CHARACTERS

MELINDA—a woman, 30s–40s.
TOBY—a man, 30s–40s.

PLACE

A major US city.

TIME

Now.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Set and props are to be suggested and kept to a minimum for maximum flow between scenes. Rampant theatricality is encouraged in staging, if not in performance.

Update any technology references as needed.

And we should never, never see any animals.
In the darkness we hear a woman's voice from somewhere in the room. Then a man's. They seem to be moving around us, past us, through us...

WOMAN'S VOICE. People ask me:
MAN'S VOICE. If this is really how it ended.
WOMAN'S VOICE. People ask me:
MAN'S VOICE. If this is how it began. As if—
WOMAN'S VOICE. There was a thread holding the two together.
MAN'S VOICE. As if—
WOMAN'S VOICE. The jungle we're in now could be time-reversed from full arcing trees back into shoots, back into kernels wedged by dirty fingernails into hungry soil.
MAN'S VOICE. People ask me:
WOMAN'S VOICE. If it's true.
MAN'S VOICE. People ask me:
WOMAN'S VOICE. Can you tell it again.
MAN'S VOICE. As if this telling will make it all adhere.
WOMAN'S VOICE. As if this telling will make it find the comfortable places inside you.
MAN'S VOICE. As if this telling will finally get to the truth.
WOMAN'S VOICE. But the truth is:
MAN'S and WOMAN'S VOICE. What I'm telling you happened.
WOMAN'S VOICE. This is a true story.
MAN'S VOICE. It may not all be accurate—
WOMAN'S VOICE. But it's all true.
MAN'S and WOMAN'S VOICE. I was there.
Lights come up on a man and woman facing us. He wears a
tie and dress shirt, slacks, dress shoes. She’s in a nice blouse,
skirt, sensible shoes.
This is Toby and Melinda.
They stand in their separate spaces: Melinda in a factory
setting, going into a ritual of motion; Toby at home holding
his invisible laptop like a divining rod, moving in a ritual
pacing about his apartment.
TOBY and MELINDA. I was here.
Melinda feeds in a stack of invisible paper, enters a code on
an invisible machine, waits, unwraps more paper, feeds it in,
enters a code, as...
MELINDA. There’s a stranger on my ID badge. Not a strange face,
it’s my face, actually what’s strange is that it’s still my face. I haven’t
changed my ID-badge photo since I had it taken fourteen years ago.
She holds it up to us.
See? This is how I looked my first day on the job and I look exactly
the same today. My boss says it’s the second strangest ID-badge-
photo phenomenon he’s ever seen. He called me Dorian Gray, but I
reminded him my name is Melinda. The weirdest ID-badge story
was Charlie Hooker who worked in Section Two, stocking paper.
He was 25 when he started here, and he had his photo taken for his
ID badge and everything was normal and a year later the boss
decided Charlie looked different enough from his photo that he
should have another picture taken. I guess working in Section Two
makes you age faster or something.
So he got a new ID badge, everything was normal for a few months,
and then he had to get another photo taken because he looked so
much older than his ID badge. And that photo lasted a few weeks,
then he had to take a new one because he looked so much older.
And that ID badge lasted him three days before he looked nothing
like it, so they took another photo and made another badge, but he
kept aging so fast they had to keep updating his badge, it was every
hour now, he would just step onto the factory floor and they’d call
him back, in and out, in and out, running, then walking, then hob-
bling, all day that last day, new photo, new photo, new photo, we all
felt so bad, and then at five P.M.—right on the dot, end of shift—Charlie died.

His skin was almost dust when he collapsed. They didn’t take a picture of that.

I didn’t go to the funeral. But we had a little company memorial a few days later with a little cake and pop and I guess people told stories that could remember him—I was on the night shift, so I missed all this, but in the break room when I came in, there were all his ID badges in a stack. And I picked them up...and I kind of made a flip-it book. You could flip through the pictures and watch him go from twenty-five years old to the edge of death in five seconds. I did that a few times, but then I got sad so I flipped him backwards and watched him come back to life.

But I look at my own photo…and I haven’t changed a single little bit in fourteen years.

If I think about it, I think that’s okay.

But I don’t think about it much.

Toby walks in a ritual pattern, raising, lowering his computer, adjusting, turning, as:

TOBY. The two hardest things about being unemployed are looking for work and not looking for work. Not looking is hard because you feel like you should be looking—even if you’re applying for ten, twelve jobs a week, every week for months and months and months and not even getting replies anymore—but maybe the perfect job just opened up now and you’re missing it! But looking is hard because 1) I have a limited skill set, and 2) I have a crap computer. Or my computer isn’t crap but my connection to the outside world is. The laptop was a hand-me-down from a friend in another city who knew I needed a computer and felt pity for me, which honestly, I didn’t mind. But while he felt sorry for me, he didn’t feel sorry enough to buy me a data plan month after month after month. So I scan for free wifi.

And someone around here has an unprotected connection.

And I don’t mind stealing it.

When I’m feeling good, I think of myself as Robin Hood... when
I'm feeling down I think I'm a miserable petty child who can't even take care of himself.

But I dress every day like I'm going to work—I heard that's good for you... I never know when... I never know where... my connection will be... so I traverse my apartment with my dousing rod... searching the desert... for water...

MELINDA. *(Continuing to feed paper.)* Sometimes, when I'm down at the factory, I get Section Three all to myself. They don't really need many people, just one to make sure the machine is still printing and to feed in more paper. Especially big orders, especially at night. Don't tell anyone, because they might take it away if they knew?... but I *love* the night shift. And holidays. People think I'm doing them a favor by coming in, but I love to be in the plant when no one else is here. Just me and the VOOM-VOOM-VOOM-VOOM-VOOM-VOOM-VOOM. It echoes in Section Three because of the very high ceilings.

Sometimes I like to think it's my cathedral. And the printers are the organ singing low serious notes, the kind that make you contemplate and feel small. But only small because there's something so much bigger than you.

Even if you can't see it.
Or touch it.

Sometimes I feel it through my shoes.

TOBY. *(Continuing his ritual pacing.)* I've gotten good connections crouching behind my television... lying on the floor of my bedroom closet... twisted like a snake around the garbage disposal beneath my kitchen sink... and yes, could I go to a coffee shop and use their wifi, yes, which entails buying a cup of coffee or a scone, which entails money I'm rapidly running out of, but yes, could I go to the library and use their computers, yes, but 1) I don't work well surrounded by crazy homeless people also on the free computers (partly because of the mumbling and humming and thumping, partly because it's like looking at my future), and 2) The last several times I *did* use the library computer, the person before me had left some blaring porn ad gyrating on my screen, and I couldn't make it
go away and I had to find a librarian, who says “WHY ARE YOU ORDERING BUTT PLUGS?,” and people are snickering, and I’m trying to explain, and he kicked me off the computer and everyone’s glaring at me and...I just don’t need that right now.

MELINDA. (Feeding paper.) Sometimes when I’m by myself in Section Three, we’ll be printing out booklets for CDs. The sheets come off in ten-by-tens and get sliced in Section Four and stapled in Section Five.

But sometimes I get to look at the CD booklets and they have the words of the songs, and I’ll read the words and it’s like a poem, but it’s only half a poem because I don’t know what the music sounds like. Sometimes, I think about someone who works in a CD-pressing factory, who stands watching all the CDs come out and maybe he listens to one, for quality control, and he loves the songs, but he can’t understand the lyrics, and maybe sometime we meet somewhere, by accident, and he sings me the music and I tell him the words. And we make a song for each other.

TOBY. (Pacing.) The hardest thing about being unemployed is that you get to know your neighbors. Better than you want to. Because I’m always here. I become the constant, the star around which everyone else orbits, and you get to expect at two P.M. Tuesdays and Thursdays, the college students above me get home—

He points up; sounds of a door and steps.

The fitter one gets in first, brings his bike up the steps out back, locks it, goes into the kitchen, opens the refrigerator, gets a beer, and sits in front of the TV watching ESPN. I know it’s a beer because in thirty-five minutes he’ll pee into the toilet and flush. His roommate comes home twenty-three minutes later because he walks home, and starts prepping dinner—he’s the chef—I know this because the weight of his footfalls and the low hum of the conversation. Can’t make out words, but they’re both funny. Or funny enough to make each other laugh every seventy-two seconds. I’ve timed it.

Something else you can do when you’re unemployed.

And below me is the working married couple, both have steady jobs—bastards—leave at seven-fifteen, share a car, home at six-seventeen,
go out Mondays and Thursdays, Friday night is dinner ordered in and sex lasting from seven to one hundred and five minutes. I think they prefer the shorter.

The guy to the left of me likes jazz, but only up to 1950. He bails at bop. Has two cats which he lets out at night and back in at dawn. I’m not sure if he loves them enough to let them roam free, or hates them enough to let them roam free.

The family to my right has two preschool kids and one in high school, who slams doors and yells a lot. I believe he’s the man’s son, the woman’s stepson, based on his accusations.

I should point out that I have never actually met any of these people. Never. Not even getting my mail. But I know them better than I know my own family.

MELINDA. *(Feeding paper.)* The only hard part about the night shift is the janitor. He comes and mops and straightens and empties the baskets and sometimes he breaks my train of thought. When he first started he wanted to talk to me and he’d say things like, “Keepin’ you busy?,” and “Burning the midnight oil, huh?,” and even this one time, “What’s a nice girl like you doing in a plant like this?”

And I smiled, but it was a nice smile, not a real one. If I wanted to talk to people I’d work with people. In the daytime. He should be the same way. He nods at me now and I nod at him back.

I don’t remember his name.

*Lights dim and they both cease their routines, moving to their separate home areas, sitting and facing out, illuminated by TV glow. Sound of a simple sitcom, complete with laugh track. Melinda smiles at a joke. Toby doesn’t. Then Toby chuckles at a different joke. Melinda doesn’t. They keep watching. The TV light and sound play over them... Then lights shift and they move back into their ritual routines, her at the plant, him pacing with his laptop.*

TOBY. *(Pacing.)* The hardest part is that when you’re unemployed every day is Sunday. Which is unfortunate because I hate Sundays. In regular life, Monday through Thursday, you’ve got your job, your school, you plan the night before, you know what’s coming,
fine, then Friday is the day before you’re out on parole, right? You can feel the potential rising with every hour...you’re almost free...closer...closer...then Friday night, and BOOM! Liberty! Whoo! Then Saturday is make-it-up and play and errands, but it’s on your timetable, and even when it’s winding down, you’ve still got another whole day of the weekend left! You’re still free!

...and then Sunday comes and no matter what you do, you can feel the hours slipping by and the only thing coming is Monday. And you can’t stop it. Sunday is like Friday in reverse. And so you don’t really want to start anything, and finishing anything just acknowledges that the weekend is over and another workday is starting...so you float in this vague mental unease...

Sunday is where God put all his existential angst. And it comes around every seven days. And you can’t stop it. Except when you’re unemployed...every single fricking day...is Sunday.

MELINDA. (Feeding paper.) Sometimes—only sometimes—very, very rarely...I think about putting my hand in the machine. As it’s printing. It wouldn’t be hard, it’s always sucking paper in, I’d just feed it my fingers instead...it might not even notice the difference. But I think I would. I wonder what I’d feel. To be part of this great moving complicated machine, even for a moment...What I’d be transformed into...

She moves her hand very near the feeding slot...

TOBY. (Pacing.) Sometimes—very occasionally—I’ll lean out my window to get a connection—I’m six floors up—and I’ll wonder...How far out can I lean? If I just keep on leaning...Further than I ever have...Leeeeaning...hanging on by one barefoot toe...And I’d slip free...And as I fall I get the best connection of my entire life and a job offer
comes in and I click “I accept” and life is finally, finally perfect...

For three-point-five seconds...

He’s now leaning out... further...

Melinda moves her hand closer to the feeding slit... closer...

Then lights dim and they both cease their routines, moving to their separate home areas again, sitting and facing out, once more illuminated by TV glow. Sound of a simple sitcom, complete with laugh track. Toby smiles at a joke. Melinda doesn’t. Then Melinda chuckles at a different joke. Toby fidgets. They keep watching. The TV light and sound plays over them...

Then Melinda goes back to her work ritual. Toby stands, but doesn’t pick up his laptop...

That was the first time I saw it.

I’ve never been a great sleeper—I used to not only talk in my sleep but sing, whistle, and apparently snap my fingers—I have no idea about now—there’s no one to tell me, hasn’t been for fourteen years. But since I lost my job, whatever it is I do, I haven’t been doing much of it. It takes about an hour to fall asleep, then I wake up at one, and it takes two more hours to fall back asleep and then I wake up hearing traffic and birds at six A.M., and I’m exhausted.

I’m exhausted from not working.

But I was up at one A.M., and I know I’m supposed to lie still, but I can’t, and I know that the only thing that will make me more suicidal than I already am is watching one A.M. television. So I go out onto my back stoop for some fresh air. I have an old plastic deck chair I keep out there, by my trash can, and I sit in it, just staring at the parking lot and other apartments and the trees and it’s quiet and huge...

And I see it.

Coming up my back stairs, silent, not a sound, like a ghost, like smoke, coming up my stairs is this dog.

The first thing that goes through my mind is, “Someone’s dog got loose,” and then...

I realize it’s not a dog.
MELINDA. (Stops her routine.) That was the first time I saw it.

I was coming home from the evening shift—I pulled into my parking space behind the apartments at one in the morning, and I always go up the back stoop and in my back door, so I was climbing the steps, trying to be quiet so I don’t wake anyone, it’s always so quiet early in the morning. It smells quiet too. And I was coming upstairs...and—

She jumps. Freezes.

The first thing my mind thought was, “Wolf!” I’d never seen a wolf, how do I know what a wolf looks like except from some deep, deep memory, some ancestor maybe, a gene that clicks on when you see Fire. Or Blood. Or a wolf. And instantly I’m Red Riding Hood, I’m Snow White, I’m every little girl who’s ever been lost in the woods and I step back, I almost tumble back down the stairs, but I don’t, I think why is there a wolf here, he’s staring at me, he wants to eat me, this is my house, this is my world, he’s coming into my world, he should be scared, he’s just a dog, a big dog—No. It clicks.

Something clicks, even stronger than knowing it’s a wolf—

TOBY and MELINDA. (Both facing out at us now.) It’s a coyote.

I’m looking at a coyote.

On my back stoop.

Outside my apartment.

In my city.

A coyote.

MELINDA. It was just

TOBY. Staring at me

MELINDA. Neither of us

TOBY. Moving. Waiting

MELINDA. For something.

TOBY. Afraid—

MELINDA. Maybe—

TOBY. Hungry—

MELINDA. Maybe—

TOBY. Curious?
MELINDA. Maybe—
TOBY and MELINDA. Watching.
MELINDA. What is it doing here?
TOBY. I should get inside.
MELINDA. How did it climb the steps?
TOBY. Slowly back away.
MELINDA. Do they eat people?
TOBY. I can use my plastic chair as a weapon—
MELINDA and TOBY. And it runs.
TOBY. Down.
MELINDA. Back down.
TOBY. Down the steps—
MELINDA. Back to the earth—
TOBY and MELINDA. It’s gone.
TOBY. As silently as it appeared.
MELINDA. I’m alone again.
TOBY and MELINDA. Like nothing ever happened.

Pause. Then they both simultaneously step back into their old spaces. Lights shift, and they begin their daily rituals, though each hesitates at different times, ponders, continues, out of rhythm now...

MELINDA. I don’t know how I knew it was a coyote? It’s not like I’d ever seen one of those any more than a wolf.
TOBY. When I do get my wifi connection—very slow, surprise—after I look for work—very nothing, surprise—I google coyotes.
MELINDA. It was more solid than I imagined. It was thin, but I’m picturing Wile E. Coyote, like a scraggly rail—he wasn’t a rail, he was real.
TOBY. I guess coyotes have been coming back into cities for the last few years—every major city has sightings—
MELINDA. I’m thinking, “What right does he have to live in my city?”
TOBY. They eat pigeons, squirrels, rabbits, cats, small dogs—
MELINDA. Isn’t that why we build cities, to keep the wild out?
TOBY. They shy away from humans, only a few urban human deaths by coyotes recorded to date, and then mostly to protect a food source.

MELINDA. “What right does he have to live in my city?”

TOBY. They can raise whole families—there are hundreds of coyote pups that have never known a desert or forest.

MELINDA. I guess it came from the park.

TOBY. I’m guessing they make lousy pets.

MELINDA. I only live eight blocks from the park.

TOBY. I had a goldfish as a kid. I wasn’t big on cuddling.

MELINDA. He’s surrounded on all sides.

TOBY. What was he looking for?

MELINDA. Looking for food—

TOBY. Why my apartment?

MELINDA. Looking for companionship—

TOBY. And then it hit me.

The question is: Are the coyotes the last dregs of a wild we are inevitably surrounding... or are they the first scouts of a wild that is inevitably surrounding us?

MELINDA. And I knew I had it wrong.

The question isn’t what right does he have to live in my city... the question is what right does my city have to be in his life?

TOBY and MELINDA. And that changed everything.

Lights shift, and they both crouch on chairs, looking through their back-door windows into the night.

MELINDA. I stop by the store on my way home and buy three pounds of raw hamburger.

TOBY. I’m not sleeping anyway, this is like, twenty times better than what’s on TV at two a.m...

MELINDA. I cut it open and set it on my back stoop. And wait.

TOBY. It’s a longshot he’ll even come back. But I wait.

They wait. Then Melinda CHARGES outside, waving and yelling. Goes back to her perch.

MELINDA. Neighbor’s cats.
Beat.

They can get food anywhere. They have people feeding them out of cute little cans. They do not need help.

TOBY. This is probably stupid, right? Why would he come back?

Beat.

If he's even still alive.

Beat.

Could have been hit by a car.

Or shot by police.

Or just got sick and died.

Pause.

MELINDA. And then I notice the cats stop coming. It's like they say cows and dogs get jittery right before an earthquake? Or like when you hear a siren and you just sort of pull over to the side of the road, without even thinking about it, it's instinct, you just get out of the way—that's how it felt. Something was coming and it was pushing everything before it out of its path...

And then there he was.
My coyote. On my stoop.
And I know you'll think this is crazy, but it's true. He looks at the hamburger—looks up at me in the window...and he nods. Just a little—(Nods.)

But clear. I mean clear. ...and I nod back. I don't even know what I'm saying, I don't speak Coyote, but he watches me a second longer, then he eats.

TOBY. So far I've seen two cats and that's it.

MELINDA. “Eats” isn't even the right word. He opens his mouth, he makes this fanged hole in his face and there's this sound, this sound I can hear even with my door closed, a roaring, a huge river carving through an underground cave, echoing, and this jagged implosion of the meat and his tongue, his teeth, white teeth in the streetlight, and water, salt water, whitewater rapids, saliva and his face and his eyes and it's done. The meat is done.

I should've bought twenty pounds, fifty pounds, it wasn't enough, it
happened too fast, I couldn’t even see it happening, DAMMIT! TOBY. I would have been better off staring at the ceiling.

MELINDA. But then he looks back up to me. One last lick of his bloody lips, that magnificent tongue...and I feel myself licking my lips...with my little stupid useless tongue, how can he help but scorn me, at best pity me...

TOBY. I’m going to bed.

MELINDA. And he darts up the stairs. Up. To a higher floor.

TOBY. And there he is.
The coyote.
On my stoop.
He just appears.

MELINDA. (Starts to move.) I’ll follow him up, at least watch for him... But I don’t want to be between him and the ground...

TOBY. I freeze. I feel this thudding from somewhere. It takes me five, ten, twenty seconds to figure out where.
It’s my heart. I can feel my heart beating. Actually feel it...

I’m six years old and I’ve snuck into the living room at one A.M. on Christmas morning and there’s Santa Claus, red suit, black boots, white beard, shoving presents into stockings and I’m watching it happen... I’m in totally the wrong place at the wrong time...and it’s right.

He looks at me...straight at me...and licks his lips, his bloody lips, he’s been eating, OH MY GOD HE MUST HAVE EATEN THE NEIGHBOR’S CATS!!

MELINDA. He must have gone up two flights—

TOBY. But I don’t move. It’s too late to help the cats in any case. He just keeps staring at me...and I know you’ll think this is crazy...but he nods at me. Just a little— (Nods.)

...and I— (Nods.) —back.
Like we’re saying “Hey”...
“How you doing”...
“Good.”...
“Don’t eat me.”

MELINDA. He has to come back down, doesn’t he?
TOBY. And he turns and glides down the stairs.

   Toby moves to watch.

I'm outside before I even know what I'm doing, I'm outside, he's sliding down the floor below me, the floor below that—

MELINDA. And there he is, flying past me, down the stairs, like smoke—

TOBY and MELINDA. ...and he's gone.

   Pause.

Melinda looks up. Sees Toby looking down (though they're right beside each other)...

   They tentatively wave to each other...

   Pause...

   They walk back into their apartments.

   Back to their daytime routines, but faster now as lights shift.

TOBY. I heard the cats next door today. They're still alive.

MELINDA. I need to buy more hamburger.

   Lights shift and they spin back to their midnight stoops.

   Toby approaches Melinda, who is crouching, laying out three Styrofoam trays of “raw hamburger” in a very ritualistic way.

TOBY. Excuse me.

   She jumps.

Sorry.

MELINDA. No. I'm sorry. I didn't—

TOBY. I'm sorry

MELINDA. No

TOBY. I live up on the sixth.


TOBY. So you saw our new neighbor last night?

MELINDA. The—?

   He nods. She nods too.

TOBY. (Points to hamburger.) Is that for him?

   Melinda hesitates, nods.
That's smart. As a way to make him come back.

MELINDA. I don't think I could make him do anything.

TOBY. Probably not.

*Pause.*

MELINDA. Are you always up at one in the morning?

TOBY. I have trouble sleeping. You?

MELINDA. I work different shifts.

*Pause. They wait.*

TOBY. How long have you lived in the building?

MELINDA. Eleven years.

TOBY. *(Points to himself.*) Five. I'm a newbie.

She nods.

Have you ever seen anything like this before?

*She shakes her head no.*

I guess they're beginning to show up more and more in cities and suburbs.

MELINDA. They should.

TOBY. He probably lives in the park, don't you think?

*She nods.*

But I guess in cities they can have a territory of about ten square miles. Or the males do.

MELINDA. Do you work at the zoo?

TOBY. No. Why.

MELINDA. You just...

TOBY. I wish. I don't work anywhere. I work looking for work. I spend a lot of time online.

MELINDA. Oh.

I don't even have a computer.

TOBY. Really??

*She nods.*

No, it's probably good, I wish—God, that's—I mean, it's kind of—

*She shrugs.*
I have a laptop I got before I was unemployed. If you ever need to use it for anything, I mean it's not—

They freeze. Watching...
The invisible coyote appears up the stairs. They watch silently as it watches them...approaches the meat...hesitates...
They watch...holding their breaths...
It eats. Toby almost smiles in wonder, glancing at Melinda, who glances back at him, smiles, they watch...
The coyote is done, stands staring at them, they at him...and he glides down the stairs.
They move to watch him go, looking down as he crosses the parking lot and into the darkness once more. Pause. They look at each other. They are very close, smile, embarrassed.

...I'm Toby.

He offers his hand.

MELINDA. Melinda.

They shake. Lights shift and they're back to their day routines, moving WAY fast, spring back to night and each other almost instantly as lights shift.

Melinda ritualistically places out eight Styrofoam meat trays.

He watches her.

TOBY. That's a lot of hamburger.

MELINDA. I want to see how much he'll eat.

TOBY. Do you have any other pets?

MELINDA. He's not my pet.

TOBY. I didn't mean—

MELINDA. I'm allergic to cats and I've never had good luck with dogs.

TOBY. Is that like being "bad with plants"? Like no matter how much you water them they wither and die?

MELINDA. When I was five I wandered off to a neighbor's house because he told me his dog had puppies. My mom let me go alone, or maybe I didn't tell her or something, but as I stepped around the corner of their house, the mother dog was waiting for me, she leapt at me and I screamed and she tried to eat me, I mean seriously devour
me, and I don’t know how long I was screaming, but something pulled
me away and I was in a room being asked all these questions and
having Bactine swabbed on me and shots and I don’t know what else.

TOBY. Jesus.

MELINDA. And my mom was nowhere to be found.

TOBY. Wow.

*She’s done laying out the meat. Beat.*

MELINDA. And you? Any pets?

TOBY. No. Not really.

MELINDA. Parental issues?

TOBY. No. Not really.

MELINDA. What else do you know about them?

TOBY. ...their Latin name is *Canis latrans.* “Barking Dog.”

MELINDA. Except this one doesn’t bark.

TOBY. I’d like to hear him howl sometime.

MELINDA. Except I might be scared.

TOBY. Me too.

I guess they call out to find each other. “I am here! Where are you?”...

*Beat.*

I wonder why this one is so quiet.

MELINDA. Maybe there’s no one for him to talk to yet.

*Toby takes out his cell phone.*

Expecting a call?

TOBY. I want to be ready to take its photo if it comes again.

MELINDA. Don’t.

TOBY. Just for—

MELINDA. Please don’t. Seriously. Please. Don’t.

TOBY. Why not.

MELINDA. I didn’t even buy him a water bowl.

TOBY. ...

MELINDA. I thought about getting him a bowl for water, a drink with
his meal, but I held the bowl in the store, this cheap plastic purple
bowl... and I knew if I gave him water in it—if he made the mistake of drinking water from it, even once... he'd be just another dog. He'd be tame somehow. Or on the road to tame. If you take his picture you can look at it any time, on your time. Right now we can only see him on his time, when he wants to be seen. How many things can you say that for these days?

Pause. Toby puts his phone away.

TOBY. But the meat—

MELINDA. The meat is an offering. I'm not making him do anything to earn it. He owes me nothing. He's still wild.

Pause.

TOBY. So what do you do when you're not feeding hamburger to wild things?

MELINDA. I feed paper to machines. A printing plant over the highway, behind the parking lot, beneath the tallest cell phone tower in the world.

TOBY. Very nice.

MELINDA. It's very loud and I have no windows. You?

TOBY. I used to be the floor office manager of a whole floor of offices 65 stories above the sidewalk.

MELINDA. So you had a view.

TOBY. The city rose like a hundred right-angle stalagmites from the bed of pavement below us.

MELINDA. Very nice.

TOBY. When the wind blew we tipped and the papers on our desk would slide just to the edge of our desks... but never fall off.

MELINDA. Mm.

TOBY. But one day someone came in from far away and lined us up and counted us off: one, two, three; one, two, three; one, two, three... And then they told all the number twos to clean out their desks, turn in their security badges, and vanish.

MELINDA. And here you are.

TOBY. Nine months later. Discovering there are a hundred and
thirty thousand people with exactly my talents, exactly my history, applying for every single office job I apply for.

MELINDA. I’m sorry.

TOBY. You’re lucky.

MELINDA. It’s what I could get when I quit school.

TOBY. If it pays the bills.

MELINDA. Sometimes I’d like to do something no one else could do. A job the world is waiting for but maybe doesn’t know it, and I discover it and it’s my job.

She watches the Styrofoam trays.

TOBY. I wanted to be the first man on Mars until I was thirteen. I wanted to grow corn and watermelon in the dry red dust on the exact spot where everyone said nothing could ever grow. I wanted to shock the possible.

Now I just want health insurance.

They wait. Toby steps forward to address us as Melinda continues staring.

He didn’t come that night. We waited and we watched and we upheld our end, but he didn’t show.

He steps back as Melinda sets out the trays again.

(To Melinda.) They mate for life, did you know that?

MELINDA. Of course they do.

TOBY. Why “of course”?

MELINDA. They’re smart.

TOBY. I don’t know if intelligence—

MELINDA. If you find someone who fits with you, you’d be stupid to keep looking.

TOBY. Sometimes they can breed with other animals, like wolves or dogs, to create these new hybrid species that have never been seen before.

MELINDA. I bet they dance when they court.

Toby laughs.

Don’t you think? Don’t almost all animals dance when they court?
Around each other, over each other, sizing each other, seeing how their bodies fit together? Or don't. Whales and birds even get to dance in three dimensions.

TOBY. Maybe that was my mom and dad's problem, they never danced before they got together. Or after.

MELINDA. I hope he has a mate.

TOBY. If this is even a “he.”

MELINDA. It is.

TOBY. How do you know?

   She's finished the tray ritual.

MELINDA. How do your eyelids know when to blink?

TOBY. ...they just do.

MELINDA. Exactly.

   They stop. The coyote approaches.
   They watch. He eats from one tray. Then another. Pause. They nod at him. He walks to a corner, pees. They tilt their heads, watching, taken aback, enthralled...
   He leaves.

He just peed on my wall.

TOBY. Definitely a boy.

Lights shift. Melinda sets out the trays again.

MELINDA. The next night I have to work so Toby lays out the food. He doesn't come. The next two nights I'm off, so I lay out the food and each night Toby brings me some new fact.

TOBY. Did you know they can live for fifteen years in the wild?

MELINDA. How long in the city?

TOBY. I don't know.

MELINDA. He comes back that night.

   Lights shift.

TOBY. They can go for two weeks without food. Did you know that?

MELINDA. No sign that night.

But every night we prepare, every night I learn something new and
every night my world gets bigger...and some nights our coyote is part of that world.

But then came The Night.

_Lights shift. Melinda lays out meat trays._

TOBY. Where were you?
MELINDA. I had to work. I told you.
TOBY. I know.
MELINDA. I’m trying to get more day shifts.
TOBY. I know.
MELINDA. Did you lay out the meat?
TOBY. I wish you’d been here.
MELINDA. You forgot, didn’t you.
TOBY. I think I fell asleep.
MELINDA. You missed him?
TOBY. No! Or maybe. I don’t know.
MELINDA. Did he come or not?
TOBY. He did. He definitely did.
MELINDA. Then you were awake.
TOBY. ...I don’t know. I kind of don’t think so.
MELINDA. You’re not making any sense, Toby.
TOBY. I waited a long time and he wasn’t coming.
MELINDA. We’re on his time, he’s not on ours.
TOBY. I know that. But I was getting sleepy—I’m exhausted, Melinda—
MELINDA. You think I’m not?
TOBY. I went inside to get another drink of water, and my screen door, it doesn’t always close if you don’t pull it, and I must have not pulled it, because I turned around from the sink with my cup of water and he was in my kitchen.

_Pause. She watches him._

MELINDA. (Quietly.) ...He came into your home?
TOBY. I wasn’t trying to tame him, it was his choice, not mine, I’m
not even sure if I was dreaming or not.

MELINDA. (Quietly, sitting very still.) What happened.

TOBY. I was a mess. I was trying to cover, to not look like a mess, but inside—

MELINDA and TOBY. Mess.

TOBY. I was so scared. And utterly, utterly delighted. And you know how weird it is when you see something familiar in a whole new setting—

MELINDA. When I was five I saw my kindergarten teacher in the grocery store and I almost peed myself.

TOBY. (Nods.) So I’m totally having to realign my entire reality, but trying to look nonchalant while doing it. And I think I’m pulling it off, I’m not dropping my cup or screaming or wetting myself. I just go— (Nods.) “Okay.”

And we stand there watching each other for a while, maybe two minutes, maybe more. And I find myself saying, “Do you want to see my place?”

And I walk away. I turn my back and walk into my dining room from the kitchen.

_She watches him…_

And he follows me.

It’s so creepy because he doesn’t make a sound, I’d expect clicking of toenails on linoleum, something, but he’s just there, wherever he decides to be, he’s there.

So now we’re in my dining room, and I’m thinking, “Thank god I keep the place reasonably neat,” and I say, “This is where I eat, or should eat, except I usually eat on the couch.”

_Laughs nervously. Beat._

And he’s looking at the photos and the art on my wall, so I tell him about them, “This is me and some friends hiking through New Mexico—Chaco Canyon—during college. That was one of the best weeks of my life—have you ever been to New Mexico?”

MELINDA. You asked him that?
TOBY. It just came out.
He hasn't.
But we walk around the room and into the living room and I'm showing him my stuff and I'm feeling a little uncomfortable about the silence.
(To coyote.) “Do you mind if I put on some music?”
And he doesn't. So I put in my Ella Fitzgerald CD.

Melinda frowns.
I don't know. I always play that when I want to look classy.
I like her music okay, but I only play it when other people are around—it says I have some taste, some classic style...hip...
Anyway, I put it on and Ella's singing “Mac the Knife,” and he seems to be enjoying it.
(To coyote.) “Can I get you anything to drink? I don't have wine, but I have water and milk.”
He's fine.

(Sitting.) It's pretty dark, the only lights now are coming in from the streetlights outside. I sit on the couch. He sits beside me. And we just sit there for while, sometimes I glance over at him, just for a second, making small talk, he keeps looking at me, or I think he's looking at me. I'm a little scared but also so, so flattered and proud that he's here in my house, on my couch... I don't want to say or do the wrong thing.
And I, um... I just kind of casually—fighting to be casual—just kind of slide my hand over...and put it on his paw. Just gently.

MELINDA. (Quietly.) ...was it soft?
TOBY. Grainy. Like a teddy bear made out of Southwest desert. Coarse and rough but pliable and flowing around your fingers. And his paws are small. It feels so delicate in my hand, like I have to be gentle...and he leans over, slowly, delicately...his face is next to mine—I don't think I'm breathing now—I can hear his breath, smell it, clean and warm—I'm looking down, can't meet his eyes, but holding his paw, his nose inches from mine, his teeth—I know what his teeth can do, they're one whisker from my throat...but I turn to face him, I want to see his face, his eyes just once, full on,
just once...and he looks at me, into me, in me, and he kisses me.
And what's more shocking to me, I'm kissing him back, full on, hard, fierce, like I haven't kissed anyone for seventeen years—his yellow eyes are on mine, I've got a handful of fur and we're twisting, we're on the floor, my clothes are sliding off, his claws over me, kissing mouth in mouth inside mouth, inside each other, my hands over his face, ears, neck, thighs, shoved against the coffee table ready to be devoured, to be swallowed, be engulfed, to be him, to be one...

Beat.

And I looked up and the sun was shining in across my couch and TV, and I was on the floor naked and my back screen door was standing open with a cool breeze coming in and it was seven A.M. And my clothes were in a neat pile beside me and Ella Fitzgerald was singing “Night and Day” on repeat. And I was alone.

Beat.

MELINDA. Things were pretty quiet down at the printing plant.
TOBY. Melinda—!
MELINDA. What do you want me to say, Toby? Congratulations? At least you got one good night out of it. I just hope he comes back again.
TOBY. It was just a dream, Melinda.
MELINDA. It wasn't a dream.
TOBY. Look at my body, look at my face, my jugular—no scratches, no marks of any kind—
MELINDA. That just shows he's a gentleman, not that it didn't happen! You could have asked him to wait outside, you could have played hard to get, made him respect you—
TOBY. Melinda—
MELINDA. Nobody made you be a slut, Toby.
TOBY. ...
MELINDA. He was lonely, that's what the problem is, he's alone in this city, he doesn't know anybody, he's looking around, he's got needs, of course he's going to go for the first person who gives him
a wink and a smile and offers him a couch, you can't blame him!
TOBY. I'm not—
MELINDA. If he knew others like him in the city this never would have happened.
TOBY. I don't—
MELINDA. But where is he supposed to meet them? There are no clubs, no bars, no *Canis latrans* singles' night at the ice-skating rink. We've done this to him, we've driven him to this, to mating for life with... (Gestures at Toby.) This.
TOBY. Thank you.
MELINDA. We have to make him welcome again—all of them. We have to make this right.

*She steps away as lights shift. Toby stays in place.*

Tuesday's my day off, I go shopping.

*She pulls out a bag.*

A dozen granny smith apples.

*Another bag.*

Twenty-five pounds of grass seed, and...

*She holds up a pickaxe.*

It's easier to buy a pickaxe than you might think. Home Depot has a reasonable selection.

*Lights shift.*

Down by the YMCA there's three tennis courts laid out side by side. They look green, but it's just camouflaged asphalt with white lines holding down every edge. It's not the best part of town, and I guess it's not the safest place to be at a quarter to one in the morning. But I do have this.

*She holds up her axe, then swings it down, over and over...*

The asphalt...is old...it crumbles easy... I start at one A.M...and tear out chunk...after chunk...after...for the next four hours...just me...and the streetlight...

*Pauses, looks up.*

I bet him and me are both looking up right now wondering where
the stars are. But all we get is a wide orange glow.

*Takes a bite of apple.*

I got through eight apples that night too.

*Spits at the ground.*

Every seed has a home.

*Counts out three steps, spits...another two steps, spits.*

Johnny Appleseed didn't have to use a pickaxe to reach the earth.

*Three steps, spits.*

If he'd done his job right, neither would I.

I finish sprinkling the last of my grass seed in the thousand asphalt cracks just as the sun slices between the YMCA and Tire Supply store next door.

*She collects her gear and moves back to her machine routine.*

My backbone hurts and my fingers are red and raw like paws that run on nothing but pavement. I have a hard time holding the paper and feeding it correctly and I almost fall asleep six times.

Was it worth it?

*She glances around...and grins a huge secret grin.*

TOBY. I spent that night on my own stoop. Melinda wasn't around and I hadn't seen Him since we...

(Gestures, embarrassed.) —which is a little worrying, so I spend a second night waiting, just to see if he'd come back, which of course he should because it was just a dream, definitely. Almost definitely.

Definitely.

But in addition to setting out raw meat, I find myself taking a shower and putting on nice cologne and a nice dress shirt and loafers to wait for him.

You know.

Just to show my own self-respect.

Or to show him that he has good taste. Or I have good taste, or we're a good fit...or something?

And with every ten minutes that he doesn't show up, I'm a little
more pissed off, a little more worried, am I just being used? Did I screw up? Did something happen to him, does he feel bad, where is he?? And how stupid am I for even thinking like this??

Starts inside.
Why am I the one waiting? He wants contact, he can knock on my door…
Except of course he's not going to knock.
I am on his time, he's not—
How codependent is this?! This is ridiculous, I'm not—

Stops. Sits back down.
I give him ten more minutes.

Lights shift, he turns to Melinda, who lays out three trays of meat and groggily sits.

I missed you last night.

MELINDA. ...I had to work.

Pause.

So?

Toby shakes his head no.
You laid out the meat?

TOBY. Three pounds of hamburger.

MELINDA. And no more...

She gestures.

TOBY. No.

Pause.

MELINDA. (Points to a tray.) I bought some raw pork chops for tonight. Just in case.


They wait, watching the trays.

Lights shift. They wait.

Nothing.

Pause.

MELINDA. The next three nights.

Beat. Toby squirms in his chair...
TOBY. (To us.) Time to mount an expedition.

Lights shift to day. Toby moves, prepping, pulling off his tie, loosening his collar, rolling up his sleeves.

I use what little web access I have to google “signs of a coyote.” I get footprints, fur colors, urine-scent descriptions, and most helpfully, pictures of poop. Or “scat” as I now call it.

So okay, I haven’t been getting a lot of sleep and I might be kind of delusional—but coyote scat is actually kind of beautiful. Twisted, knotted, like gray rope, like those ancient cultures where they tie a specific kind of knot in a long, long rope every time a major story happens in the tribe—an entire history within each fiber. In this case you can see exactly what the coyote’s been eating—mouse skulls, mole fur, strawberry seeds, talons of a robin, the entire buffet is in every piece of scat.

So I go to the park.

Lights shift.

I haven’t been for five or six years, but I pack my tuna sandwich and two cookies and I spend the day at the park. Just me and the trees and bushes and dirt and sticks... and maybe him. I have to go off the worn trails, into the undergrowth—I love saying “undergrowth”—pushing through green—

As he moves, his exposed arms and face get cut and scratched—

—branches scrape my arms and face, slicing, slicing, faster, I’m running now, another step another step another shove and the noises of the world fade behind me...

Pauses, looking around...

It’s darker, but it’s a green dark, a million specks of white sun in the canopy—I love saying “canopy”—

(Moving.) Deeper...and deeper... I’m running again. I don’t even remember why I’m here, snapping through twigs over rocks twisting past trees beneath limbs...

He stops.

I suddenly wish I’d spent some internet time seeing what poison
Ivy looks like...
But who gives a damn.
I'm in a cocoon that's been growing since before I was born, since yesterday, that's growing right now, this second, around me.

*He kneels, checking the ground.*

No scat. But this is just one pocket, one hour of one day of one lifetime.

*Sits, pulls out his sandwich, takes a bite.*

These aren't just his woods anymore.
They're ours.

*He steps over to Melinda on her stoop as Lights Shift.*

**MELINDA.** You're hurt!
**TOBY.** Just scratched.

**MELINDA.** More like gouged.

*She starts applying Bactine.*

**TOBY.** I went to the park.
**MELINDA.** Did you see him?
**TOBY.** Not yet. But I'm going back. You should come with me.

*Melinda pauses.*

What.

**MELINDA.** I have things to do during the day.
**TOBY.** Like what.
**MELINDA.** Errands. Work.
**TOBY.** Just come for an hour, just to sit—

*She stops him. Points.*

*The coyote is back—finally—they're back on the edge of their seats... but something's odd...*

(Quietly.) What's that in his mouth?

**MELINDA.** I think it's a squirrel.

*The coyote drops it and backs up.*

**TOBY.** (To coyote.) Is that for us? You want us to have it?

*The coyote turns and descends. They watch it go.*
He didn’t eat his meat—come back, eat—

_She stops him._

MELINDA. He’s bringing _us_ food now.

TOBY. Why.

_Melinda shakes her head._

Maybe he wants to even it up. So nobody owes anybody.

MELINDA. Or maybe he’s taking the next step.

TOBY. ...

MELINDA. Don’t animals bring food to their mates? Maybe that disemboweled squirrel is your engagement ring.

_Toby laughs uncomfortably. Stops._

You should be flattered.

TOBY. I’m not going to eat it.

MELINDA. Suit yourself.

TOBY. You can’t seriously—

MELINDA. It can’t have been that easy for him to hunt and catch it for you. And then pass up the meal himself. This meant something to him.

So what does it mean to you?

_She steps away. Toby stands alone, staring at the dead squirrel._

_He pulls a baggy from his pocket._

TOBY. I use two old chopsticks to put the squirrel in a Ziploc and I put it in my freezer.

I have lots of room in my freezer these days.

MELINDA. This is where it starts getting a little fuzzy for me. I pretty much rotated my shift to work from five P.M. to one A.M., so I could wait up for him through the night and keep making my preparations through the day. Which pretty much worked. Except I’m not getting hardly enough sleep.

But here’s my day... I think. I pack a sandwich and go fill up my car’s gas tank. I drive around the city checking out buildings, making notes, move on, eat my sandwich, drink my juice box, drive on and check out more buildings. I do this hour after hour until three P.M., when I go do my research, buy more supplies, come home and col-
lect my notes in my notebooks, and siphon two-thirds of the gas out of my tank and store it in jelly jars, milk jugs, watering cans, old Cool Whip bowls, whatever I have that I can seal. Then I go to work at the plant and think for eight hours. Then I come home and wait for him for eight hours. Because he's the touchstone. He's the reason for the other hours. Or weeks.

I'm losing track of time.

TOBY. I'm not sure when I'm sleeping anymore. I must be sometime. I think it's during the day and during the night. This is what I do know: I pack a sandwich and go into the park at dawn. Every day. Moving through the undergrowth and overgrowth inch by inch until I'm coming to know all of it. All of it. And it's a big park. I've found scat now. Several times, more and more, it's all over the place, it's like once you're attuned to it, the whole world is made of coyote shit.

But I haven't seen him. Not out here. Sometimes I think I get a glimpse of him to my side, watching me—

_He turns quickly, shakes his head, nothing._

So I move on, on all fours, circling. It feels like we're dancing.

MELINDA. Explore, watch, eat, explore, watch, prepare—

TOBY. The thing is all of this is making me ravenous. I start packing two sandwiches, then three, I eat two bowls of cereal before I leave and a whole five bags of Ramen when I get home.

_Starts eating from a cereal box._

And when I'm waiting for him at night, sometimes I'll go through a whole box of cereal. And bologna. I can't get enough generic Frosted Flakes and generic Oscar Meyer. (Quietly.) Sometimes mixed together.

_Lights shift. Toby eats as Melinda lays out two trays of meat._

MELINDA. You're eating more than he does these days.

TOBY. It's like I want to swallow the world.

MELINDA. How long has it been like this?

TOBY. A week maybe. Ten days.

MELINDA. And how long is the gestation period for _Canis latrans?_
TOBY. About nine weeks. Why.
MELINDA. I'm thinking you're pregnant.

    Beat. He stares at her...gives her a slight smile.

TOBY. You realize how many different ways that's impossible?
MELINDA. I think you're eating for two. Or how many pups can be in a litter?
TOBY. Up to nineteen.
MELINDA. Wow.
TOBY. There are not nineteen pups growing in me—there's not one! It's crazy—
MELINDA. You had a romantic night together, you don't remember how it ended, now your body's changing, you're craving weird food and he's bringing you nourishment almost every night this week. He's doing his best to be a good father.
TOBY. And what does that make me?

    She looks at him.

Melinda, I don’t—I have no orifices, not the proper orifices, I have no womb, there's no way for a baby anything to get in me or come out of me.
MELINDA. We'll see in nine weeks, won't we.

    They grow silent. The coyote is there. They watch. He drops something, eats, and descends. Toby circles the dead animal.

TOBY. What is this?
MELINDA. I think it was a possum.
Bet they don’t have that option in Lean Cuisine.

    Lights shift.

(Pulling off her shoes and socks to go barefoot.) I'm still preparing. It's closer. But there's a new facet. Compost.

I never really knew about compost before, but now I've read about it and most nights, if I think I have time before he comes, or if I'm not too sleepy after he comes, I forage. There are whole great rich metal boxes of rotting food behind every restaurant. It's done its duty, it sat on someone's plate, gave them pleasure, gave them guilt, gave them all it had to give, dead plant, dead animal, animal juice,
whatever, now it can either be sent to the landfill to disintegrate and evaporate into steam...or it can give birth to new plants and new animals. I think it wants to do the latter.

So I help it.

I take bags of uneaten, partly eaten, eaten-and-spit-out food, carrying the bags over my shoulder like a reeking Santa Claus with my hatchback sleigh, and I find a football field. Or a soccer field. Or a baseball diamond. Anywhere where nature is trying to come back but it's being constantly undercut, where life wants to blossom...and I spread the compost as far and as deep as I can. You can almost feel the earth lapping it up like a parched lioness, desperate for raw nutrients, for true real un-pesticided food.

So I give it to her.

TOBY. The next few days—or weeks—days—I do feel something. I mean, I'm probably losing it, right, but...

It feels like something is growing—

_Holds his belly._

...in here. There's like a something in there that's not me. And it's getting bigger. And of course the most logical thing is that I have a tumor. I have stomach cancer or bladder cancer or something...and it's going to kill me. But I feel okay, better than okay, most days I feel better than I felt when I was employed. And since I'm not employed I have no insurance so any trip to the doctor will cost me money I don't have, may never have, and if I needed a full operation, chemo, radiation, pills and knives...I'll never have enough for that.

But I also can't let myself die.

But I feel _alive._

But more alive than I should. Like two lives.

Which I don't want to think about—

_He pulls off his socks and shoes._

—which I _don't_ think about when I'm in the park.

I find I can't stand the feel of my shoes anymore, I'm a toddler again, fighting cloth and leather and plastic foot coverings. I want nude feet. I want odd lumps and sharp pricks and uneven ground against
my flesh.

Beat.

I also find myself not trimming my toe- or fingernails anymore. Not sure about that one. Forage. That’s what I do now. I forage.

MELINDA. And I’m ready. For the first step. I go to my four abandoned buildings: a clock factory, two apartment buildings, and a dead mansion, each several miles from the others. No humans are coming back here, but they won’t let anyone else move in either. So I’m speeding up the property transfer.

Nobody lives next door to any of them, and they have no squatters as far as I can tell. But they do have a hundred nooks and crannies for jars and jugs and Cool Whip tubs of gasoline. And thirty-two yards of slow-burning fuse. I try to time the fuses so each building goes up at one a.m. I touch my match to each line of hemp and cotton with a prayer, I step across the street to staple my signs, and as I’m driving home I begin to hear the sirens.

TOBY. Did you hear the news?
MELINDA. About what.
TOBY. Somebody set fire to a bunch of buildings last night.
MELINDA. Did they.
TOBY. Burned them all to the ground.
MELINDA. Wow.
TOBY. And at every fire, they left signs across the street.
MELINDA. What did they say?
MELINDA. Wow.
TOBY. Everyone’s trying to figure out who “The Wild” is.

Melinda smiles.

I’m guessing I know.
MELINDA. I've started going to the library.

TOBY. Melinda—

MELINDA. A librarian named Bela showed me how to use the computers, how to bow down and pick out the letters on the keyboard to ask my questions of the great and all-knowing web.

TOBY. You're using the internet?

MELINDA. At first I got angry because everyone wanted to tell me so much that I didn't want to know. Or sell me so much I didn't want to use. But then I started figuring out how to ask the right questions and who I could trust for answers.

And one of the things I now know is that for every one acre of city, where a mostly empty building sits, there could be one hundred thirty-seven species of animals (if you count birds and bugs), seventy-one species of plants, and enough seeds to create another twenty-eight acres of wildspace.

I'm guessing that those four buildings that burned will make room for three thousand five hundred sixty-two animals, one thousand seven hundred twenty-six plants, and seven hundred twenty-eight acres of new wildspace.

TOBY. Jesus.

MELINDA. But that's just a guess.

TOBY. You're an arsonist.

MELINDA. Whoever set those fires is doing us a favor.

TOBY. You're a terrorist.

MELINDA. Toby. You're making wild accusations and I don't like it. Please stop.

TOBY. I also heard about someone destroying tennis courts and throwing trash all over football and baseball fields.

Melinda sits, eyes closed.

What have you been doing, Melinda?

Pause. They sit in silence.

MELINDA. Nothing makes soil as fertile and ready for new life as a layer of ash.
Did you know that?
Lights shift. Toby steps over to his kitchen.

TOBY. (To us.) Here's the thing. I'm almost out of money. Savings, all of it. I haven't paid my rent for two months and I skipped my utilities for a month before that.

Every time I reach for the light switch or the bathroom faucet handle, I hesitate, not sure if anything will happen when I flick my finger or turn my wrist. Things I used to take for granted I know now are on borrowed time. They will stop, the Fate thread to my modern life will be cut. I just don't know the hour.

But what leads me to think of all this now is that I also have almost no money for food. And I'm still starving. Whether I'm eating for two or nineteen, I can't fill this gaping maw below my chest.

But what I do have...is a freezer full of squirrels, raccoons, possums, and a cat.

So one night at 6:05 P.M., when I can't hear myself think because of the clawing in my gut, I take out a raccoon, and I thaw it in the microwave, and I skin it, which is nothing like scaling a fish which I'd done when I was twelve with my uncle. Mammals are insanely hard to skin if you don't know how—weird liquids, hunks of fur and hair drifting and dribbling all over everything. But I keep working, my one decent carving knife and my long-dormant instincts and by 9:13 I am gnawing the last meat off the last leg bone. I store what's left for tomorrow.

I won't tell you it tastes like chicken, because it doesn't taste like chicken. It tastes like raccoon.

And I fucking loved it.

MELINDA. I spend most of my days moving from library to library so no one place gets too suspicious, or too much of a home. I'm learning all the things I'll need to know for the coming days, falling asleep with my head on the keyboard, hand on a mouse, slight string of drool from my lips to the spacebar, but then waking and moving on, surveying sites for the next step, harvesting information, filling in notebooks, ordering supplies, moving on...

Lights shift. They sit together on her porch, exhausted, both
in rumpled clothes, barefoot, a far cry from how they began. Toby has a definitely bigger belly.

Sound of faint sirens in the distance.

TOBY. That’ll be more fires.

MELINDA. I’ve been sitting here with you all night.

TOBY. They say there’s been two or three fires a night every night now. Different corners of the city going up in ash and flame.
And always signs in marker on posterboard or spray-painted on the street: “The Wild Needs A Home Too.”

They’ve caught some of the arsonists.

Obviously not all of them.

So far it’s only been abandoned buildings, but it’s only a matter of time ’til someone makes a mistake and takes someone out.

Are your disciples doing you proud?

MELINDA. I’m following my path, they have to follow theirs.

TOBY. (Holds out a sheet of paper.) Is this part of your path too? I stopped by the Steamed Bean on my way back from the park, just to smell the roasting coffee…and to walk around and see if anyone’s left anything in the bottom of their cups, a piece of a blueberry scone on a napkin… And what do I find by the bulletin boards but a stack of these.

(Reads.) “Get the facts. Are you raising your family in a poisoned city? Since 1978, the EPA and NIH have recorded toxic levels of mercury, lead, arsenic, and polychlorinated biphenyls in the soil and groundwater of our city.” It goes on to list the effects of poisons on grandparents, me, my unborn child—all with footnotes that I haven’t checked yet, but I’m guessing are not the most reputable websites. And it ends by telling me to ask the authorities about it, but not to believe their answers because they have financial interests in people not fleeing for their lives.

If I didn’t know better, I’d guess someone is trying to scare us out of our city.

MELINDA. Just planting seeds.

TOBY. And how far and wide might I find these seeds scattered?
MELINDA. Pretty much every coffee house, nursery school, and retirement center in the city and suburbs.

TOBY. Jesus, Melinda, you’re a one-woman anti-chamber-of-commerce!

MELINDA. The more people who leave, the more room there is for him, for you, and for all the others, Toby. There will still be plenty—plenty of space devoted to us. I’m just carving.

_Lights shift. Toby steps into his apartment._

TOBY. The gas and electricity cut out today.

Which means I’m back on the sun’s schedule, which is okay. It means no recharging my laptop and that’s okay. It means no music but what I sing, and that’s okay. It means no refrigeration and no stove and no microwave and that’s bad. I scramble to bring back kindling from the park and build a fire in my bathtub to cook all my squirrel and possum and mole and what I think might have been a Russell Terrier. I put it all in Ziploc bags, add salt and shove it into a beer cooler which should hold it for a couple of days. Days I spend selling off everything I own.

I hope he brings me something good to eat by Wednesday though. My stomach is killing me.

_Lights Shift, Melinda returns to her work ritual one more time._

MELINDA. I give the plant its last eight hours of my life. A day shift no less. Lots of people wanting to talk about the fires, all the people they know who are moving, how the city has gone to hell.

I don’t even take a break. I want to remember this afternoon, savor it, make it the epitome of the last fourteen years. Every sheet of paper that slides off my fingers, every indentation in the flesh of my thumb when I push the buttons. Every hum, every click, every hiss. This is how it should have been all along, I guess. But at least I get it today.

The last day.

As I walk across the parking lot at 5:05 p.m., I turn and say goodbye.
to the plant for the last time. No tears. Just an acknowledgment that we’ve been together a long time.

Pause. Nods.

Thank you.

She starts unbuttoning her blouse and loosening her skirt.

Toby is on all fours in the park—or lying down—holding his stomach, his mouth and fingers are smeared red.

TOBY. It’s the first time... In the park. I see him. I’d found a wild raspberry bush as the sun was setting and was plucking berries, my fingers red with juice, with blood from the thorns, and I look over...and there he is watching me...with two dead chipmunks in his mouth.

Toby winces from the stomach pain.

He sets one down just like he does on the back stairs...and then he nudges it with his nose until it’s within arm’s reach...

Thank you.

And he steps back.

And I eat my berries and he eats his chipmunk...

and we’re having our first supper together.

Melinda strips down to her underwear, shoving her blouse and skirt into her backpack.

MELINDA. I found the loose manhole cover two weeks ago. As the moon rises I climb down with only one way back out, and that one way is a long, long way away.

She finishes packing her clothes.

Clothes aren’t right down here. I need to feel it on my skin.

Melinda begins marking herself with brown smears and smudges as she crawls forward.

It’s cramped...and narrow...dark and moist and warm—the world’s longest birth canal.

And I do what I need to do along the way. I’ve spent months—or my whole life—preparing for this—but nobody told me until now that’s what I was doing...
TOBY. *(Holding his stomach.)* I come home to find a sheet of folded paper under my door telling me I have until Friday to leave my apartment. I’m taking my final step into a world without storage—collect what you need for the next few hours, then collect again when that runs out. The whole world is your closet, your garage, your purse, your refrigerator.

*(Unbuckling his pants, sweating...)* I can do this.

MELINDA. I have to stagger the timers so everything goes off at one a.m. I push each button on each digital watch with a prayer, I come out where I left my car three-point-six miles from the manhole cover.

I hang my last sign on the Home Depot garden supply fence, and as I’m driving home I hear the first dull thud beneath my rolling tires. It feels like low serious notes from a church organ.

And I don’t feel small at all.

*Lights shift and she turns, still in her underwear, to Toby, who is writhing on the ground, holding his stomach, his pants off.*

Toby, where are your pants?

TOBY. ...too tight... I couldn’t breathe...

MELINDA. Come with me. Come on.

*She pulls him up and they circle—they are illuminated by faint orange glows from the distance...*

TOBY. We passed my apartment two floors ago...

MELINDA. We need to be on the roof. Closer to the open sky.

*He lies down and she opens her backpack, prepping, pulling off his shirt, he’s now stripped to his underwear...*

(To us.) I have enough opiates for a pretty strong local anesthesia. I’ve spent two weeks going over and over how to perform an emergency cesarean section. Everything is sterilized, gleaming in the moonlight. (To Toby.) Are you ready?

*He nods. She takes out a small sharp knife and slowly moves it over his lower abdomen, leaving a long red scar to match his many other cuts.*

It’s just like the pictures, all the pictures, if you can follow directions
to operate Section Three you can follow directions on a human body, my hands are steady, just like feeding paper, but pulling something out, not in, my hands inside him, eyes closed, fingers leading, caressing warm tissue I have no names for...until I feel it.

A paw.

A tiny firm, slick paw.

*She pulls “the pup” up into a bundled cloth, like swaddling clothes.*

And I cradle it out. A blind, soft, drenched, perfect coyote pup. Except not a coyote. Not just a coyote.

And then another. There are only two. Twins.

They open and close their jaws and pull at their paws, trying to roll over, trying to nurse, trying to find their footing in this strange new world. All the stranger because they’re in it.

*Her hands are red up to the forearms now.*

And I sew Toby back up, from the inside out, one layer at a time. It’s just like the pictures, just like they said, I use antibiotics, I swab him clean as best I can...

(Quietly to him.) Toby.

...Toby...

*He stirs.*

You’re a family.

*She hands him the bundle. He blinks, takes it, wincing, dazed...*

I’ve got milk for them, but you’d better clean them off first.

TOBY. ...how...

MELINDA. They’re designed to be licked.

*He hesitates...and licks a pup, begins cleaning them both...*

They’re hybrids. Ready for a new world.

*A faint sound of sirens, the orange glow gets a bit brighter...*

Toby looks out...

TOBY. There’s plumes of fire all over the city...

MELINDA. Yes.
TOBY. A dozen spirals of red smoke taking the old world back to heaven...
MELINDA. That wasn’t me.
TOBY. And the streets...are flowing.
MELINDA. That’s me.
A dozen new rivers running through the valleys of buildings, sending word to the animals and plants that they have new banks to come to, new water holes in the cool of the morning.
TOBY. How many sewer pipes did you blow up to do this?
MELINDA. Twenty-two.
TOBY. How many people are without water?
MELINDA. None. They can come bathe and drink with the animals. The water will flow through every new field I created, through the garden sections of a dozen nurseries and hardware chain stores, dragging potting soil and loam and seeds and wood chips with it, spreading life like silt throughout the city.

Sirens louder, lights brighter...
We have to get you to the park where he can feed you and you can rest until you’re ready to hunt for yourself again.
TOBY. What about you?
MELINDA. I’m leaving tonight. I’m going to take what I’ve learned to a new city. And then another city after that and another and another and another. Until the dance is done.
TOBY. You could live with us in the park.
MELINDA. (Shakes her head no.) I found my job. I’m Eve in reverse, leading us all back to the garden. But I can’t live there myself again. I don’t remember how.
Your job is to be the new Adam and open up your ribs to populate the garden again.

They sit illuminated by the firelight, sound of water flowing, sirens sounding more and more like animal howling...
TOBY. (Glances at the ID badge sticking out of Melinda’s backpack.) You look nothing like your ID badge anymore. Did you know that?
MELINDA. Listen.
TOBY. To what.
MELINDA. The sirens. I never heard them quite like this.

_They listen..._

TOBY. They're the howls of a hundred coyotes...
MELINDA. Welcoming your pups to the world.
TOBY. Calling through the dark for another—
MELINDA. _Quietly._ I am here—
TOBY. _Quietly._ I am here—
MELINDA. —where are you?
TOBY. —where are you?
MELINDA. If you can hear my voice answer me—
TOBY. Answer me...
MELINDA. Just let me know I'm not alone.
...that I'm not alone...

_They lie there, nude or almost nude, bloodied and soiled, hair in tangles—her cradling him, him cradling the pups in their bundle—watching the night sky, listening, waiting...as...

_Lights fade..._

_End of Play_
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