

## High Above the Ground and Two Finches

I really don't have very much wisdom to impart. I'm just a kid with a laptop and an English teacher who humors me. Reading this book is probably a waste of your time. You'll walk away from it not having learned a thing. Actually, you'll be just a little bit more stupid. This whole thing is a trick. Everything I will write will be a lie, an extrapolation, an exaggeration, a bold yet unsupported proposition. And you will believe it all. So don't bother. Honestly, just put the book down now. You've got enough people feeding you lies. Shouldn't you be taking out the trash or something, anyway?

I learned in a creative writing class that this is a good way to make people want to read your work. Tell them *not* to read it. Make your writing the apple of their Eden. Entitle your work, "A Poem No Person Should Read. Ever." And people will pick it up. That's what I'm doing. I'm playing mind games with you. And they're working, aren't they? They're totally working. You're still reading.

I read an essay today, called *Refugium*, by Barbara Hurd. "We are gardeners, all of us," she writes, "our hands broadcasting seeds in the spring, our arms in autumn clutching the harvested wheat." So here we are. I broadcast, you clutch. Rinse. Lather. Repeat. The wheat is shitty, but it's food. For thought, anyway.

### I.

The room was silent except for the tapping of shoes against the carpet, the buzz of the radiator, and the frantic scratching of pencils. I stared down at my paper.

1. For a four-times-differentiable function,  $f$ , what is  $f(x)$  when the third derivative of  $f(x)$  is zero?

I sighed. It had been two days since I'd spoken with my brother. I'd had my doubts about boarding school, and this constituted a large portion of them. I was no longer a part of his life. I wasn't written in between the lines of his schedule in dry erase marker, and posted the refrigerator. A third derivative of zero means an extremum in the second derivative at  $x$ . What would he be doing right now? Was he at work? Maybe he was at that new transition school-type thing. What was it called again? God, I couldn't even remember what he was doing these days. Inflection point in the first derivative. What about two years from now? Where will we go from here? And what can I say about  $f(x)$ ?

Strangely, my mind wandered backward to a recent history class. We had been discussing the nature of the divine in the Buddhist religion. My teacher had written on the chalkboard, in his gracefully illegible penmanship, the words: *Cannot be Elucidated*. Perhaps this was, indeed, the answer.

### II.

My mother called me this morning. As I settled into our routine conversation (Hey, mom. Yes, I'm eating. No, I haven't decided to come home yet...), I could sense that she had something to tell me. Nothing important, probably just some fresh gossip or family news. There was a rushed feeling to her small talk gave her away. After making sure that I had been taking my vitamins, she launched into her story. "So you know,

Dawna, Pouya was waiting for the bus yesterday morning. And those stupid bus drivers are so cold. They don't wait for you if you're late," she complained, exasperated by the world's incompetency. "Anyway, Pouya's bus comes at 7:05. And you know I usually leave the house around 7:00, so Pouya's only home alone for a couple of minutes, and then he has to go wait for the bus. But yesterday, I guess he was late, because he missed his bus. And so around three, I called him to see if he had gotten home yet, and I said 'Where are you?' And he said 'Waiting for the bus.' And I said 'At ELA?' 'No. At Marshall.'" He was waiting there outside all day, from seven until three! And his teachers never called me to say he wasn't there, and the bus company never called me to say he missed the bus, and he just stood there by the stop sign waiting! For eight hours!" She sounded distraught. I stifled a giggle. "Are you laughing?"

"Absolutely not, Mother."

"Dawna! I don't believe you! This is not funny at all! It was cold outside!" She was right. It wasn't funny. It was hilarious.

### III.

Today I sat on the brown couch and watched Pouya go through his daily routine. He checked off "eat apple" on his tiny magnetic whiteboard that clings to our fridge for dear life, occasionally sliding a few inches down the smooth surface. Next on the list was "set table." There are multiple maneuvers involved in this casual command. "Open cupboard." "Move bottles and jars aside until the Windex is visible." "Shove everything back into the cabinet and close the door quickly before cleaning supplies and condiment bottles can come crashing out. Hurry and hurry because the noise will hurt your ears. It will come spilling around you, destroying the perfectly square floor tiles. And you will only be able to sit there among the rubble, hold your hands over your ears, and rock back and forth precisely twice per second in order to impose at least a little bit of order on the situation.

Except you won't do that. You will just walk away from the whole ordeal. That's what you've been taught. When there is too much to handle—too much noise, too much color, too much heat, light, movement—you can just walk away. Walk away and just keep walking and walking across the street and onto the blacktop of the neighbor's driveway and walk in a wide circle like you're taking an exit on the I-94 and then just keep going and go all the way around the block and around one more time and maybe you can go to the park, too, but whatever you do just keep on walking because going back means noise, means color, means heat, light, movement."

Except today Pouya didn't walk because today he was quick enough. Today he closed the cupboard and took the Windex and some paper towels and he started pulling on the yellow trigger. And he pulled the yellow trigger, and he pulled the yellow trigger. But, alas, he was not rewarded with the satisfying spray of blue, and the sharp scent of ammonia-d. Because all of the blue liquid was at the very bottom, and this was no good. This was no good at all. Pouya looked at the Windex with a very sour face and I could see the dilemma. The schedule says "set table." Not specific, but he remembers well the "setting table routine" that had been laminated and taped to the wall a few years back and it had clearly stated that before place mats could be selected, the table absolutely must be Windexed.

This was a situation that called for creativity. And resourcefulness. And many other abstract concepts that don't make sense and can't be defined by flow charts. So

Pouya thought, and eventually he decided that the top of the Windex bottle absolutely had to go, because it was the top that was causing all the trouble. The entire situation, the whole system, it just all needed to be inverted. The bottom had to become the top and the top had to vanish.

So it was off with its plastic yellow head and then the liquid was pouring out onto the table. Not a waterfall, because there wasn't enough left for that, but there was certainly enough to create a strongly-scented film on the dark wood of the table and the poor bottle was foaming at the mouth. I could see the little white bubbles. I could see them and I knew they were a testament to the unfairness of the whole situation. The fact that the world had to be inverted. Someone who had just been wandering innocently along their plane of existence had to confront such a situation and then there were paper towels and the blue was spilling over the varnished edge in little, viscous drips. And I watched from my perch on the couch, because how could I tear my eyes away from something that smelled so clean? It had conviction; it was stubborn and sure of itself, and it was telling us quite clearly that we had made the right decision when we pulled it off of the shelf at Sam's Club and put it in the shopping cart with our giant box of Honey Nut Cheerios, which was all entirely routine; I have grown up surrounded by Windex and Honey Nut Cheerios. But this bottle didn't know that. For all it knew, I was a first time customer. It didn't matter, though, because now there was no way that I doubted the undeniable cleanliness that emanated from this blue that was dripping onto the carpet.

## IV.

Let's assign every brain a number value. This number will be represented by the variable,  $b$ .  $b$  does not determine the intellectual or social value of the brain in any way. It is simply a random number chosen to represent it. Now. Some scientists believe that every individual falls somewhere on the autism spectrum. I think this will be easiest to explain using set theory. So. Let's denote the autism spectrum using a set, under which every  $b$  value falls. Thus:

$b \in \{a\}$ . Now, if  $b$  is a variable with a domain consisting of only certain values, namely, the values assigned to every brain that is alive today, then we might represent  $b$  as a set, too. Now. If there are no values under  $\{b\}$  which are not present under  $\{a\}$  and vice versa, we can say that  $\{b\} = \{a\}$ .

But if this is the case, are we all diagnosable with autism? Well...no. So my explanation is inherently flawed? I think not! Let's represent the  $b$  values of all those who are *diagnosable* with autism in a set  $\{d\}$ . Thus,  $\{d\} \in \{b\}$ . Set  $d$  is an element of set  $b$ , meaning that  $d$  represents a part, but not all, of set  $b$ . If set  $b$  is equal to set  $a$ , then  $\{d\}$  is also only an *element* of  $\{a\}$ , emphasizing the point that, though all values of  $b$  fall on the autism spectrum, we are not *all* diagnosable with autism.

Where is this going? Well, nowhere. And that is exactly why it is going somewhere. I have an almost pathological need to represent everything to myself using math, even when it is absolutely useless. It is almost impossible for me to consider any part of the autism spectrum without resorting to set theory, assigning new variables to those aspects of the spectrum that I am interested in, and searching for relationships between those variables mathematically. It's simple math, but I am displaying what many would consider an almost autistic behavior. There are many autistic individuals who live by numbers, communicating and learning through their use. So, that's part of what defines my own  $b$  value. See what I did there?

But maybe math is the best way to understand the autistic mind. From what I can tell, Pouya's mind works by algorithms. If \_\_\_\_\_ then \_\_\_\_\_. For example, if the remote is not in the bowl, then stuff it between the couch cushions. If the remote is in the bowl, walk away. If Dawna's bedroom door is not locked, open it. If Dawna's bedroom door is locked, walk away. There are only two options: in the bowl, not in the bowl. Locked, not locked. There is no third choice. The door can not simply be closed, and not locked. The remote cannot simply be on the table, and not in the bowl. But how can one exist this way? Whether we like it or not, there are infinitely many options. The door can be half open. It can be a quarter open. It can be 264 309ths open. There are an infinite number of other positions. But for Pouya, they do not exist. There is only A and B. By eliminating these other options, he simplifies his world. Keep in mind that all of this is pure conjecture, that there is absolutely no scientific proof for any of it, and that it is based purely on the observation of one subject: Pouya. But if it's true, we can use this new understanding to work with Pouya and perhaps others in a more constructive way.

By eliminating all but two choices, Pouya creates for himself a state of lowest exerted energy. Think about how you approach problems. Say you want to buy a bike. It's a pretty tricked out bike, so it costs \$500.23. Now, if you have \$500.23, you buy the bike. But you then have to consider whether or not you can afford to spend that much on a bike. If all you have is \$500.23, you won't be able to obtain food or shelter. If you don't have the money, you don't buy the bike. However, this opens an entirely new world of choices. Now, you start thinking about how you can get \$500.23. You could steal it. You could get a job. You could borrow it. You've added something more to the algorithm, complicating it immensely, adding innumerable variables. But for Pouya, none of that exists. If he doesn't have the money, he doesn't buy the bike. It's as simple as that. By simplifying things in that way, he's saved himself a major headache. In chemistry, biology, and physics, it's accepted that everything in nature moves toward the lowest energy level. In quantum mechanics, we can see that electrons, too, behave in this way. The copper ion is a perfect example. Every electron surrounding the nucleus of the ion has a specific "address". We use quantum numbers to define the address, and they tell us about the energy level of the electron, as well as its position within that energy level, the shape of its orbit, and the direction of its spin. The electron configuration of a given atom gives the address of the electron with the very highest energy, and when electrons get removed from an atom, they are removed from highest to lowest energy level. When a student who has just been introduced to quantum numbers is asked to write the electron configuration of copper, they are expected to write it incorrectly. This is because copper is an exception to the rule that electrons will fill one energy subshell before moving on to another one. In this case, copper leaves one subshell half full, and moves the electrons that would have filled it to the next subshell. In doing this, both subshells are filled halfway, rather than one being filled completely, and the other being filled only partway. This is because being filled halfway requires the lowest amount of energy. The electrons spread themselves out so that there is less repulsion between them. Thus, they have achieved the state of lowest energy. Pouya is a bit like copper. He does things a little differently, but in the end, he is just another ion.

## V.

Pouya to me, March 2009: "You need to shave your beard. You look like a monkey."

## VI.

Do you want to know what it's like to live with autism? Well, so do I. Every morning, I wake up to an alarm clock in a tiny dorm room, dress, and walk across the quad to class. While I am walking, my brother is on a bus to the Center for Enriched Living. Because I don't have time to enrich his life myself. Sometimes I think that our lifestyles are set up to be entirely incompatible with what's best for an autistic individual. My own words are meaningless, here. I am dealing with a much higher power than myself. I am dealing with society. And even as I write this, I can feel my thoughts being strained. Pushed through the tiny openings in a green plastic colander. The essence of my ideas pouring down a figurative drain into some underground sewage system full of censored ideas, some dangerous, others simply too unclean to coexist with what he have been spoon-fed. Well, perhaps that's a bit melodramatic. But in some respects, it's absolutely true. Revolutionary thinkers have always been considered dangerous. Perhaps it's time the autism community unleashed its wrath.

Are we a revolution? You could say that we are. You could say that people who drive up to Springfield to speak with legislators, organize rallies, and raise money—you could say that we are a revolution. And we would love to hear you say it. It gets lonely sometimes, here on the front lines. There are times when I want to give up on everything, when I forget how much this matters. But we have so much momentum, and we have created such a wide network of support. We have accepted that in order for our sons, daughters, husbands, aunts, grandparents, cousins, friends to truly be happy, it's not they who need to change. It's everyone else. Otherwise, how can we possibly bear to let go of our loved ones, to allow them to lead independent lives? It's a dangerous place out there.

As a child, I was forced to be acutely aware of that. I saw how incompatible this world is with my brother. I watched as society rejected him again, and again, and again. It was in small ways at first: a weird stare on the subway, mothers pulling their children closer to them as he passed. It made me indignant and bitter. But when I started to resent the entire world for simply existing, when normal people became criminals in my eyes, that was when I had to convince myself that it wasn't their fault. For the sake of my own sanity, for the sake of my ability to find a niche in society. And so I tried putting myself in their shoes. And as much as I hated it, it worked. Though there were some real assholes that I had difficulty identifying with, most people act exactly as I would, had I never heard the word autism. I realized that we were fighting a battle against ignorance, not against autism.

It is tiring, frustrating, and extremely difficult to spread the kind of awareness we need to make this world a better place for the developmentally disabled. But there have been times when people have shown me that it's actually worth it. It's the tiny miracles, the friendly stares, the "outsiders" who would give *anything* to understand, that have made this a battle worth fighting. Although the constant metaphors and emotional rallies grow annoying after a while, it takes one memory of a moment where Pouya was hurt to remind me of that stabbing feeling of defeat, to keep me fighting.

## VII.

4:15. Class is over and I'm running. Running down the tiled hallway. Slowing at the door and leaning against the cold metal bar. Running again. I like the way my feet feel when they hit the pavement. Maybe I should count my steps. But it's too late now.

I've gone too far. Besides, the wind is drowning out the sound of my red sneakers tap-tap-tapping against the concrete. It's cold. But my coat is snuggled inside my bookbag, cushioning my laptop, and bending the corners of the half done calculus worksheet that is not in its folder. It bothers me that it's not in its folder. But it doesn't matter. What matters is that I keep running. I need to. It's been a rough day. I sat through class after class, bouncing my knees under the table, waiting for an opportunity to tear out of my seat and fly, dropping tension and anxiety like breadcrumbs behind me. I want to sit in the back of a speeding pickup truck on a tree-lined highway. I want to bring everything I own. I want to sit there amid a sea of colorful plastic and paper and metal and throw things out onto the asphalt and watch them get smaller as my speed reaches 87 miles per hour. And I will count them, to make up for right now. How many times have my red sneakers made contact with the ground since I left? I consider buying a pedometer as I reach the baseball diamond, drop my book bag in the dugout, lean against the chain-link fence and stare at the expanse of grass before me. Behind the outfield is the hill by No-Pond. And behind that is just open air and sky until you reach Randall road. And then I want to shrink to the size of an ant and count the blades of grass. But I would have to be a fast ant, because that's a lot of ground to cover, and I have somewhere to be in an hour.

## VIII.

The car window was cold against my forehead as I watched the snowflakes fall gently but quickly onto the glass, blurring the headlights and signs on Waukegan road. It was getting dark.

"Dawna?" asks my dad.

"Mmhmm?"

"Did I ever tell you what happened when I took Pouya to work the other day?"

Without waiting for an answer, my dad launches into his story.

"I took him to that place by my office, tacos el something."

"Mmhmm," I wasn't paying very much attention. I was remembering how we had stayed at a hotel the night of Thanksgiving. It was in Kenosha, right next to an outlet mall. It was our first time going Black Friday shopping and the stores were going to open at midnight.

"Anyway, we had a nice lunch, he was doing very good. You know he likes those chips and salsa. He was eating them and we were talking normally and everything."

At the hotel, Pouya had done exactly what we had hoped. One of my favorite quirks of his is his love of independence. He enjoys staying in hotel rooms while I go out with my parents. He actually shoos us out the door. Then he settles into an armchair with his PJ's on, turns on the TV, and flips through the channels, occasionally ordering a movie on demand and watching it as he munches on something from the vending machine in the lobby. So when midnight rolled around, we left him to the flat-screen in the Radisson, and hurried to see which stores had the shortest lines.

"But, Dawna. Whenever he is around your mother, he is a spoiled brrrat." I rolled my eyes as my father rolled his r. *Here we go.* As he launched into his customary rant about my mother's patronizing attitude and its negative effects on Pouya's emotional growth, my mind drifted back to shopping. I smiled down at my brand new Calvin Klein jeans, though they were just a dark shape against the car's pale upholstery as the sun went down at. They had been an absolute steal. Twenty-five dollars. No one should ever pay more than that for a pair of jeans. That's my philosophy. Before allowing myself to go off

on a tangent about denim prices, I quickly tuned in to what my father was saying.

“I bet you, if she just left him alone for one week...” Good. He was about half way through the customary rant. That gave me about two and a half minutes before he was done. I settled back into my seat and smiled again, remembering the beige sweater I had bought from the Gap. It was the only beige thing I owned, but it looked kind of cool with my mom’s chocolate brown, buttoned, wool skirt from her teen years, and some knit tights and boots. As I constructed possible beige sweater outfits in my head, something my father was saying bypassed the filter in my head that was tuning him out and slammed into the walls of my skull, echoing briefly before I forgot what it was. Something, though I didn’t know what just yet, bothered me about what he was saying. But for the time being, I decided to ignore the inexplicable sinking feeling in my stomach. I had mentally moved through most of my wardrobe, searching for things to match with that sweater, and had come up with at least seven outfits before my father was suddenly done. I could tell because he said the word waiter, which stuck in my auditory filter like a noodle in a colander. “Waiter” was not part of his customary speech. I tuned back in.

“...waiter pulled me aside and before he could say anything, I told him don’t worry about it, and I went after Pouya.” That sounded familiar. I suddenly realized why.

As we were leaving the hotel on that Black Friday morning, toting empty wallets, innumerable shopping bags, and dark circles under our eyes from having shopped from midnight to 4AM, Pouya sort of slipped from our radar while we checked out and loaded the car. Just before we left, the concierge pulled my father aside in much the same fashion he was currently describing. And my father had held up a hand in understanding and looked at the man with tired, apologetic eyes as he went to retrieve my brother. And so it was the same story in the restaurant. And the story was

Fire extinguisher tags. The little slips of paper with instructions that all institutions are legally required to attach to the extinguisher when they hang it...yea those. That’s what causes my family so much trouble these days. Taking them is one of Pouya’s new hobbies. My parents call them “behaviors,” But they’re not. Animals have behaviors. Fireflies flash their rear ends in specific patterns to attract mates. That’s a behavior. Taking tags off of fire extinguishers is theft. It is a violation of building codes. But it is also perfectly excusable if the perpetrator conveniently happens to be autistic. This shouldn’t frustrate me. I should understand. I should be patient and mature. I should look at the bright side. I never knew those tags existed until Pouya stole the first one in a department store. Now, should I ever find myself in an emergency situation involving fire, I will know where to look for instructions on how to use an extinguisher. And I will stand calmly and patiently and read those instructions word for word as people scream, “PUT IT OUT, DAMMIT!” But I will tell them to wait because I must be sure that I wield this instrument of salvation properly.

## IX.

As a child, I always found myself wishing for our family to be able to eat at a restaurant without Pouya making a scene, or go to a mall and all stand in the same store without Pouya wandering off and my mother frantically running after him. I told my mom that the other night while we were at a restaurant. We sat watching Pouya make silly faces at one of the waitresses. Part of me was embarrassed, and the other part was ashamed of myself for feeling embarrassed. I groaned and turned in my seat so that I

couldn't see him. My mom shook her head, clearly disappointed. "Dawna, why do you care so much? Just don't worry about him." But how could I not worry about him?

"One of these days," I told her, "he's going to do that to the wrong person, and end up getting hurt." My mom laughed at my lack of faith in society.

"There are so many autistic kids now," she said. "It's not like before when nobody knew about them. People understand now." But then Pouya began to wiggle his fingers behind his head like he had antlers, and the waitress giggled. Sighing, I shrank down into my seat and tried to ignore him, as guilt added itself to my list of conflicting emotions.

## X.

The most wonderful thing I think I've heard all year (it's only February) came from a little boy who was walking into a restaurant as I was walking out. It was cold outside and he was bounding across the pavement and he turned to his mother and said, "My toes are aggravating me!" And I swear, at that moment, the entire world seemed to fall into place with a satisfying click, and I understood the meaning of life for a fleeting instant. I know I did, and if it were a movie, the sun would have come out again at 8PM on that cold Chicago night, and small elves would have appeared from behind every car in the parking lot, and we would have done a musical number.

## XI.

I took the train downtown today to volunteer at a clinic that works with families of autistic children. I was actually just tagging along with my roommate, who has been working there for a while. It was a great program. The kids were divided into three groups and then rotated between three classrooms, dance, art, and music. I volunteered there once about a month ago, but the work I did was mostly moving from classroom to classroom, delivering snacks, and cleaning up when the program was over. This month, I was promoted. They assigned me to the music room, where I was to supervise and play with the kids as they banged on miniature keyboards and plastic drum sets.

I felt awkward. I always feel awkward when I work with disabled kids. I have this constant, nagging feeling that I'm doing something wrong. Even worse is an assignment like this. I hate it when my job is to play with them. I'm really bad at playing. I must have failed preschool. For instance, this morning, after the group had come into the room, run around it a couple times, and taken everything in, we decided to get everyone together and sing a song. This presented a bit of a challenge, as everyone already seemed to be singing their own songs (and yelling at each other) at the top of their lungs. After a while, we managed to get their attention. The chaos was quieting down. The girl who had just spent five minutes running tight circles around the middle of the floor had noticed that the group was coming together and was jogging over to meet us, when I completely ruined everything. She was coming towards me. I had to do something. I was supposed to be playing. How could I play with this girl?

I glanced frantically around, and spotted a wooden, painted maraca lying on the floor. By this time, the group was completely silent and everyone watched as the girl looked up at me for direction. I held it out to her, asking if she wanted to play with it. She took it, and proceeded to run around the room again, the maraca now adding its own beady voice to her incredibly loud one. Of course her shouts of laughter were enough to convince the rest of the group that it was still playtime, and they all went to join her. I

remember thinking, “*Why did I just do that? That was so incredibly stupid!*” and feeling like all the other volunteers were staring at me in absolute awe of my incompetence. I cringed as another volunteer ran after the girl, trying to coax her into joining our circle. For the rest of the day, I decided it would be better if I let the whole “playing” idea go. I followed the kids around, making sure that everyone had a toy instrument, and that no one used it in any way that might compel parents to take legal action. I was fairly successful.

Why do I feel so awkward and out of place volunteering with the developmentally disabled when I have absolutely no trouble being around my brother and his friends? Maybe it’s that when I’m volunteering, I’m being judged. There are other volunteers watching me. They may have more experience. What experience do I have? I don’t spend a lot of time volunteering. Usually, I just hang out with kids like this. It’s not a formal setting. When they start dancing in a crowded restaurant, I don’t scold them. I don’t tell them, “That behavior is inappropriate for this setting. Let’s sit down, shall we?” No! I join everyone else in a circle and clap my hands to the imaginary beat and laugh until my stomach hurts. But here, in this clinic full of medical experts and experienced volunteers, I have to know where to draw the line. I have to make sure that everyone behaves properly. I have to lead by example. Honestly, I think I would prefer to dance.

## XII.

It smells like diapers in this car. Not soiled diapers. Fresh ones. Have you ever smelled a fresh diaper? It’s an artificial smell. Synthetic. There you are, your face about an inch and a half away from the window. Looking at you twists up my insides. I miss you, but you’re right there, sitting next to me in this synthetically scented car. What would happen if they hit the brakes and just left us here on this quiet country road? There are no streetlights, and nothing around but trees and mountains and more trees. But we’d be okay. We always are. Remember when we used to get lost together in grocery stores? You would follow me as I walked purposefully through the aisles, tilting my head to look down each and every one, because Mom had to be in one of them. You were quiet then. You could always tell when I was worried. But I was never that worried. I planned out in my head where we would sleep if we had to spend the night there. Usually, the spot I picked was away from the refrigerated aisles, because I didn’t want us to be cold. At JC Penney, I made mental notes when we passed particularly comfortable looking display beds, and looked around for alarm clocks that we could use to wake us up before they started opening the store again.

Sometimes, Mom had us wait in the car while she ran into Jewel to pick up milk or pretzels or your prescription. I hated that, because she always took too long. I sat there, playing with the seatbelt. I knew she wasn’t coming back. I knew that someone had come into the store and held up a gun. And I knew that we were going to be orphans. Sometimes I cried. You watched, concerned. You were quiet, then, too. Just like you are now, staring intently out the window at the trees that are moving too fast for you to count. Do you know that whenever you do that, you point your finger at the glass? I don’t think you notice. But you do. You point like there’s something really interesting outside that you want everyone to see, but it’s a half-hearted point, like you think people will say you’re silly for pointing at something so ordinary. It’s not ordinary, I know. This is not the I-94. You don’t have all the exit numbers memorized on this highway.

Still, you know where we’re going. “Ohh,” you say very quietly when we pass the

next exit. Dad heard you.

“Shoot! Pouya, did we pass the exit?” You say nothing, but your pointed finger tenses a little, and you twist your body to look backwards at the green exit sign as it shrinks into the distance. “Damn!” he says. You grin at me. I grin back. How do you always know? What is it about that giant State Farm atlas that fascinates you so much? I imagine you poring over it, page after page, committing the curves of coastlines and interstates to memory. It would take hours to learn a city, years to learn the whole country. And yet, here we are in Middle-Of-Nowhere, USA, and you’re still our navigation system. The only difference between you and the machine on the dashboard is that you can eat an entire mushroom pepperoni pizza in ten minutes.

We make a u-turn just as we start to hear little taps on the roof of the car. Rain. I settle back in my seat and wait for it to pick up enough so that I can race the drops down the car window. Later, when the glass fogs up, we’ll write nonsense phrases with our fingers, and when it gets dark, we’ll watch them illuminate in the red lights on the highway.