and the dark spaces in his nostrils.

He looks down at me. I see something in his eyes. Concern, maybe. I used to think I knew how to read his eyes, usually when they were mooning at me. I prop myself up on an elbow, and I say: What *is* it? He blinks. Almost frowns.

I lie back down. I can smell the bitter of the pulled up weeds. I let the sound of the river bring the blue sky closer.

Twelve.

The bedroom windows face northeast, and the light comes through the wood slats of the blinds hard and early. The front porch faces the river, you can see it through the brush, but the bedroom faces a long flat patch of land, with the peach trees against the far cliff. You can feel the next bend in the river, beyond, but you can't see it. We are at the heart of Navajo Nation. The cliff edges are there beyond us, hazy sometimes, but always visible. When it rains, the clouds sometimes hover just above the rim, the rain like dark string.

I have walked to the next bend in the river, and then to the edge of the cliff, and then down to where the old mule road rises winds up. I have seen the tourists coming down the mule road, looking at their feet and holding their sunhats. I have walked to the other side of the valley, where I found an almond tree planted at the foot of the cliff.

Thirteen.

I have read three novels, one about a woman who rescues her lover from a helicopter crash, one about schoolgirls in Algeria, one French novel from the point of view of a cat. I am reading a book about meteorology and am trying to understand pressure inversions and the damage that oxides of nitrogen cause in the ozone layer.

The books in the house also include:

A history of Native American pottery.

A military history of the American revolution.

The Texas Senate, 1964

A book on macramé.

A book of pictures of food made to look like animals.

A shelf of military thrillers.

A shelf of cookbooks (Indian Made Easy, Herbs and Roasts, Easy Chinese, Vegetables and Julia Childs).

A shelf of detective novels (Dorothy Sayers)

He doesn't read any of them.

Fourteen.

I decide that a television and some vampire novels are necessary. When his parents come, I make a strong request, and his father drives us into town. His mother stays to tidy up the cabin, and I feel that I am being evaluated. I spend the drive thinking of places -- on top of the fridge, behind the nightstand -- that I have not cleaned.

I look at him sideways, while we are driving out of the valley and he is looking out at the plateau rising before us, and it is such a normal way of seeing him that I catch my breath.

The store is run by a large man with a lot of rings. It lies just outside reservation lines, but he is from the tribe and recognizes us as outsiders. I make sure to mention that my husband's tour of duty just ended, though, so the prices are not too bad. We get a used television. It is huge and dusty, but the picture, when the man turns it on in the store, is sharp and bright. His father waits in the car. He doesn't get out to help me and my husband hoist the television into the back seat. We squash up against it, to hold it in place.

The bookstore is dark and dusty and I buy all of their vampire books and then a romance set in the antebellum South because that's what I'm in the mood for. Plantation balls and scheming Yankees.

We get burgers at the bar at the local pub. A television blares in the corner, a basketball game, and the bartender can't take his eyes off it, even when he takes our order. The burgers come piled high with lettuce tomato onion and curly spicy fries and he digs in with an appetite I haven't seen yet. His father orders pasta primavera.

I watch him eat. He is shoving big mouthfuls of burger and wiping at the pickle juice that runs down with the back of his hand and then slurping from his beer and looking up at the basketball screen and watching the players move up and down the court with pleasure in his eyes. When the guard scores a three point shot, he and his father both bounce a little. He's enjoying this.

I think of the dinners I have been making -- steak and steak Milanese and fried chicken and pizzas -- all the cooking I never would have thought of doing before, the pita bread and pickles I ate when he was gone, and I think, look how he is enjoying that burger. He could have asked for a burger. I would have made him one. I can make a burger.

I want to ask him: Do you want me to make you burgers? Are you getting better? If you are getting better, does it have anything to do with me?

But instead, I don't eat very much, and we watch the end of the basketball game, where the men in the yellow jerseys win, and then we go back to the car. I sit in the front, this time. His father asks him, You OK back there, as we pull off the gravel parking lot, and he says, Yes, and his father and I make eye contact.

That night he sits up again in bed, with a sound. I roll on my side and look at him. He is wearing a tank top and boxers and the covers are down at his waist and his chest is concave, it seems so skinny. He has always been skinny, skinny and strong, but now he just seems skinny.

He is staring at the wall. Outside, the moon is bright and yellow and it's throwing shadows into the room, the dancing shapes of branches cut with the slats of the blinds. On that wall they hung a map of the canyons. It's old, pen and ink, with hills like crows feet and old-fashioned cursive. Our bend is named for the cabin. Lean-To Bend. He stares at all this. Stares and stares. He doesn't look frightened, to me. He looks like a man who has lost something, and is staring intently at the place he last saw it.

I reach out and touch his arm. I'm his wife. I used to touch him all the time. His arm jumps back like I have burned him. He doesn't look at me or react in any other way. I say his name. Nothing. It is like being inside a nightmare where no one can hear you

and you can't move. Finally, I give up and I roll over and close my eyes and try to go back to sleep.

Of course, I don't sleep. I feel him lie back down and readjust himself in the bed. Both of us are awake, then, awake and staring at the shadows in the yellow light.

Seventeen.

The vampire novels are satisfying and take up a day at a time. At one point, a vampire pops out from behind a pylon and I am so involved in the book that I yelp. I'll need more soon.

I didn't think to get a VCR, though, and of course, there's no reception in the valley. So the TV isn't so useful. When his parents come again, we will go back for more burgers and a VCR and some tapes.

Twenty four.

Standing in the video store, I am under the impression that they only have movies about children and animals. I point this out to his father, and his father grunts. It is a grunt that he used to make, and I look up, but it is only his father. White hair. Black sweater stretched over his gut. His father moves off into the war movies aisle and I think, you are crazy, too. I look at my husband and we are both watching his father pick up old World War II movies.

What do you want to see? I ask him.

Apocalypse Now, he says. He says this utterly deadpan.

I stare at him. We can't watch Apocalypse Now. I hate Apocalypse Now, and he knows it. We can't watch Apocalypse Now because he watched Apocalypse Now with his boys in the service, to get them jacked up for battle. He knows that I know that. He used to try to get me to watch it. He would promise me he had put in a dance movie with Jennifer Lopez. Then when I sat down on the couch, it would be choppers and explosions and Flight of the Valkyries and I would scream and tackle him for the remote. A trick he used to play.

I want to grab him by his arms and shake him and say, You did it! You did it. But instead, I just stare, and then open my mouth and laugh. He is silent again, his face blank. He picks up a comedy with a picture of a man and a dog on the front, then puts it down.

His father rents Saving Private Ryan and I tell his father I won't watch it. I rent two Masterpiece Theater period pieces and a cartoon about a giant robot.

We end up watching the cartoon. My husband sits the movie out, on the porch, on his chair.

Twenty Five.

He made a joke. A joke implies an audience, which means, awareness and interaction.

He made a joke. Our joke.

I think about this while I'm cutting onions in the kitchen and the windows are open and cold fall air is coming into the cabin. We can hear the cries of the brown thrush and the leaves dancing in the rising wind. The shadows are just starting to lengthen. His mother, when she was there earlier with bags of groceries, seemed utterly unconcerned. She put ears of the corn into the fridge and stacked cans of tuna on the shelves and smiled at me as if this were just what happens, the boys come home, they go silent for a while and need to be isolated at a cabin and taken care of and won't touch their wives, and here's the pasta sauce. When she left, I started cutting onions furiously, letting my eyes sting with them.

Twenty Seven.

I make a list of Things I Blame:

His father the former soldier.

The president.

The government.

The army.

The American People and their President.

His Field Commander.

His father the successful educated man.



His mother.

My mother.

Myself.

His father.

Myself.

Him.

Thirty.

We are sitting out on the porch. He is sitting in the rocking chair and I am sitting on a stool and we are looking out across the tops of the salt cedars at the water which is cloudy and an almost pinkish brown, today.

I am not angry with him for taking me away from my life. My life was at a stopping place, anyway. But I need him to talk to me. So I say, What next?

What? he growls.

Forty.

His mother and father stay for dinner. I move the table from the kitchen out onto the porch, where we must sit two on each end because it's too narrow for anyone to sit on the sides. I light candles in small glasses and float manzanita berries in a glass bowl. I sit with him. His parents look at us. We chew on our pork chops and eventually his

mother murmurs that this is delicious, dear, and I thank her, and we all go on being silent for a while longer.

I think, during this dinner, of the term 'companionable silence.' It usually means that both parties are happy to be silent, as if they're communicating peacefully without words. Our daily silence, between him and me, cannot be described this way. But if that silence is un-companionable silence, then the silence at the dinner table with all four of us is utterly broken. We are all being silent, but in our heads, at least me and his parents, we are screaming and screaming at each other.

Fifty.

Here are the things I wish for:

A dinner out at a nice, crowded restaurant, where we talk about stupid things, like toilets in other countries.

Unlimited access to all of the movies I want to see, and all of the episodes of the television shows that I like, all at once.

A dog.

Another dog.

A child.

A pleasant but unchallenging job where there would be an office manager who would take requests for what kind of soda I wanted in the office refrigerator.

A sideboard. I want to own a sideboard. And I want to put a bowl for keys on it.

Sixty.

Here is what I was doing before: I worked at the Gateway House, a transitional center for juvenile delinquents. They stayed with us when they got out of juvenile detention, it was part of what they got for good behavior, or as part of a plea, and we would help them get used to the idea of going back to school, or getting a job. I did visioning sessions where I tried to make them imagine themselves inside a different life.

Imagine what your morning is like. What do you have for breakfast? What do you wear? I would demonstrate: I eat Cheerios with a banana. I wear a skirt and a shirt and a cardigan.

I don't even own a cardigan. But the girls liked that idea of me, as someone dowdy and formal. It gave them something to push against, so they could say: I wear all black, or, I wear stiletto heels. They would have liked this cabin, for those sessions. I stayed there for two twenty four hour periods a week, and did paperwork at home. In my nights on the floor, I could hear them all around me, rustling, scratching, moaning, laughing, fucking. I was one of the residents advisors who didn't bust them for leaving their bunks. I made sure the girls knew how to say no. I kept an eye out for the push-overs, but you know, if they want to fool around with each other, who am I to stop them? The boys floor was locked, they couldn't get up there. And they were teenagers. What do you want.

So that was the stopping place, in my life, when one of the girls got mad at me for taking away her TV privileges and told someone that I didn't do bunk check and that Takeesha and Erin were sleeping together, and I hadn't said anything. I knew, and I hadn't told.

Seventy.

I know that his parents are stopping by on Saturday. While I know how many days I have been here, and while there is a calendar that hangs below the Kitchen Home Garden platter, I have become convinced it's open to the wrong month. Is Saturday really tomorrow?

As soon as they get here, I will find out the date, and I will begin crossing out days as they happen.

Seventy Two.

Finally, we go back to the pub. It's crowded, this time, and smells of people and of damp wool. We sit at the bar. He points to the burger and closes his menu. Last time, I think, last time didn't he speak his order out loud? I ask the bartender what's in a margarita. His father looks at me like I am a crazy woman, and I look at my husband, who is looking quietly off into space.

A margarita? his father says, and laughs. I remember that a margarita is something everyone knows, teenagers at the shelter know this, or know not to ask if they don't. I try to laugh with his father and the bartender, at myself.

I laugh too loud. The bartender looks at my husband, for some kind of cue, and my husband, of course, is now staring intently at his cocktail napkin.

I order a margarita without knowing what is in it. His father orders a dirty martini. The gentleman is silent. I call the waiter back and order my husband a beer. His father raises his eyebrows, but says nothing.

I think, as we eat, that it is a little bit of a shame that the family cabin doesn't have a satellite dish for cable.

Eighty three.

We do have a kind of routine. When he wakes up, he goes straight into the shower and stays there for a long time. I stay under the covers, where it's warm, and try to distinguish the sound of the shower water from the sound of the leaves and the sound of the river. When he is done, the bathroom door opens and steam fills the bedroom. I take my shower. He sits on the edge of the bed until I am done, and stares at the floorboards. I notice that there is an interesting knot, in the widest board. Maybe he stares at that knot.

We eat breakfast, inside. When he is done, he clears his dish, forces a smile at me, and returns to his chair. I sit at the table and push my food around. I clean up. I read about the undead having hot sex and stealing beautiful dresses from Victorian shoppes. Or I read about the Civil War. Or I watch the new miniseries I have rented about a family living through the Salem witch trials.

We eat lunch. Same deal.

We eat dinner and I open a bottle of wine and sometimes he smiles at me, when I come out with the tray, to the porch, where we have moved the table, and lit a candle. The river talks to us, then, we can hear its tide rising and its stones when they creak and move.

Ninety.

His parents come and I find out the date. I have been here for more than three months.

Ninety Three.

I write a list of options for things I could say:

Please talk to me.

Walk with me to the peach orchard?

I'm your wife. I don't care if you killed a man with your bare hands. Or ten men. Or twenty.

I want to understand. I will always love you.

This isn't easy for me. I like talking.

We made dinner here once, for Trent and Jane. Do you remember?

Do you even like peaches?

I want to have a baby in the next two years.

Are you crazy?

Are you going to be crazy forever?

Should I leave?

None of them seems right.

Ninety Five.

His parents show up and we eat dinner outside again. We are clinking our silverware, and I am listening to the different sound the forks make against the heavy dinner plates we are using tonight compared to thin, smaller plates that I usually use. This sound is deeper, more resonant. We're eating steak Milanese, which I have over-salted. His father puts his wine glass down hard on the table and says, Well.

Everyone looks up.

Well, his father says again. What do you think?

And I say, What do I think of what, sir?

He is a man that everyone always calls sir.

And he says, How long do you think this can go on?

And I look at him and I think, forever. This could go on forever because that's what this is.

So I say, Let's give him another month or so.

They want to put him in a hospital. They all hate doctors. The whole family. His mother had a double mastectomy. She almost died of cancer because they didn't check out the lump soon enough. This, somehow, only made them hate doctors even more. His father, I think, hopes that a hospital might just frustrate his son back to speech, but is also worried that it will eradicate all remaining words. And yet. They love me, too. They're worried about me. They may hate doctors, but they don't want to make the same mistake twice, of leaving the growth for too long. It also seems to me that they feel they have given me a chance, here, in the cabin. One chance. Time is running out.

Watching his father stab at his meat, I feel as if I am my husband's tutor and he has failed his math test again. I stare at him. His hair has grown out into a shaggy, all-around mess. He is paler than he used to be, no sports in the sun anymore, and the contrast of his skin with his dark hair makes him prettier than before. He sits very straight. He cuts his meat slowly and eats without looking up and I think that if you

saw him, in a restaurant, out of context, you would think he was a poet, or a graduate student, someone introverted and naturally quiet.

He does not seem tortured. He does not seem to be in pain. But he is a man who used to play beach volleyball and make up nicknames for his friends, like Fleece Attack and Brat Boy. I remember turning around and looking at him when he yelled at me for screwing up when we were playing on the beach. "Angelface, I love you, but what *was* that? You had it. Spike it next time." He was wearing Hawaiian patterned shorts and sunglasses. This memory, for some reason, is the hardest for me to endure.

I was always terrible at beach volleyball.

It's really too cold to be eating outside tonight. The wind bites like winter, and we are all sitting with our shoulders tensed up. The night is very clear, though, and the moon is so bright, you can make out individual leaves reflecting it. At one point we hear, unmistakably, the quiet hoot of an owl.

They want to come back for him in a week. They want to take him to the veterans' hospital in their town.

They have some wonderful psychiatrists there, his mother says.

Ninety Seven

I try to touch him again, in the night. He is on his side, facing away from me, and I lay my hand on his arm. He jerks it away.

I lie on my back and stare at the ceiling.

Later, much later in the night, I feel something on my shoulder and I start. It moves away. I realize that it was his hand, but I don't know what to do. I'm afraid to reach out and pull it back to me. I lie very still, praying, begging silently, for him to try again.

He doesn't.

The waiting is so intense, I can feel my spine tightening. I press my head into the pillow, thinking, Put your hand back. Put it back.

I lie there for hours, pressing until my neck is sore.

But then I start to think, maybe that's all it is. Maybe we have to learn how to lie still. Maybe we have to learn, or re-learn, to just let the other person be there.

Ninety Eight.

I call a taxi, who says he does not run service into the valley, but he can call his cousin's wife and she can run me up to town for a flat price. A squat, dark woman

with a smelly station wagon appears. I load the TV into the back, and look at my husband and say, I won't be long.

I resell the TV to the pawn shop. I hock the Kitchen Home Garden platter, too, because it's unwieldy and I can't believe that his parents chose the thing anyway. The man with the rings squints at it and I tell him it's a family piece and he squints at it some more and gives me forty dollars. I think, he is crazy, too. I go to the bank and draw out everything that I have left.

My driver tells me yes, she knows a man who can sell me a car for very cheap. I tell her it's very important that it run and that I have very little money. She nods and says, yes, a good car for cheap. She takes me to her other cousin's garage. A man with a long braid comes out from behind a hurricane fence and stacks of tires. He's wiping his hands on a rag. I tell him what I want and he walks me over to an old Ford coupe, old gold with one black door. He talks to me for a long time about how he replaced the transmission, how important it is that I change the oil, how it needs you to go easy on the clutch. He tells me that if I treat it right, it should last me for years. I drive myself back to the cabin. The car bumps wildly over the rutted tracks -- even the station wagon had much better shocks -- but it sounds fine, the engine sounds good. For some reason I trust the man with the braid. When I come round the bend, I see my husband there, on the porch, and I honk and honk.

He stands when he I get out of the car. He smiles.

I kill the engine and look at him standing there. I remember what to do. I smile back. By the time I have looked down to watch my step as I climb up onto the porch, he is sitting again. I kneel in front of him. The porch is cold and hard against my knees. He is looking down at me. I try to hold his gaze, but it slips to the top of my head. His hands are at his sides and he seems to have retreated, to have moved backwards, but he hasn't. I move towards him, scooting closer to him, inch by inch. He doesn't move away. I get very close, until my chest is touching his knees, and I am staring at his face, not his eyes, but the chapped redness in the skin right below his nose. I take my gloves off. I stay there until I can count the number of seconds between the beginning of his breath and the beginning of mine. Slowly, I lift my hands and put them on his knees. He lets me. They rest there until I can feel the heat of his skin coming through the denim. His sweater is a cream color, and looks fuzzy.

When I get up, my knees crack and pop and I say, ow. I pick up an empty glass that's at his feet. I walk to the door, and turn, and talk to the back of his head.

We're going to leave, I tell him. We're going to leave tomorrow. I'm not putting you in that hospital.

He says, OK. Or at least, I think he says OK, but then the sound is gone and I'm not sure that it was the sound of his voice and not a trick of the trees and the wind.

I'm going to pack everything I can find, I tell him. You should look around, though, and make sure there's nothing you want to take.

I turn and face his back, talk directly at the rocking chair.

It's going to be hard, I tell him. I don't know what I'm going to do to make us money, and I don't know how far that Ford is going to take us.

He sits and looks out at the river.

Maybe you can get a job as a mime! I tell him. Or a security guard. They don't talk much.

I am looking at the back of his head, and thinking, maybe he's smiling. He made that joke.

I turn sideways in the doorjamb. I hold the glass in one hand and pick at the splinters in the frame. Or maybe if we have a kid, I say, maybe if we have a kid -- not just now, but, eventually, at some point -- you can just sit there and look at the kid. You have to say something if he sets the house on fire. Or tries to eat the bleach. But otherwise, you can just sit there and look at him.

This time, I don't look at the back of his head, I look out at the bend in the valley, the curve of this ravine. The wind comes up from the river, carrying the smell of wet rocks and frozen earth, and I think, well, he may or may not be smiling. As long as he's not moving further away. As long as he's still sitting there, it's OK. I say, maybe in the next two years? I count to five. I look again. He's still there. Facing straight ahead. The wind tousles his brown hair a little.

I say, OK, then.

He's still sitting there.