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Editors:

Helen Sedgwick, Sue Reid Sexton, Kelly Sinclair, Euan McClymont, Pippa Goldschmidt

**The Drive, by Helen Sedgwick**

**Marigolds and Temptation, by Patricia Ace**

**That time of year again, by Colin Begg**

**Paris Central, by James Fountain**

**Hermit, by Barry Gornell**

**again, by Gabriella Jönsson**

**Way Up in The Alps, by Micaela Maftei**

## **The Drive**

by Helen Sedgwick

Cats' eyes were twinkling in the full beams as Lucy's stare bore a hole into the road ahead. The sky was the black of Katrina's mascara, the silence in the car punctuated by irregular sobs that sounded like they were choking her. You've got to stop that now, Lucy's skin prickled with every noise, you've got to stop that, it's not helping. She said, "It's okay, Katrina." Katrina held her hand over her mouth like she was trying to smother the sounds, her body convulsing.

Lucy was counting the cars. There had been lots on the city bypass, but that was good. Many cars were good, and no cars were good. A few cars were bad. They were the ones who might remember them. She opened her window a little, she was afraid of the smell. Although there was no smell. But she was afraid one might develop. Smells are relative. If a smell develops slowly your body will adapt to it in tiny increments and so you won't notice it until you get away from it. That would be bad. If they returned to the car afterwards and there was a smell, very bad. But the open window made it noisier, and that was bad as well. She needed peace and quiet to think, to concentrate. She would do five and five; five minutes of fresh air, five minutes of quiet.

A black, no a red, what was that? A Polo. A fat man driving. With a beard, long hair. He was shouting something, mouthing something at her, fuck. No, no it's okay. He was singing. Speeding along in the fast lane, singing to his radio, his Metallica CD, whatever. And he was past them now. He was going. Gone. Another one gone by, leaving behind them an empty road. Good. And the sobbing seemed to have stopped for now.

A minute of silence.

Then Katrina started making little gasping sounds. Lucy's eyes flicked over to her. Katrina was clutching her hands over her mouth, her shoulders jerking up as Lucy realised what was happening. Just in time. Pulling in to a lay-by she turned off the engine, the lights, the car sitting in darkness, and reaching past Katrina she opened the passenger door for her, saying calmly, "It's okay. But if you need to throw up, do it outside of the car." Katrina leant out, her head between her knees, retching onto the tarmac and making pitiful little groaning sounds. Lucy stroked her hair, pulled it back off her face for her so it wouldn't get all gross. A silver fiesta drove past. Fast. Well over the limit, Lucy thought. Good. They wouldn't notice. She held Katrina's hair gently off her neck. Her skin was so white.

"Done?"

Katrina nodded, still holding her hand over her mouth.

"Good." Lucy reached over again and pulled the door shut with a bang that made Katrina shudder. Lucy indicated, checked her mirrors, pulled out, accelerated, every movement precise, considered. On the other side of the road, a black BMW. No one behind them. Good. Cats' eyes glittering in the road. It was a clear night, and dry. Lucy's eyes scanned the horizon ahead. The moon was looking quite extraordinary, she thought. It really is so beautiful out here.

They might get lucky. That would be good. It all depended. It all depended on that huge, shimmering moon, dragging quivering masses of water about the planet. It was strange, she thought, the way it seemed so removed. So removed from everything ordinary, everything bland. What they had been taught at home as kids, in school, at university, was all so base and unimportant now. In the end, what it came down to was that cold body of rock in the sky, revolving around them as they scurried about their tiny corner of the earth. And tonight. Tonight was totally separate from that mundane world of daytimes and lunchtimes and coffee-times, that world of other people. That world

didn't matter now. There was something bigger at work here, something celestial, overpowering. And everything that happened was so completely out of her control as to absolve her of all responsibility.

The car was hers though. Her own, beat up, innocuous little car. It wouldn't let her down. It was responsive to every movement, every touch. Connecting her to the black road leading them to the sea. She was speeding. Eighty-five. Probably unwise, but she felt so free suddenly, so free that she didn't care anymore. Eighty-nine. She could feel every slightest bump, every change in the surface. She was joined to it, part of it, of flesh and stone, of metal and plastic. And it all made sense. It was as clear as the freezing night sky. Ninety-five. Oh, god, she felt good, turning the wide, open corner, her foot pressing hard on the pedal, but then.

Shit. Cars. Lots of them, up ahead. Something had happened, must have happened. An incident. There were coloured lights flashing, coming into view. Katrina had her head down on her chest, looking as though she was trying to curl up into a ball like a scared little woodlouse. A sign flashed by. Fuck. Lucy slammed on the brakes, swerved left. She had nearly missed it, my god, the coast road. Of course. The coast road. What was that thud? Shit. Fallen off the back seat. Nothing to be done now. And at least this road was empty and dark. Away from the flashing amber lights, away from the cars, away from the moon. They would take the coast road through Longniddry, through Aberlady. Katrina's head was up. She must have felt the swerve of the car, heard that falling thud, she was turning behind, shit, how to stop her? "Katrina", too late. And now she was groaning, her hands over her eyes, turning away from Lucy, leaning into the door and the sobbing was starting again, jolting through her body. Lucy slowed the car right down. It was time to be careful now, to think. Discretion. "Sssh. It's okay." She stroked Katrina's leg, trying to be soothing, but her mind already working, racing through possibilities. She needed to be smart. She watched her speed through the villages, slipping along the coast. No one would see them. No one would know. She was an apparition, nothing more, and, my god, the beauty of it.

She had not even been there.

She was free of it.

And now, the golf course. Deserted. Carefully maintained, preened. The final landmark. They had arrived.

Lucy turned off the engine, opened the door. Sat in silence for a minute with her heart racing, the cold whipping around her cheeks. The darkness in front of them was absolute for a moment. The moonlight struggling to force its way through the sky. She stepped out of the car. Opened the back door. It had fallen off the seat, as she'd thought. Was lolling on the floor, half cloaked.

"Come on," Lucy said. Katrina was crying. Lucy could just make out the black smeared down her cheeks, her face a painting destroyed in a violent thunderstorm. She looked so frail tonight, Lucy thought. But her hair was wild and beautiful still, blowing across her eyes in the bitter sea wind.

"Lucy?" Katrina's voice was thin and faint, almost childlike.

"Please don't cry. Everything's going to be okay."

She watched as Katrina tried to take a deep breath, the air reaching her lungs in little puffs as her body shook, her lips trembling. Lucy looked out across the grass. The sand grey in the moonlight stretching on and on, smudged and blending with the black, black water, the tide out, that beautiful moon on their side, protecting them. Lighting their way to the sea.

"Lucy? What do I have to do?"

"Take his legs. And don't cry."

## Marigolds

by Patricia Ace

I love my rubber gloves, I do  
they give my hands protection  
from all the mess of married life  
that falls to my detection.

They let my fingers boldly go  
where none have been before –  
round the u-bend, up the wall,  
behind the playroom door.

And when I come to slip them off  
I love the snap of plastic –  
alas, my fair hands thus unsheathed  
smell like a prophylactic.

I love my rubber gloves, I do  
they keep my hands from wrinkling  
when doused in buckets, tubs and sinks  
I set the house to twinkling.

They keep my manicure intact  
as I wash up the dishes –  
my golden gauntlets serve me well  
but if I could have three wishes –

no more housework, no more toil  
release me from these fetters...  
I'm sick of having soft, white hands  
that smell like old French letters.

## Temptation

by Patricia Ace

I suppose I shouldn't have done it really  
but I did so want the apple.  
It pleased me to see it hanging from the tree,  
growing rounder and redder by the day.

The smell of it was driving me wild.  
I caught wafts of it from across the garden  
and rose from my husband, who warned me.  
*I'm only looking*, I told him, *what harm can it do?*

But of course looking is never enough.  
It only took the serpent telling me it was safe  
and the thing was in my hand, hard and smooth,  
a bauble of pleasure, a globe of knowing.

Adam couldn't resist it either, once I went to him  
wiping the drool from my chin,  
the fizzing sweetness prickling in my mouth. But  
after we'd eaten, we both felt bad about it.

We didn't get away with it. Not with  
the Old Man being omniscient and all that.  
But I got a nice fig-leaf bikini out of it  
which looked great until I got the bump...

and labour pains can't be that bad, can they?

### **That time of year again**

by Colin Begg

dead wasp on tenement half-landing  
a couped, crushed,  
crash-landed gunship drone, a  
yellow-and-black-hawk down

beak-curved tail pokes the cold close slab,  
sharp light catches  
anger of a dead man's bristle  
in the straight dry stinger, a  
modified *ovipositor*

(bold females bear  
this keen search  
for a winter home  
a jam jar rush  
a sugar bowl)

draught twitches wings  
but her *coelom* is empty  
desicated as the husks  
of papery comrades –  
last year's bleaching fallen  
still in the gap  
behind the broken sash

### **Paris Central**

by James Fountain

Paris central sunshine moving  
Shudders through the soul

The beauty echoes down the road  
My footsteps twine with hers,

Notre Dame blurs the world,  
Slows time with an unfurled flag

Of stained glass glowing gems,  
Artists gaze expressionless upon

Distant bridges, plugging thoughts  
Into the Eiffel Tower, its power

As the god of France,  
A magnet, encouraging romance,

Breathing life through criss-crossed  
Metal, lost ducklings find their mothers

And huddle; the family beside the couples,  
From within the metal god, gazes

Into the middle distance, at tiny figures  
Below. Wind moves through metal branches

Beneath the artificial tree house, and  
Up another liftful goes, another happy couple,

Money to the country, happiness the couple,  
Crumbs to the ducks below, and other families follow.

### **Hermit**

by Barry Gornell

The stage door is long since closed, the performance lights turned out. You hide in the shadow of the doorway. Tucked between the wheelie bin and the wall, you are witness to the nightly ebb towards home and bed as the city drains. You are left in the company of late night taxis and delivery trucks.

You pull the torn sleeping bag tight around your body and over your head, curling your legs up, securing the bottom between your feet. Compact and secure, you're no larger than a bin bag. All that betrays you is a single grimy hand sticking out from the dark, gripping a creased paper cup with a few copper coins in the bottom.

You found the sleeping bag, if it was lost. The salty tang of urine isn't yours. The briny taste in your throat should nauseate you but you're tired, beaten, open to memories of warm, shallow water and the comfort of sunshine. You can hear the surf, feel again the weed-slippery stone against the soles of your seven year old feet.

The seat of your shorts dampens as you sit patiently on the rocks, waiting for the surface of the rock-pool to still around your calves, waiting for the scuttle of the shells to begin. Hermit crabs scoot across the floor of the pool, collapsing upon themselves at the slightest disturbance to the water. You're still long enough to know them. Your hand dips quickly into the water and plucks a crab from the floor. Cupping it in the palm of your left hand you would wait for the crab's sense of safety to coalesce. The claw emerges to explore the crease of your lifeline. You're as quick as the crabs, adept with the nails of your thumb and index finger, pinching the claw before it can be withdrawn. You manage to tease the soft skinned creature from its protective casing. You have damaged countless others before and been left with a half full shell in your palm, the gritty pincer in the other. These you dropped back into the pool, knowing they would become food and eventually a home for other crabs.

You flinch, keen to the gulls at the bin bags, screeches of laughter. The drunken click of stilettos staggering sideways prompts retreat from both memory and the street's light. You understand that the more meager your home the less likely people will respect it. The grimy hand withdraws the paper cup deep into the doorway's darkness and the borrowed safety of someone else's bag. There you sleep, unnoticed, until the commuting tide of the morning flushes you back into the city.

## **again**

by Gabriella Jönsson

Because my computer is turned to mute  
and silently breathes light  
because the morning is glacial  
frozen streets that remind me  
of a song title  
in French  
that I translated  
brokenly  
in that caravan up the hill

But most of all (I think)  
the way your lips and the morning sun  
form the word "po-em"  
with two distinct syllables  
into a kiss  
(they come from Aiken...and you think you've been...)

The reverberations  
of something dramatic (a thunderclap? The hammer  
of Thor?) and something  
minute  
- a rabbit's footprints  
in the white  
(echo this)

## **Way Up in The Alps**

by Micaela Maftai

Some things are the same, because they will never change, because it is not their business or in their nature to change. Some things cannot go five minutes without changing and becoming something else entirely. The trick to a long and happy life is to negotiate balance between these two truths.

In here, of course nothing is changed. No one would stand for it. There would be uproar and revolution. The lights are still too yellow, like the tinge on the underside of the skin of the chicken on the plate. The booths are padded with burgundy plastic and the tables have a comforting sheen of oil that reminds you of the enormous number of other meals eaten here, a place softened by a thousand elbows. This is nice. It will not be nice in the car, on the cold way home, when the smell of the french fries and the chicken and the sauce will waft out of the fibers of your coat and fill the small rectangular space like potpourri and revolt you with the heaviness of the grease, but now it is nice and brings back some memories, indistinct but probably true, of birthday parties and after swim meets.

The waitress is not the same as before, obviously, since you have never been in this actual building, but she is the same as all the rest, with her name tag slightly askew and her name written on white tape which you can see is layered over another name, another person's tag, four cents of plastic passed down and down again through a chain of middle-aged women. Her name is Gita.

You came in here for no reason, because it just happened this way, unforeseen but not unusual because things these days sometimes just jump up like squirrels in the road and you simply react and then look back on them, past tense before you can try to understand them. There is something about eating. You are still not able to adequately explain it, and to be this silly about something so essential and fundamental. . . . . you are embarrassed to tell anyone, even though there are dozens of people to tell, people who would feel honoured if you told them. But it is still private and you know you cannot explain to anyone that the one thing that has been totally changed, with no hope of recovery in sight, is the eating. This is not a thing you expected. In a superficial way, you expected none of it, but in a more real and true and natural way, you expected it all because it is the nature of humans to think about these things and imagine them.

You anticipated the first few days where it was something perfectly normal and natural that Neil was not here because Neil had died, was dead, and dead people cannot, unfortunately, join the living in any of their activities. And so, while it was undoubtedly tragic and unpleasant that Neil could not drink coffee with you and wish you a pleasant day and pick up milk on the way home and lie up tight behind you like a question mark in bed and bring home papers from work to spend the evening marking while you looked up from your book every so often and congratulated yourself on a husband well chosen, handsome and smart with that habit you loved of licking the top of the pen when he did not realize he was doing it, it had to be this way and there was nothing earth-shattering about it – every one dealt with it eventually and to be this calm and understanding about it was enormously helpful when dealing with all these relatives and arrangements. Then there was the day and the time where like an egg the real truth of it split and there was an enormous amount of wet and heavy things on your head, when becoming submerged forever and ever was the reasonable and rational course of action, where you expected that you would suffocate any moment now, which would be a pity but would also thankfully relieve you of the flood of killing emotions released in your life. Those were heavy days and those were difficult days and those were days when there was no life to be found in anything and somebody had to telephone or knock on the door each day to make sure you got out of bed in the morning



and you were very nearly fired. And even still, that part of it was known and expected (indulgently, surely) and you knew that it was to happen, must happen. Those were hard days.

And then, in the small returning joys of life left to you, was also something familiar, that one day you would smile at a stranger on the subway and another day let something inappropriate and embarrassing slip out of your mouth unmonitored and wish yourself dead in the quick space afterward without remembering dead, what dead meant; that someone would flirt with you in the line to the grocery cashier and you would first think someone else the target, and then when you recognized yourself, smile and enjoy instead of turning to ice. Those things were known and expected too, and their arrival was noted with powerful emotion, among the strongest recognition. But not this eating.

Perhaps you'd shot yourself in the foot from the get-go. There might no hope of recovering from a ride like the one you'd been on. After all, you'd spent years accumulating meals in a way like pearls and to be left hanging, guarding these memories alone, would certainly be expected to give anyone a little trouble. Of course it would be unthinkable for you to turn into one of those silly people who begins to romantically think that the body can survive on tears and sighs and dwindle down to a ridiculous size, waiting desperately for outside comment and aid to return to normal. You have not felt the need, thankfully, to resort to this sort of adolescence. But to eat, the act of eating, has been stripped of any type of natural feeling. And so far, you are doing all sorts of strange things. You will often forget to eat, for far too long. A day or more. It just never enters your mind. Or, you will look at all the items in your refrigerator, sitting there dumbly and waiting, and you will, out of pure idleness and an unsure sort of guilt, eat something only to make it disappear. An entire jar of pickles. Mustard licked off the plastic cap. Spoonfuls of cold pasta sauce. And then the feeling of an alien inside, something inhuman about what you'd done.

After one extreme, you may have arrived at another. Because it was extreme to your mind, this thing you'd done. The feeling of connection with another person so sharp and invasive that you would yelp when he cut himself shaving, all four eyes would open for the day in the same second, he would answer a question with words that you'd been silently thinking. Conferences in strange parts of the world where Neil was paid to discuss things so boring he'd nearly gone blind, made worthwhile only for the money and the location, and because you were there - towns in Latvia and Columbia and Austria and Georgia, old stuffy men and your man who still wore his pants long enough to cover his socks, still fixed his glasses at the optometrist and not with scotch tape, both of you running off to dinner while they sat at the hotel bar and contemplated their medicated wives, dinners alone and isolated and with only laughter. Breakfasts eaten rushed before work or leisurely while taking days off, surprises when he awoke earlier and thought of nothing better to do than batter bread and brown it with cinnamon, the smell waking you up. Elaborate meals out of the cookbook with mistakes and substitutions and wine. You were proposed to over a meal. Announced a pregnancy over a meal (though that hadn't mattered, hadn't amounted to anything, you'd spoken too soon, just late was all. No point in remembering it.) If this is your past, does it make sense, then, that with Neil gone, everything, including this, is changed?

Your weight has gone down, of course, but not significantly, which is strange. People ask you if you are eating because they recall the days when you would not leave the house or the bedroom, they know you are not yet to be fully trusted on your own, and to inquire after eating habits is the easiest and first way to remind you that you are still on the mend. Yes I am, you say, I'm fine. And you look fine, if thinner. Tragedy has always been good for the waistline. But secretly it shocks you a little to still look human, normal, when your body has abandoned its most primary urge. At work, sometimes you realize you've forgotten a lunch only when you smell the plastic microwave odours of someone else's, and you think you should leave the office for a lunch break if only for appearances. You're never

hungry, you're never full, you're never aware of needing food. Soon you will probably go to a doctor. But for now, you will just deal with it, and see how it develops.

And this evening, it seems to have tipped over into something. You worked late, not too late, but later than usual, late enough for it to be darkening as you walked to your car. Again, you hadn't eaten all day, and didn't even really notice until you walked out of the office, past the kitchenette where somebody's Tupperware was sitting forlornly lidless on the counter. You tried hard to focus on your body and to sense your stomach, to remind it that it should be doing its job, but all you felt was a nothingness, a neutral sort of breathing feeling, no help at all. The human body is not supposed to sabotage itself, you thought, as you turned the ignition and drove carefully, the way you always do these days, and without knowing it you pulled into the parking lot and got out of your car and asked for a table for one and ordered what you always used to order. Gita seems to think nothing is out of the ordinary. She cannot be expected to know.

Across the aisle of the restaurant a party of three is being seated while you look at your chicken, which Gita brought over a minute ago. You are drinking ice water. Well, you have a glass of it on your table. The party of three is a man and his two small children who wear snow pants and carry backpacks half-full. The children are blond and the man has hair that must also have been blond in the first years of his life. They all share the same pair of eyes, the man's more lined and the children's less wise. He waits until they sit before he eases himself into the bench and he looks at them while he picks up the menu. One of them has hair sticking together and angled all over his head. He could have just been at swimming practice. They are far enough so that unless they raise their voices all you can hear are mumbles.

The food on your plate is like a magazine picture and that you can move it and disturb its placement with your fork makes you anxious. Nothing has gone into your mouth yet. The man is ordering for all three of them.

The tremendous weight you have, no one seems to understand that you weigh twice as much now because you are silently and stubbornly carrying him around when before he had his own two legs and you were all you weighed. Now he is perched on your shoulders all day, legs wrapped around the waist, arms hanging down into your line of sight and the bones of his ankles bumping yours when you walk. Because if you do not carry him, he will have no way of moving and he will be gone and then instead of a double weight you will disappear, it's a fact. Maybe this is why your body doesn't want to eat at all. It weighs enough already. Your arms are always tired now but the alternative is unthinkable. You'd rather have the weight, with all the history of it, the hardly bearable weight of his secrets, the ones that are all yours now, sick to your stomach with the thought of betraying them but sicker still with the knowledge that they are useless and empty now, meaningless, belonging and relevant to no one. That his father hit him to make a man of him. That he told the first girl who unbuttoned his pants he would love her forever, seconds before he ejaculated over her wrists. That fear is, and always was, his favourite emotion, because of the infrequency of it.

On the plate there is chicken. There is salad. There is a roll from a freezer. And there is a glass of water behind the back rim of the plate. This is normal food and it is important that you eat it. It will make you a human again. Your fork peels the skin of the chicken back away from the flesh and the high proud breast grows up on the plate white and made of fibers. Running along the fence in the yard. And you spear it and inside it is clean pure white, healthy, good. The dressing on the salad weighs down the leaves and you spread it like mayonnaise with your nicked knife.

Gita brings three plates to the table where the man and his sons are. The smallest one, stuck on the inside of the bench next to his brother, raises his arms above his head and cheers for a goal scored. Gita smiles. "It was forEVER!" he tells Gita, his father, the

restaurant at large. “It was forEVER and then finally we can eat it!” and he digs his brother in the ribs with his elbow to spread the glee. The brother ignores him and methodically unwraps the paper napkin from his knife and fork. The youngest says something else at a normal volume, inaudible for you, and pushes the entire roll into his mouth. The father reaches across hastily and takes it out. He wipes the boy’s spit off of it. Something he is telling him, presumably to eat like a person and not an animal, and the youngest takes it back and rips it into pieces that he eats one at a time, staring at his brother. They eat in silence for a while, the youngest still staring at his placid brother. Then, unprovoked, out of the blue, he announces, around his mouthful of roll, “David kicked me!” Imperiously. David, knowing he has done nothing of the sort, is unconcerned, and pokes out the small plastic-housed pat of butter. He does not even raise his eyes. “David KICKed me!”

Room service in hotels. It was an indulgence, but it was a pleasure and once in a while there are people who learn that truly, there is no excuse for forgoing pleasure, that nothing is more painful than recollections of happiness refused. Neil knew. He neglected no opportunity. Room service in all the hotels you stayed at, lousy ones, four stars, everything in between. Room service half an hour before he had to begin another day of discussing painfully boring historical documents, stories a thousand years old, things you couldn’t imagine anyone alive being interested in. “That’s it – we’re all dead already,” he would say while he laughed and it turns out he’s right. Room service in the middle of the night because there is no better way to forget you had a fight in a hotel in some awful country no one wants to live in with a man you can’t remember why you married, away from home too long and lonely. To wake the hotel staff and order a cheese sandwich and chew the white bread and remember it while you eyed each other warily. It was nothing you ever thought about, but it was always there.

The man is hustling both his sons out of the bench. The youngest, his chlorine hair dried sticking up, rubs his eyes and complains about being moved. The father raises his voice for the first time loud enough for you to hear.

“I was watching the whole time. Nobody kicked you. You sit here beside me,” and he ushers the youngest into the corner of his own bench, reaching across the table to put the small boy’s nearly untouched plate in front of him. David, the other boy, is now free to eat undisturbed. Now the youngest is facing you and you can see him better, his smooth unformed face and the tiredness in his eyes. It is late for small bodies. David cuts his chicken into very very tiny pieces before putting it in his mouth.

Everything on your plate is cold. Even the salad, which was cold to begin with. You pick up one wedge of tomato on the tines of your fork and inspect it. The colour is bright enough to suggest human modification, and the seeds are yellow and frozen in their jelly. With the salt shaker, you shake a layer of salt onto it and you touch it with the tip of your tongue. A feeling like your finger in an electrical socket. Putting your tongue back into your mouth it feels like drought. With your teeth you peel off a piece of the skin, a piece about as big as a blade of grass. It is like eating paper and there is no taste. After a few seconds you scrape it off your tongue with your fingernail like a stray hair. Then, slowly, you look up. The youngest is staring at you. You stare back.

Eventually the father leans over and shovels some food onto the boy’s fork. He has eaten almost nothing and you have the impression that his body has no time for food, sees sitting and filling as a genuine waste when there is so much to see and do. He squirms while the father inserts the fork into his mouth and when he chews you can see everything he’s eating. By the time he swallows the father has another forkful.

“But it’s ROTten!” the youngest says loudly.

“No it isn’t. Eat this.”

“But I KNOW! It’s ROTten.”

“Martin, it’s chicken. You like this! It’s not rotten.”

“I know. I ATE it.” He lunges over to pick up the salt and pepper shakers and in doing so brushes past David’s plate, jostling it. Quick as blinking, David smacks his hand.

“Did you SEE that?” Martin shrieks. The father is still holding the unwanted forkful of food. Before he can be stopped Martin wriggles off the bench and hides under the table. The father starts to eat his own meal again. He and David are nearly finished. Gita comes around the tables in her section. Everybody ignores her except for you. You ask for the bill. She looks at your full plate of food and then walks to the back of the restaurant.

The father of the sons finishes his food. He uses his last bite of roll (in all likelihood saved precisely for this purpose) to wipe his plate. Then he puts it in his mouth and stares at David while he chews. David is picking up one miniscule piece of food after another, chewing methodically and never stopping. Suddenly, without notice, the father reaches over and brushes David’s hair off his forehead. It is a gesture of love made to look practical, the thing most fathers are very good at. Martin under the table starts to sing to himself. He pulls at the folds of pant along his father’s thigh. The father tugs and coaxes him back up to sit on the seat and Martin’s snow pants make a zipping sound. The father indicates the boy’s plate of food. Martin slaps his tiny hands over his eyes.

“But I CAN’T!”

One bite, the father seems to be saying. You haven’t eaten anything at all.

“But I TRIED. And it was ROTten. Ow! Ow! My eyes hurt! Ow my eyes hurt SO MUCH!” He keeps his hands over his eyes and, conveniently, his mouth. David finishes his plate and pushes it away delicately. Gita materializes in front of your eyes and surprises you with the black plastic billfold. “Thank you,” you say. “No,” you say when she tries to take away your plate.

The father is paying his own bill. There is, for one single isolated second, the wild urge to run up to him, drag him back to your own table, and beg beg beg him to feed you the way he was willing to feed Martin, to make animals and airplanes out of food, to urge one forkful down, to be someone who cares when you reject the perfectly good food on your plate. You do not submit to this urge.

David and the father stand up and David soberly brushes any crumbs off the legs of his snowpants. Martin is lying on his back along the plastic bench. When his father asks him to stand up he puts his hands over his ears. “But my EYES hurt SO MUCH. Ow. Ow!” David goes to wait by the front door. He will make a superb accountant. The father lifts Martin with kind hands and sits him on the plastic bench to make sure his fingers are reasonably clean before he puts mittens on them. He looks one last time at Martin’s full plate and he makes Martin look too. Then they start to walk away from the table. Martin is saying, “but I TRIED but it’s just my EYES-”

“I know,” his father says. “Your eyes hurt so much.”

“YES,” says Martin, glad to be understood for once.

Then they are gone, all three of them, and nothing is left but scraps of food and the restaurant is so much quieter than it was all night, it seems. You look up for the first time and cannot tell if there are more or less people than there were twenty minutes ago. You wish you knew the pool Martin swam in. There is a high-pitched squealing sound and Martin comes racing past your table. He dives onto the plastic bench and he reaches down, under the table, and unearths a black toque. When he lifts it above his head in triumph he hits one of his hands hard against the wood table. He tries not to cry by throwing his head back and shaking it while waving the hat up and down. When you look over your shoulder, his father is at the door, poking his head in.

“Martin?” he calls, hoping that the child does not explode into tears or screams in the middle of the floor. “Martin, come here. You’re fine.” And Martin obeys, walking with one eye open and the other hidden behind a small red mitten. His hat is held in the other

mitten like a lobster claw. When he gets to the front door, his father tries to get him to uncover his eye but Martin refuses.

Gita comes back. You forgot to pay your bill and you are so embarrassed that you keep her waiting while you dig in your purse for your wallet. Then, when you give her back the billfold, you ask her to wrap up your food for you. You are trying to decide whether or not to wait for her to bring it back to you. You don't even have a dog or a cat.