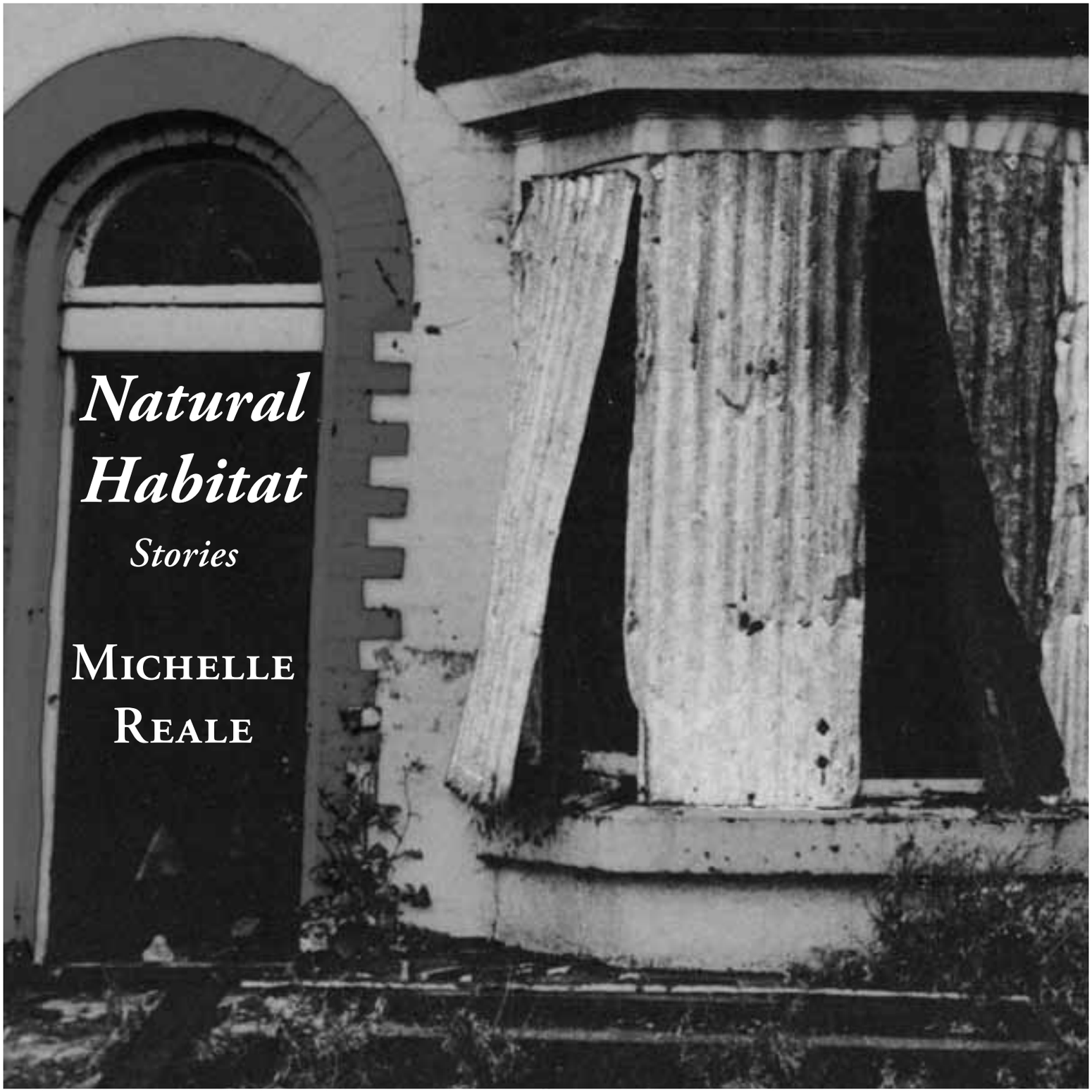
Natural Habitat

Michelle Reale


Natural Habitat
Stories
Michelle Reale

A statement concerning *Natural Habitat* by Michelle Reale:

What I Left Behind, What I Found There

A few years ago I saw a New Yorker cartoon that hit such a chord with me. It was two fish, swimming in the sea. The one says to the other, "Even in water, I don't feel like myself." That was something I could relate to.

The whole of my life I have been interested in who we are as individuals and the world at large. Who belongs? Who doesn't? How much of that is just a creation of our own minds? Where is our true home?

I was raised in a twin house, in a neighborhood that was predominantly, but not exclusively, Italian-American. My parents bought the house, in 1957, from the Italian-born Presbyterian minister (yes, they do exist!), Reverend Della Loggia, for eight thousand dollars. I and my brother and sister were born there. That house, that neighborhood and the blocks surrounding it which included most of my relatives, the few friends I had, our parish and our school, were my entire

life. The street was like the city in a small town: Bell Telephone, a coal company, a plastics factory, an auto body shop, an Assemblies of God church, bicycle shop, a hardware store and many other businesses co-existed with those of us in those twin homes. My mother did not need to drive us any where or arrange play dates. The world was right outside our front door; we just needed to open it and step in.

We moved from that home when I was sixteen years old. It was an event that caused a sort of cleft in my brain. Never had I identified with a place as much since. I suspect, at this point, I never will. I have embarked, over the last few years, on something that I call "excavation". I have spent a lot of time, walking around my old neighborhood. It would take an entire book to explain what that exercise has meant to me and what I have found there. Last summer I spent some time in my next door neighbor's house. Mrs. Z had just passed away and her two daughters, my best friends from childhood kindly allowed me to spend time in the house, alone, to write. Place is so important to me. As well, I'd spent half my childhood in that home. My affection for that family runs deep, as they are inextricably bound with my childhood. My friend warned "Don't be sur-

prised—the house is unchanged since we were twelve." She was right. It was like time had stopped. I roamed around the house, quietly and with great respect ---it did not belong to me , after all. I wanted to write, but managed to weep a lot over the days I spent there. I lightly touched objects, the very same, I'd had a fascination with as a child. It was all preserved. Even the toys we played with. The two sisters were readying the house for the new owners. It would be lost to be forever--my last connection with my old neighborhood. My own house stood one door away, much like the way we left it, in fact. It had been lost to me so long ago. So now I mourned to "homes".

My stories all, in one way or another, have their genesis in impressions from childhood and "outsider" status. "Natural Habitat" is a place where we should belong. But do we? Many of my stories turn that very notion on its head. The French philosopher's Diderot has cautioned "*We are where we think we are; neither time nor distance makes any difference."* Along with writing my stories, it is a dictum that has comforted me more than once. I have come to think of that old neighborhood as, truly, my natural habitat, where it will remain in my mind, the same as it always was.

Acknowledgments

The following stories first appeared in one form or another in no particular order in the following publications and are reprinted here with permission of the original publishers:

"From A Distance" – *Bewildering Stories*
"And She Flew" – *Blood Orange Review*
"Bruised" – *Dogplotz*
"Sticky Sweet" – *Dogplotz*
"Gone" – *Elimae*
"Junk" – *Elimae*
"Small Things" – *JMWW*
"What Remains Was Always Here" – *Pequin*
"Leaving the Life" – *The Smoking Poet*
"Bonding"– *Word Riot*
"Forbidden Fruits" – *Word Riot*
"Natural Habitat" – *3711 Atlantic*

a kind thank you to them, yourself and, of course, michelle for sharing

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A Dedication and Special Thank You

Dedicated to my grandmothers, Dolores Oliva Pantalione and Anna Serrao Messina. Gentle women, both.

Very special thanks to Chris Bowen, editor extraordinaire, for his extreme generosity in making the publication of this chapbook an extraordinary experience. To my son David, who helped gather just the right combination of stories. To friend and colleague Adam for walking into my office, literally, with the cover. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Bonding

Friday nights we all went out to dinner as a family. The Pike Family Restaurant had "home style" cooking, dull wood paneling and accepted cash money only. The hostess, the Greek owner's third wife, knew all the gossip, and greeted everyone like they were the main attraction.

The five of us squeezed into a booth and held the large sticky menus in front of us like we were reading for pleasure. My mother was a creature of habit and let it be known that the weekly ritual would go on until she said so. She'd light her first cigarette before we even ordered. Because it was a family restaurant, there was no liquor, but she craved her whiskey sour, and would moan until her food came. My brother took the longest to decide, causing my father to stare at him with a disgust, which had nothing to do with the issue at hand. My sister would order a plain cup of whipped cream for dessert. Each and every time the waitress would say "just whipped cream?" and she'd laugh and point her pencil at my sister like this was something new, and the funniest thing she'd ever heard. I ordered the Salisbury steak, hold the mushrooms, like it was the best thing on the menu.

My mother would smoke and turn this way and that way to see who was coming in that she knew. She did the same thing at Sunday Mass. My brother would bite his nails and my sister played with the salt and pepper, pouring them on the Formica tabletop, wetting a finger and tasting them. My father blew his top when the platter set before him arrived lukewarm. Or so he said. My mother hissed under her breath "for the love of God," and I thought 'here we go again.' I felt grateful to be spared her rage because we were in a public place.

My father could not eat a meal that was anything less than scalding hot. He sent it back. Twice. When it returned, it was placed before him, but we were more than halfway done our meals, the table looking like a battlefield of a spilt soda, cigarette ash and crumpled napkins. His plate was so hot it cracked right down the center, right in front of him. Half of his dinner lay on a Formica strip in the middle.

He held a thick fist up to his mouth, and his eyes stared straight at my mother. My brother tore at the skin on his swollen, red fingertips and I touched my knee to his. Only our little sister, with whipped cream around her mouth, was innocent enough to look forward to

what came next. My mother clicked her long fingers in front of my father's face telling him to "snap out of it". She turned her attention, instead, to a blonde, blue-eyed family all dressed in crisp navy blue and white at a table across from ours. "Fucking Mormons," my father said.

My mother smiled and ignored him. "Now there's a nice little scene," she said while lighting another cigarette. My father shifted uncomfortably, the ring of keys on his belt loop jangled loudly. It sounded like an indictment on all of us. As if the combined effort of every Friday night shouldn't have counted for something in the end. She raised her sweating glass of diet soda to no one in particular, like not a single one of us was right in front of her. In a tight, fake falsetto, she praised happy families everywhere.

Gone

She knocked on the door, one, two, three times, and kicked for good measure. Rap, rap on the window. The Father honks the horn five, six, seven times. Father O'Malley won't wait Mass for the Grandmother. The Father throws half a cigarette onto the sidewalk and forgets to exhale the smoke. "C'mon, we'll be late!" She takes the two steps off the wooden porch and glances behind her. Impatience will get you everywhere. It will get you to the church on time. Her Grandmother waits for this ride, every Sunday morning, pre-Vatican missal, for all its worth, resting on swollen knees. She whispers her own incantations, with eyes closed, while everyone else wriggles, daydreams and attempt to scratch niggling itches that never goes away. Afterwards, there was no after-Mass twisted crullers with brown sugar from the German bakery. There was no strong brewed coffee, percolating, stovetop, with cinnamon in the grounds. There was no ashtray offered to the father, the smoker. No pasta sauce bubbling on the stove. No invitations to a plate of pasta at 2 pm. No sign of the Grandfather, still asleep, though the body had been removed, the fingernails said to be as blue as denim jeans. The Granddaughter will love to

tell how they had to pry the pre-Vatican missal out of her cold, stiff hands. The Grandfather lives in a dream. "She said goodbye before she left, I remember," he tells the room, but no one is listening. The Father stands outside on the pavement, waving people inside the house, smoking one cigarette after another. The Grandfather sits on the Grandmother's chair and nods to one and all, occasionally rubbing the soft-silver stubble on his face. The Granddaughter thinks how the Grandfather hasn't a prayer now; he'll die of a broken heart. The Father smokes and sighs. The sun dips in and out of dark, gathering clouds. The Daughter looks up and sees the neighborhood women coming towards her, their arms linked, an army of benevolence. She hears sounds as though the words are uttered under water and their faces are closed to hers. They could be saying anything, singing songs, uttering prayers, or cursing all that is holy. It doesn't matter. The Grandmother is gone, but the others, women strong and patient, have come in her place. The Granddaughter takes the steps two at a time, dutifully, following behind them.

Small Things

She presented her new baby to the old man who lived next door. He seemed lonely, like she was and she tried to reach out, something she wasn't very good at. Her boy was a great opportunity. They stood in their respective yards under the kind of sky that was so blue it could be the ocean, the ground beneath their feet turned topsy-turvy. The old man wore his beat up, button down cardigan despite the heat, leaned on the fence and stared. He said to the air around him "brand new" as though he might have been talking about any object at all. Then he looked around like anything was more interesting besides the new life right in front of him. "So I guess you don't want to hold him," she laughed but the anger, always lying just below the surface, shot through her like someone flipped a switch. The flick of his chin upward was her answer. He hooked his finger behind his ear and scratched, made a motion and moved away from the fence. She shifted a little bit, but her feet wouldn't move. She was trying to get his attention, but the set of his jaw showed no interest. "Bye now," she said, in a tone she hadn't meant to be as sarcastic as it sounded to her own ears. She watched him bend over to pull at some weeds,

she and the baby already forgotten. He hit the roots against the lower bar of the wooden fence and the dirt flew. She thought she could taste the tiny grains in her mouth. The baby cried "maw, maw," sounding like a small animal bleating or maybe something not real. She was not yet used to him being around.

Her eyes had trouble adjusting inside. She saw darkness patterned with pricks of light and she had to feel her way with her hands along the furniture like her grandmother used to do. She leaned up against the wall, which was cool. The baby in her arms came into focus and she stared as if he were a stranger, like he'd never made that painful journey through her body. She thought about how, shortly after he was born, still shaky, she phoned her mother, yearning to hear her voice, astonished at how much she had missed it. "You have a grandson." Her mother put her on hold. Coming back on the line, she sighed: "Do right by him." There seemed nothing more to say, and after the call ended, she held the phone to her ear for a time. A stick thin nurse with yellowed, nicotine stained fingers yanked it out of her hand and pointed to the baby in the clear plastic bassinette beside her bed. His mouth was opened in a tiny "O" and she panicked

at the absence of sound. She whispered to his tiny body in the crook of his arm "Granny loves you," and hoped that someday she would. She wanted to show everyone that she will be able to grow him into a man though she realized with a tremor, what a long road that would be. She decided not to think about it.

Later, the old man knocked at the back door. She saw him peering through the rusty screen. She said "Coming!" in a singsong voice like a housewife in an old television show. She was careful not to show the anger she'd felt earlier. He shuffled into the house and stood in the kitchen and looked around as if her world might have been a foreign land. He did not speak. She could hear the wheeze in his breath and wondered how she hadn't noticed it before. She thought of her boy, asleep in his little basket in her bedroom, and suddenly wanted to go to him. "They found something a while ago," the old man said, in that strange, faraway sounding voice. "Found something?" she said and her mind ticked off ordinary objects that might have been lost. "Cancer, in my colon, early, though, they said. I'm still holding on." She said the first thing that came to her mind: "You're lucky." He snorted and looked at her as if for the first time.

"If I was lucky, I wouldn't have gotten it in the first place!" he said, trembling. She twisted a lank of her hair, to give her hands something to do. I am a mother, she thought. He has no idea whatsoever. She wanted to hurt him. The paradox of his anger and vulnerability made her want to make him suffer. He eyed her straight on and said "I'm old and alone. We're the same." He left through the door he came.

Tomorrow, she'd take the old man something, like a peace offering. Maybe a cake that she'd bake. She'll say "let's start over again, shall we?" like she'd heard someone say before. Then she'll go over and over in her head what she will say to her mother if she should talk to her again. She will tell her to come soon and tell her this boy will take your breath away. She will ask her to forget the past. After all, they were all just small things, anyway.

Sticky Sweet

The father bends down and whispers to his daughter, who stands, with hands solemnly folded, in line for Holy Communion. Go right out the side door he tells her. She does not register the disappointment she feels, but still, hates to say her prayers on the run. She'll miss the display of goodness the opportunity allows her, will miss the priestly procession at the conclusion, the go in peace she longs for but doesn't know why.

Outside in the cold, brilliant sunshine, the father lights a cigarette, and takes a draw that deflates his cheeks so that he looks like a man who is starving. When he throws back his head and exhales upward, she thinks she sees a bit of communion wafer in the corner of his mouth, and she cringes at the thought of the nicotine mixing with the body of Christ.

The father walks briskly and smokes. The daughter's short, plump legs work hard to keep up with him. He turns around a few times, his smile jaunty, the cigarette smoking itself in this mouth. He squints from the sun or the smoke or both.

The pavement in front of the old German bakery is cracked and dirty. The daughter can see through the smudged glass that they are the first to arrive before Mass lets out. The father throws his cigarette out and exhales as he leans into the heavy door with the rusty bells around the doorknob. The daughter breathes in the smoke that trails behind him and imagines what if feels like to be polluted.

The girl is behind the counter. She sees the father and folds her thick, dark hair behind her ears. The father hands stuffed in his coat pocket, points to his choices with his shoulder, laughs too loud. His voice goes up and down. The girl laughs, soft, her mouth pale pink inside, her tongue punctured with a small silver stud.

The daughter stamps her feet on the old wooden floor of the bakery. Her whole body begins to sing a sad song and her fingers and toes tingle. She watches the father and the girl like they are actors in a play. The daughter thinks, that she has said Dad, Dad, Dad, Dad many times. He pays no attention so she isn't sure if the sound ever left her mouth.

The girl touches the long twisted crullers, the sticky chocolate covered donuts, the plain "old fashions" placing them ever so gently in the white bakery bag. She licks her fingers and begins again. The father stares.

The father is saying something over his shoulder as they leave and the girl stands, head cocked to the side. She moistens her lips, listening. The daughter feels as though days have passed standing in the bakery and she feels hot and itchy underneath her coat.

Father and daughter each carry a bag and walk home. This time the walk is slower, the father's eyes like hard blue marbles, focused on something far away. The daughter looks inside of her bag and pulls out a donut and begins to lick the cinnamon sugar. She finishes it in three bites and goes for another. The father looks down at the daughter, good navy blue church coat dirty with the tell tale signs of something sticky and sweet. The wife will be pissed. Dirty girl he hisses, swiping at her coat with his big, hairy hands attempting to remove the evidence. Her small breast buds hurt from the pressure of his quick hard slaps, a sensation she cannot get used to. The daughter begins to cry. A memory of shame washes over her like

a blush. Your mother will not be happy he hisses as they step over the spotless threshold of the front door to their home. The daughter thinks that is true. She stops crying as she steps inside, her eyes desperately trying to adjust to the darkness inside. It is the only thing he has said all morning that has made any sense.

Natural Habitat

Cece knocked hard on the door. She knew Libby was in there. Waiting for an answer, she curled the toes of her bare feet. She could feel the small ribbons of the chipped grey paint on the wooden porch sticking to the sweat on the bottom of her feet. She hoped Libby would answer in her bra and panties, the way she usually pranced around in the heat. Cece liked how Libby didn't care who saw her. The screen door whined. Cece looked up and smiled. She was rewarded.

Libby held herself around the waist, like she was cold or coy. Cece, sweating in the thick August humidity, knew that Libby was neither.

"Hey," Libby said, softly, tentatively, like a question.

"It's a done deal, Lib." Cece didn't trust herself not to cry. "We are so out of here."

"You knew it was coming, Cece. I told you so." Libby's voice had a soft edge, but an edge nonetheless.

Then:

"When, Cece? When do I lose the *best* babysitter I ever had?" The emphasis on "best" made Cece uncomfortable.

"Friend, too, Libby, right? Best friend you ever had, not just babysitter."

Cece waited for confirmation. "Anyway, four months, tops. My parents think they can sell right away.

"*Christ*," Libby said in what sounded like disgust. She brushed something off of the bottom of her feet. They were filthy.

Libby stepped aside and finally let Cece in. Cece looked at the soft upper flesh of Libby's arm, the light blue veins, marbling the white skin, and the shadow of stubble under the arm. Cece felt a rush of excitement and fear. Vulnerability is everywhere, she thought.

Cece was sixteen and the neighborhood and all that happened in it was Cece's entire world. She'd met Libby and her husband Billy when

she was almost 13 and immediately sought them out as friends. They accepted her. They were virtual outcasts in a neighborhood of immigrants, plaster of Paris Blessed Mother's in nearly every front yard, immaculate, though small twin homes. Their home was conspicuous from neglect, but Cece loved it. She felt like such a rebel sitting with Libby on the front steps. She began babysitting for their sons, Tommy and Josh when she was 14. Libby was friendly with the neighbors who stared at her long, white legs in denim shorts, gauze peasant tops, and bare feet. She smoked brown cigarettes that she would draw long and hard on, while the Italian women shook their heads in disgust. Their house was a comfortable mess, a place where you could 'let it all hang out'. Billy's Playboy magazines lay indiscriminately around the house---kitchen, bathroom, playroom, uncensored and well thumbed. Their pet rabbit, Hocus, a big brown lump that seemed to turn up everywhere had the run of the place. This, in particular, disgusted Cece's parents, who had labeled the family "disgraziati" the moment they moved into the place. Shortly after, her parents began talking about moving. Cece thought they'd live there forever. "More trash will move in, goddamn it. All sorts. We've got to get out while we can." Cece wondered where she would ever fit in.

Libby lights a brown cigarette and inhales deeply. The house felt stuffy and smelled like wet dog. Cece could hear the boys playing upstairs, all clang, bounce and high pitched squeals. Libby sat and smoked, at times oblivious to Cece sitting in front of her. Hocus nibbled at the corner of a Playboy magazine and simultaneously let loose a volley of poo nuggets. Libby wrinkled her nose, cigarette poised, body glistening with sweat.

"It's not the end of the world, Cece. Your parents won't go far." Libby seemed tired, lazy, as though her mouth were acting out of orders, not of her own volition. "Don't over think it, Cece. It is what it is."

"Lib, I don't want to go. I can't explain it. I want to stay close to you. We're friends, right?"

"Kiddo, let me give you some advice: the "situation" (she made quotes with her fingers, the slow burning brown cigarette still in hand) you think is all cozy and comfy today becomes your "cage" (again, the quotes) before you know it." Libby attempted to snap her fingers but appeared to change her mind.

"You will be o.k.—do you hear me?" Libby said this without any conviction. You. Will. Be. O.k. The emphasis did not help. 'She doesn't mean it," thought Cece.

Cece wants to cry but thinks better of it. Crying always exhausts her. She feels numbness start at her toes. It spreads. Everything Cece ever thought different and exciting is connected to this home and the four people who live here.

Keys jangle in the back door. Cece wipes the sweat off the back of her neck and looks up. Libby's husband Billy, shuffles through the kitchen. The clank of the car keys hitting the countertop makes Cece jump. Billy walks past them with a long slow stare at his wife. He merely nods at Cece. He looks exhausted and grimy. He grunts and makes the slow climb of the 8 hours a day worker upstairs to where the boys are.

"*Billybaloney*," Libby says in a low voice, and blows a strong stream of smoke straight up at the ceiling. The boys become silent upstairs. Cece finds the silence as disconcerting as the noise was.

The rabbit huddles in a corner, one brown shoe and a sock with a frayed heel lay nearby. A dark, wet spot spreads around Hocus. It will eventually dry, despite the extreme humidity. The spot it leaves will become a larger part of the rug's history. The spot it leaves will be in good company.

Cece gets up, feeling like she has been in that living room forever. No one has checked on the boys since has been there. Libby focuses her eyes on Cece as if suddenly remembering she'd had company for the past half hour. Cece wonders why they have so little to say to one another today. She tilts her head and looks at Cece , opens her mouth , then closes it. Something will go unsaid. For now. She doesn't get up, even as Cece opens the screen door to leave. The heat outside is degrees cooler than inside and Cece wonders how they endure without air-conditioning. Cece takes a deep breath and raises her hands above her head and blows out. Five houses down she sees the "For Sale" sign on their immaculate patch of grass.

Libby stands out the screen door and calls out, angrily: "I worry about you, kiddo, I really do. You've got to learn to handle things. You never were good at that!" Cece feels the scorch of the sidewalk

on the bottom of her feet. She hops towards her house on one foot and then the other in search for a cool and quiet place out of the heat.

From a Distance

1. Scene outside: sunshine, blue sky mixed with clouds, a slight breeze. Aunt Bea puts a pie with lattice-like crust on a windowsill to cool sort of a day. The key is to find the things that comfort. Walk the perimeter of the house outside, commune with trees, give a nod to the daffodils poking up through the ground cover, the very ones that had been covered with snow just a week before. Kick a stone down the driveway, look carefree. Save checking the mail for a bit later. Smile and wave at the neighbor with two children even after the young boy throws a tennis ball at you. Yawn to keep the corners of your mouth from twitching.

Stand back a bit: look at your house the way others see it: immaculate lawn, neat curtains drape gleaming windows, pineapple brass doorknocker: *Welcome!* Listen to the silence. There are never enough children around, they are signs of life. Grass to grow, which will mean more lawnmowers. But it is not your neighbor cutting the grass. It is a man he has hired. Still, you will wave. He will laugh at you when he gets into the truck. Driving away, he'll say to the other

guy: “That bitch was hot for me!” Careful now, not too eager. A smile can always be misconstrued. Alone. O.K., but alone. Not as it should be. Lawnmowers predominate. The hum is a comfort. Rain, when it occurs, will allow the grass to grow. More lawnmowers. The men who move them across lawns. Heavy sigh.

2. Fear paralyzes in a thousand different ways. Split yourself in half and pretend. Everyone is doing it! Laugh when you want to cry, smile when you want to frown. Try to remember not to throw yourself at the mercy of strangers and yell “help me”. They will not believe you. Steady now. Just keep going. Let your job become the refuge from your home. Bye-bye gleaming windows, immaculate lawn, brass pineapple doorknocker. Work as sanctuary. Work so you don’t lose your mind.

3. Count the spaces between the ordinary, everyday objects. Objects. The word rolls around your mouth like something steady and true, until your “objects” have been rummaged through because he might be looking for “evidence” of something you did. The strange thing is, you never thought of doing anything until now. Then he will no longer let his toothbrush touch yours, and he leaves your hair cling-

ing to the bar of soap he won't use. You poison everything you touch. He will shop for and eat the food that he buys with the money that he makes. You really should be grateful for a roof over your head, you silly girl. You always did want so much. Too much.

4. Leave before being left again. You think you heard that in a song once.

5. Too late. It doesn't matter if it was real or imagined. The last time anyone saw you, really saw you, was as you walked down your driveway, seemingly numbed by the drone of the lawnmowers. The lawnmower men laughed: "Nutty as fruitcake!" They jumped lightly and high-fived each other. You protected your eyes with your hands and you seemed to be looking at something far away. What or who it was is anyone's guess.

And She Flew

Jesus hangs on the cross right over the marital bed, blessing all things great and small. The mother, brow furrowed, sits in the hard chair, worrying her hands, intermittently reaching out to her children who breeze in and out of the room. Her youngest son, with his arms outstretched, like a bird, is doing the sway and the dip, while hooting like an owl. Stop, she tells him, and tries to laugh like she has seen the women on television who are never exasperated with their children, never feel lonely, never feel a shadow of a former self: brighter, stronger, saner. Those mothers never had to leave their country. They never had to raise their children in another language and hide the shame, like something dirty, of not being able to understand them.

The daughter sits at the mother's feet, rubs her eyes and tugs on the mother's arm. She moans with a mouth full of sad boredom. The mother looks at the soft pink insides of her daughter's mouth, the small teeth, and the soft tongue and feels a desperate ache at the vulnerability that is pressing all around. No, no she tells the daughter. Not now. Let mother sit for a bit. Angry crying, but the mother

is impassive as only she can be. The older son grabs the younger boy and tells him to settle. Mother doesn't feel well. Your flying is making her dizzy. And the mother thinks, no, that's not it. Misunderstood again.

The mother stares at her big, strong son, who in reality is still a boy, only he's older than the others. The light in the room goes bright and dark, by turns, as clouds move with sinister purpose in front of the sun. The mother feels as though she is caught in a kaleidoscope and suddenly comes alive. She revels in the heady feeling. A soft flutter fills the room. The children begin to scream. The bat does the sway and dip around the room as if anointing one and all, God's own emissary. The mother can hear the older son gather the children and is pleased at his excitement. Finally, she thinks, a sign has come: all will be well now.

The older son swats at the bat with a broom, but the bat flies with ease, high and then low. Jesus hangs on his cross and watches. One by one the children leave the room. Dinner will be set for them somewhere. The mother remains. Dark settles into the room now. The sounds of wings beating feverishly and breaths taken short and

quick fill the room. The moans are silenced. The bat speaks to the mother in the only language she can understand, every word filled with meaning.

In the morning, so many will ask was she ill, how long had she been unhappy, was she more afraid than usual? The older son will tell them, in all honesty, that she was the happiest, in that afternoon, than he'd ever seen her. The daughter, purplish circles under her eyes, will moan with no sound. Her brother, wings carefully tucked inside, will only be able to dream of his next flight, though the open window will beckon to him for a long, long time.

Junk

He drove up the driveway fast and stopped with a screech right before he hit the garage door. The corpse of our heater laid on the concrete slab, which made up our backyard. Uncle Jimmy came to haul it away. "Dad's not home," I told him. "I'll wait," he said.

The sky threatened rain, the air thick with humidity. My uncle lit a cigarette with a dirty book of matches, leaned against the truck. He looked at the sky, then at me. He frowned like I was to blame for what he didn't find there. My jean shorts cut into my chubby thighs. My "Cutie Pie" t-shirt showed my bra. Uncle Jimmy noticed. He smoked four cigarettes passing the time. We did not speak.

On Sunday nights at my grandmother's house, cigarettes after the heavy meal. Ashes were tipped into the remains. Character assassination would begin, the worst for Uncle Jimmy. Mother called my father's brother "fairy Mary." She was wrong.

Uncle Jimmy threw a half-smoked cigarette down on the ground. He rubbed his hands impatiently on his jeans, beat out a tune on

his thighs and walked toward me. I moved backwards; fell into the rusty sheet metal. Blood trickled into my sneaker. My uncle stopped moving. My Dad was home.

My father mopped his neck with a yellowed handkerchief, asked me where my mother was. I shrugged. He placed a rough hand on his brother's shoulder and glanced at my ankle.

Uncle Jimmy laughed hard, his thick yellow tongue vibrated. My father moved away from him, but not toward me. "Clumsy kid you got there," he said, like it was all he knew about me.

What Remains Was Always there

The old man sat at the kitchen table, chastened. His daughter lit a cigarette and threw the pack on the table. Crouching down, she rummaged through the mismatched pots and pans in the bottom cabinet under the kitchen sink looking for one with a lid. She winced through the smoke, one eye closed, the cigarette clamped in the corner of her mouth. Mouse droppings, dust and a rust-colored pool of water from a pipe that looked ready to burst, covered the old lining paper. She vividly remembered the print: a woven pattern, made to look like straw.

She found both a pot and a frying pan, but, with irritation, no lids, and plunged both into the sink which she filled with water and three squirts of green dish liquid. She sweated from the effort and switched on the fan with the dusty blades that sat on the counter top. The old man stared at her as if willing her to speak first.

"O.K., Pop. Do you want them boiled or fried?" Rosemary asked her father. Minutes before she had ranted about the dandelion greens

he'd brought into the kitchen for her to cook, after scavenging all over the neighborhood for the coveted leaves to eat. Rosemary had never had a taste for them and refused to eat them. A classmate in grade school, long ago, had once mentioned that her father would have liked to get out his BB gun and take a shot at the next "wop" that snooped around his yard, even if he was only picking at his weeds. Rosemary felt the shame anew, and hated to think of the old man scouring the neighborhood with a plastic bag and the old paring knife he had sharpened so many times there was barely a blade. She looked at him in the brand new Reeboks she'd just bought him, obscenely white and incongruous with the white button shirt and brown slacks that he wore, no matter the season or the weather.

"Make sure you clean the leaves good." He made a face, as if he was a man of highly refined taste and not a picker of weeds that sprouted through the cracks in sidewalks. Rosemary took a drag of her cigarette and blew a smoke ring. She looked at the pots soaking and thought she couldn't bear to sink her hands in the hot water. Strangely, the late afternoon sun seemed twice as strong as the midday sun and the kitchen felt ready to combust. Rosemary stared at

her father, gentle and stubborn at the same time. He'd been more of a comfort to her when her husband left than she had been to him when his wife, her mother, died. They both grieved terribly and could hardly do a thing for each other.

"You know, Mrs. Anastasio is going *to kick your ass* for not leaving her any!" Rosemary joked with her father, feeling less irritated and glad she could please him with so small a gesture. The old man relaxed, and she cringed when she thought that her anger probably intimidated him. She wasn't used to cooking for him here, and if she had to cook the greens, she would have rather done it at her house, where she usually feeds him. Lately, he hadn't wanted to leave the house for any significant period of time, not even to see his granddaughters, her two daughters, that loved having their grandfather around. Guilt, lately her predominant emotion, tugged her in a familiar place.

"This time, it was my turn, next time her turn," he said, chuckling and raising his thick, browned hand as if he couldn't care less about the lack of dandelions left for his loud-mouthed neighbor. Finally: "In the pan, Rosemary. A little garlic and some potato, diced up

small." He gave the directive as if inspiration had struck out of the blue. He rolled his tongue around his thin lips in anticipation. Soon the garlic hit the pan with a hiss. The old man folded his hands on the table, leaned back and closed his eyes with a smile on his face. Rosemary tucked an old linen serviette with the small purple and yellow flowers and long green stems that her mother had embroidered many years ago around his neck, like her mother insisted on doing for him all the years they were married.

After the old man ate, Rosemary cleared his plate. They sat quietly at the table, lethargic, their bodies now accustomed to the heat. While she smoked, her father worried his fingers nervously and looked contemplative.

"You know, Rosemary, once the dandelion has a flower, the green part is too tough. It's no good no more." He stared straight ahead, but looked at her from the corner of his eye. She shook her head slowly back and then burst out laughing. She grabbed his arm from across the table and shook it playfully.

"Don't I know it, Pop. *Don't I know it!*

Bruised

Leezie is the reason I shop at the Giant. I stand in her line, with my mother, even though the wait is shorter in the others. I like her voice, her funny way of talking. She has a boyfriend, Freddie, who she lives with in town. She tells everyone, "Freddie, *cwazy*, that's for sure, but he *wuvs* me." Freddie of the Indian burns Freddie. Freddie of the slap you around the room a few times Freddie. You could forgive Leezie anything, even her cartoon voice, because she'd never hurt a soul. *Slivered almonds, saltine crackers, ground meat, honey*. My mother gives me a rough shove then tries to make it look like she didn't mean it.

Leezie touches our food and I like it. I am staring. "*Christ almighty, Mara*," my mother spits in a low voice. Leezie's eyes shimmer. They appear darker or lighter depending on the way she turns her head. She never looks at my mother directly. *Toilet paper, dill pickles, cake mix, coffee*.

A bag of plump plums opens up. My mother never ties the knot tight enough. The purple mounds scatter along the rubber conveyor

belt. Leezie tries to gather them in her small hands, her nails bitten but polished, blue and sparkly. She and my mother both reach for the stray one that rolls away. Juice from the fruit runs down their hands like blood. I see the wet, red flesh of the plum and the twisted, wrinkled skin. My mother throws the battered piece of fruit into the plastic bag. I see the shimmer of sweat on her forehead and neck. Leezie grabs the plastic bag, suspends it in midair, spins it, then ties a strong knot as if she were in control and that gesture was evidence.

My mother pays with cash, but doesn't take her change. Leezie slips the money into the big pocket of her navy blue smock. She greets the next person in line, silently, her heavy eyes looking downward, her cheeks a dusky blush.

In the car my mother lights a cigarette then starts the engine. She rolls the window down and blows a strong stream from the side of her mouth. She stares straight ahead and says that Leezie is as "naïve as the day is long. A real dreamer." Then: "I blame the mother," she continues, softly, sounding like she might add something else, but decides not to. "*Dreams*," she says, her voice strangled, thick. I notice the dark hairs on her upper lip, like short dark wires, the one's that

make her look so angry one minute and inconsolably sad the next. Then: "Dreams are for dreamers!" Only she says, "*Dweams are for Dweamers*!" She snorts. She laughs, small puffs of smoke escaping in brief explosions. She forgets to put a hand up to her mouth to hide the expanse of her grey gums and small brown teeth. She laughs until she cries and wipes away her tears with a clenched, white knuckled fist. I feel an ache begin as delicate as an after thought. My mother raises the cigarette to her lips with a shaky hand and presses the gas pedal. The roar rouses me and I want to go home.

She fumbles for the key to the back door leading into the kitchen. The sun is low but illuminating, casting my mother's lumpy shadow on the wall. Digging into the shopping bag, she pulls out the plastic bag of plums. With a show of righteous and deliberate intent, she presses her foot on the pedal of the trash container and drops the fruit in. She holds the bag high because she knows I am watching and releases all five fingers. She stands still for a few seconds as if trying to decide what to do next. She rubs the back of her neck slowly. Her strong silence is a warning to me. My mother's most urgent communications are in gestures like these.

I will rescue the plums from the trash. I will take them up to my room. I will lock my door. I will lay the plums on the floor and lie down next to them. Roll them. Touch them. Lick them. My mother will beat on my door with the flat of her palms. She will kick with her bare feet. Later they will bruise and swell. She will be dramatic. She'll beg. She'll cry.

I'll ignore her for a while. Later, I will let her put her head in my lap, and I'll rub her temples in the slow circular motion that she likes, while I think of Leezie the entire time.

Forbidden Fruits

Janie's mother will leave her with the babysitter with the cleft lip. Janie and LaRue watch Geraldine leave the apartment wiggling her wide bottom as she walks up the street. Her ponytail is high and smack in the middle of a corona of fluffy blonde hair. Her pink waitress uniform is stretched taut across her breasts. LaRue sighs, and stands longer at the window than Janie does.

Janie's mother is strict and so every day she tells LaRue "no candy, no television" but LaRue allows both. It is summer and the days are hot and long. All day Janie and LaRue lie on the couch, curtains closed to the blazing sun, flicking the remote control, unwrapping mini tootsie rolls and Hershey Kisses. The air-conditioner hums and rattles, encasing them in the apartment like a tomb. They make tiny balls out of the pink, blue and green tinfoil and throw them at one another. They laugh hard.

Later, Janie's mother calls to say she'll be late, like she so often does. LaRue puts the phone down lightly and says "You're stuck with me

a while longer, kiddo." LaRue opens the fridge, the freezer, and half empty cabinets and wonders what she'll make for dinner. Janie yawns then grabs LaRue around the waist and tickles her. They fall to the kitchen floor. LaRue is on her back on the cracked and cold linoleum floor. Janie straddles her, and moves her soft pink finger over what should be her upper lip. LaRue barely moves, indulges Janie's curiosity out of a fear unnamed. She swallows hard when Janie leans down and kisses the wavy, grooved line on her face. The kiss is soft, Janie's breath is sweet. LaRue jumps to her feet, feels the tremor in her hands. Janie watches her and waits, rubs her eyes hard "When is my mother coming home?" Janie whines. "Soon", LaRue soothes her. Dinner is forgotten.

"Let's clean up those tinfoil balls," LaRue says and tries to make a game of it. Janie lies on the rug, flicks a few with her soft, sweaty fingers then rolls around and around. LaRue looks at Janie, lonely and bored in the apartment gone dark and quiet.

"Mommy will be mad. She doesn't like me to have anything sweet." LaRue looks at Janie. She traces her finger over her strange, wavy lip, touched by another's lips for the first time ever, today.

“I know, Janie. I know exactly how you feel.”

Leaving the Life

The neighbors threw them a party the night before.

A move to the other side of town, out of the old neighborhood, was a cause for celebration. The revelers smiled the distorted smiles of the envious, though they were secretly hopeful: it could happen to us, too. Amber beer bottles were opened, cigarettes lit. Pans of baked ziti bubbled and the cheese stuck to the cheap paper dishes. Voices hit a pitch that would later make them cringe when they thought of it, which they would do often. All that talk about the good times. They partied until they were tipsy then called it a night. They carried their sleepy children into the cold and walked back into their own house, a few doors away.

They imagined what was said when they left: who the hell do they think they are? Too good for us! They knew because before they got lucky, they did the same.

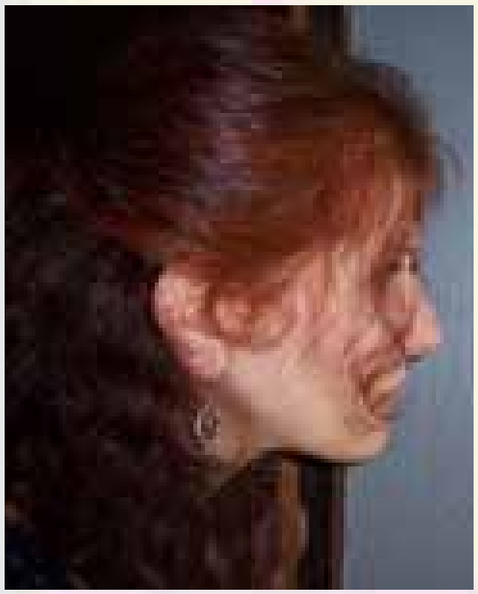
In the morning, snow covered the neighborhood like a membrane. The car was running in the driveway and would be warm when they

climbed inside. They told each other to look around carefully, in case they'd left anything behind. The mother wondered if anyone would open their front door and say a final goodbye.

The silence was like a cold shoulder. The mother ran upstairs one last time, scanned the room, breathless. "All clear up here," she called out, but no one heard her. The children were already outside on the pavement, their small mouths open, catching snowflakes on their cherry tongues.

The father scraped the snow off the windshield, stamped his feet against the cold. His shoulders slumped as though he carried a burden. The mother turned the key in the lock and walked down the front steps for the last time. Everyone was in the car now, waiting. The mother raised her arm over her head in an arc, giving a last wave to everyone and no one at all before getting into the car.

They drove away, slow. Their street was bumpy with frozen tire tracks. The footprints they left in the snow from their front door to the sidewalk would be covered in no time at all.



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