

Robert Plant's crooning emanated from the boombox on the kitchen table, *you're gonna let your hair hang down. I'm satisfied to sit here working all day long; you're in the darker side of town.* His lilt was welcome to the quintuple-pierced ears of the woman at the sink. Mary's hands were scalded and her nail beds were stinging with Palmolive as she scrubbed down one of the last frying pans. The task of scouring the kitchen had begun around 9:30 that Thursday morning, interrupted only by a brief lunch break and a quick run to Wal-Mart for more cleaning fluids. She appeased her daughters with tacky nail polish and exiled them to the backyard for the duration.

"Oh and those neighbors, you wouldn't *buh-lieve* how messy their yard is. Those boys get sand *all over* their deck! If I was their mom I'd *tan their hide*, that'd teach them to keep that sandbox straight." Angie said haughtily. Mary listened through the open window, snickering. The first time she heard this rant, it was her mother-in-law the night before.

"Yeah," Iris answered with a soft lisp. Her pudgy little fingers moved as carefully as possible over her sister's nail. "I know whatcha mean Angie,"

"No, no! *Iris*," The older sister whined and then whispered, a hand cupped around her lips, "my name's *Sandra* remember?"

After a nasty splinter from the wooden cabinet, the peeling linoleum on the kitchen floor and a soapy coating over her hands, she was at the short end of her fuse. The girls had since come inside and were now glued to Nickelodeon in the living room—it was time for *Aah! Real Monsters*. Mary turned up the stereo to drown out the television, but the kids followed her lead and turned their volume up just a few notches higher. Just in time for a *Monster* belch.

“Mom?” A pint-sized person called out to her over the battling noise. Mary brushed a snatch of salt and pepper hair from her face and ran a sponge over the panhandle. When she was twenty-one her first strands of gray hair had appeared, prematurely as they had done to her father decades ago. At first she hated being the only co-ed with graying hair. But after a while, it became Mary’s thing. It was her mark, a sign of individuality. But that was college; stuck in her new identity the grayness just made Mary out of sync. Her tape clicked, it was at the end of its spool so she walked over and pressed rewind. She sang aloud to herself to compete with the din.

“And yesterday I saw you standing by the river, and weren’t those tears that filled your eyes,”

“Mom?” The voice asked again.

Mary kept her focus on the words flowing out of her. “And all the fish that lay in dirty water dyin’, had they got you hypnotized?” She heard feet marching toward her; she judged her cassette to be far enough back and pressed play. The guitar started “That’s the Way” again and Mary hurried the few steps back to the sink. She refused to acknowledge.

“I don’t know how I’m gonna tell you,” Mary sang.

“*Mom,*” Angie sounded thoroughly appalled. “Can you stop singing *please?*” The little girl began to smile. “Remember when we were in the car and Dad said your voice sounded like a, a ‘broken bugle’?”

Mary paused and wheeled around with menace.

“Don’t you *dare* take that tone with me, or you’ll be sorry.” Mary growled, “What do you want?” She did remember the car incident of weeks ago. They were driving away from the final walk-through of their new house. Mike tossed his menthol cigarette butt out the window and giggled with the girls as Mary sat humiliated in the passenger seat, not finishing her rendition of

“Mona Lisas and Madhatters”.

Angie’s eyes widened and scrambled for words. “Uh, when’s dinner?”

“Later.”

The brevity of her mother’s words sent Angie shuffling back into the living room, tail between her legs. The cassette played on and Mary put away the frying pan. Her mind moved on too; to her husband who wouldn’t be home for another few hours. This was their first house together, a white split-level in the manicured, WASPy suburb of Valley Oak. On the cheaper side of town that their solo salary could afford.

“We’ll have a big backyard for the kids, a garage we can put both cars in, more closet space...” Mike promised the night before they closed on the property. “It’s exactly what you wanted—they can ride bikes, have a basketball hoop maybe. And you’ll have that garden you’ve wanted so long.” Mary’s thoughts turned to growing azalea bushes, snapdragons and kiddie pools. She could sit outside and enjoy a book and a gin and tonic. Maybe. *Bye-bye condo. Hello, family*, she thought.

When the Girardi clan moved into the house however, Mike had been M.I.A. The call of the office—extra hours here, corporate functions there had claimed her husband. It rendered Mary a kind of widow, putting the house together and raising their children by day. At night waiting in bed for her husband-come-phantom, where their tense bodies only shared 300-count sheets and a southwestern zephyr passing through.

Mary wiped her brow, dripping with sweat after finishing the last of the dishes. *August is a bad month to move in*, she thought.

Behind her were stacks of recently evacuated boxes; this was Mary’s favorite part of

unpacking—getting to break them down. She grabbed them up—three bigs and two littles and went out the back screen door. It took a good yank on the garage door handle to pull it up and open.

Once inside she set down the boxes in a neat row, parallel to her parked Buick. Mary cracked her knuckles and stretched her neck before pouncing on a little box first to get her started. Her size nine foot stamped down hard on the cardboard, squunching and flattening it down in no time. Next came an old TV box, a big one but not the biggest yet. She turned it on its side and read the words—*Toshiba 18-inch screen television*. She raised a foot over the brand name and came down hard, punching a hole right through the center. Mary pulled her foot out and went at it again. She hopped into the air and came down, crushing the structure from the box. As she continued her smashing of the boxes, Mary's thirty-four years diminished into a childhood trance. She was gratifyingly blank.

Sweat plopped down onto the shriveled corpses as she stood over them, mucus built up in her mouth. She spat forcefully down then went to the car – she had an emergency pack of Kools and a matchbook waiting in the glove compartment. She closed the door and lit up, leaning against the driver side door. Mary admired her carnage. *Pizza and a frosty soda, now that sounds like dinner.*

Mary set down her paperback, *The Prince of Tides*, and listened to Mike gargle in the bathroom down the hallway. Though this house was much bigger than the condo, the upstairs was pretty close quarters. An errant child sneaking downstairs for a cookie or a husband grumbling were easily detected.

Mike had been an hour late. Leftover pizza waited in the fridge but the kids were long

asleep, unable to achieve their nightly, ritualistic welcome once he got home. “Daddy!” They’d run to him and latch onto his legs. Mike would pat their heads and a big cheesy grin would stick on his face. It was his only bright spot. Tonight though, his feet dragged and he had duffel bags beneath his cloudy blue eyes. Affording suburbia was already taking a visible toll.

“How was your day?” Mary asked, though she could see the drain behind his eyes. She lit them a cigarette to share. Mike put out his hand and shook his head,

“No, no thanks. I just wanna eat and get into bed, I’m beat.” Mary put out the cigarette.

“Did Fleming ask you to stay late any other nights this week?” She probed.

“Phlegm? Nah, but next week I have to go to the city a couple days, have to meet with the Cook County Recorder. They want to talk about the new charging system for deeds and plats.” Mary’s attention waned.

The man before her waxing on about the latest in real estate, not too long ago would crack out his guitar after dinner and sing “Hey Joe” or some Neil Young. Her honeyed brown eyes roved over him.

*Where did you go?*

Mike turned out the light and eased under the covers—pulling the comforter as usual all the way up to his chin. Summer didn’t interfere with his procedure. Mary laid on her back with a hand on her chest and the other over the pit of her stomach. She began her breathing exercises to alleviate tension and insomnia.

*Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale.* Mary summoned the teachings of the yoga class she took years ago with her sister Cathy: *inhale and exhale all in one breath.*

“Hey Mare? Can you scoot over a little, I’m on the edge, here, couldja gimme? Just a

little more room,”

Breathing interrupted, she moved over and he turned over. Again Mary took position; *inhale.*

As her eyelids got heavy, a burbly fart sounded beneath the sheets. A gaggifying odor zoomed right up Mary’s nostrils; she tried to pretend it wasn’t there, convince herself *well, not like I haven’t smelled this before* when another noise sounded. This time, it came from the backyard.

Mary’s eyes opened, her husband’s gas wafted far from her thoughts. Her ears perked—something was scratching on the garage. She turned and pulled up the blinds. The scratching became urgent, now accompanied by rodent-sounding chatter. She squinted to get a good look; the full moon gave the backyard ruffians no quarter. Two figures on the garage roof circled around each other, sidestepping, advancing forward and falling back. The bandito-looking raccoon stuck out a paw and batted at his enemy menacingly.

“Michael? Mike!” Mary hissed. “Do you hear this?”

“I’m sorry Mare... I can’t help it,” he muttered into his pillow.

“No, no look! There’s a raccoon and a possum. They’re, fighting! On the garage roof. C’mon, look at this! I’ve never seen, have you ever?”

Mike struggled to sit up. He stared out into the darkness, “Where?”

“The garage, look, look up on the roof.” Mary pointed a long finger toward the animals.

Mike gave the garage a quick glance and then turned away.

“I don’t see anything... I dunno... I don’t see anything.” Mary looked at him, hurt. He hadn’t even bothered to put his glasses on. *Maybe he’s being sweet, pretending he’s interested. But Jesus Michael, pretend a little better.* She looked back out at the garage as he curled back up

under the sheets.

Mary leaned against the windowsill and fingered one of her piercings, a hole made in her dorm room circa 1980; vodka and a joint had been involved. The possum now had the upper hand. “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“Hey Mom?” A little girl asked from the kitchen upstairs.

“What?” Mary called back.

She had chosen to spend Friday cloistered in the basement. Currently she was unpacking her cassette tape collection. The ‘possum and raccoon began to chatter away at each other again in Mary’s brain—swiping at each other and baring their teeth. The two brutes had gone at it for a good half hour before retreating to opposite sides of the roof and melting into their midnight surroundings.

Mike snored as Mary watched, riveted by the growling and scratching. It reminded her of the boxes from earlier in the evening—the thrill of physicality. Not talking, not having to explain – just raging it. Sweat would pour, blood would rush and she could feel powerful. She could shed her compassion and responsibility. Reverting down to meaningless aggression. It was arousing.

When she finally slept, Mary dreamt she was sitting on the backyard fence. It was the wooden privacy fence the family cat, Sire, would troll, snooping in the neighbors yard and watching for any viable prey. She was facing the house, but kept looking behind. Palm trees waved at her, the grass had turned to sand and she was smoking from a wooden pipe. The weed was strong, unlike the mids she used to smoke. Mary spread her body out in a strong stretch and the pipe disappeared. She reclined back in mid-air, somehow not falling down from her perch.

She felt the need to put flowers in her hair—there were morning glories below her, reaching up from their vines. She looked down and extended her hand but standing on top of the now flattened flowers was Mike, about a foot tall, shouting up at her. His words were inarticulate, hollow sounds as though from the other side of a long tunnel. He pointed back toward the house vigorously. The girls were standing near the back door playing Miss Mary Mack. Mary heard the tune of a carousel as Mike continued pointing toward their daughters and yelling. A bison-sized possum was advancing on Angie and Iris from behind, pointy teeth bared. Mary closed her eyes and leaned backward toward the sand.

“We gotta show you something.” Iris and Angie said together, voices chiming together in strange synchronicity.

Mary set *Voices* next to *Armed Forces* but stopped with cassette in hand. Angie and Iris were night and day, milk and apple juice, Ariel and Snow White—never on the same page, never in agreement. When the two were able to agree organically, Mary always seized the opportunity, or at least took notice of it.

She put the tape down on the dryer and walked toward the stairs. Slowly she ascended into the kitchen, both kids were silent and staring out the screen door.

“What is it?” She wondered if one of the brawlers was in the yard again.

Angie looked back at her mother and pointed outside.

“Look over there.” Angie whispered.

Mary looked over at their side yard. On the other side of the short chain link fence stood two large birds, staring back at the three girls. They had long, feathery necks cropping up from



bushy, stout bodies. They stood still as stone and were silent, but their orange eyes were penetrating.

“What are those, Mom?”

“I think they’re, I mean they look a little young so I’m not sure but I think they’re... emus.” Mary had only seen ostriches before at the Brookfield Zoo. They were regal, their plumage soft looking and well kempt. These two in the Walkers’ yard seemed to be their shorter, rougher cousins. Their coloring was a mix of browns and grays, hanging off their bodies like limp hay.

“Emus?” Angie held onto her long ponytail and looked up at her mother.

“They’re like ostriches, just smaller.” Mary turned the handle to go outside.

“Mom, are those like Big Bird?” Iris licked slowly at her popsicle.

“No. They’re, I don’t know.”

Iris and Angie looked at her as though she had spoken in tongues. Mom always has the answers. Mom was never a person who didn’t know or wasn’t in the process of knowing.

Mary pulled open the door and walked out onto the stoop. The girls followed—Iris stayed safely behind her mother’s legs, Angie slowly advanced onto the driveway, closer to the birds.

“Don’t get too close!” Mary whispered urgently, not wanting the emus to hear. Both birds looked searingly at her though, and never before had she felt so exposed and understood.

“Daddy!” A blue, two-door sedan turned into the driveway and started toward them. The girls stepped off the driveway and followed the car to the garage, Mary stayed near the stoop, watching the emus watch her. The one on the left whispered to its partner, little chattering sounds. Mary knew they were talking about her; the emu listening kept an orange eyeball on her

the whole time, nodding as his partner jabbered. Laughter came from the garage as Mike and the girls strolled up, he had his briefcase in one hand and Iris' hand in the other.

“What’s going on?” Mike started with a rare ease in his voice.

“Emus.”

“Emus? Why?”

“I don’t know, it’s the Walkers ya know-”

“No I don’t.”

“Well you would if you ever paid attention to what goes on around here.” Mike’s blue eyes widened behind his thick glasses and their little girls looked down at the ground, uneasy for their father. Mary hadn’t intended to snap at her husband and immediately felt red in the face.

“They’re weird people. They put all their old bikes in a hole in the ground in the middle of the lawn.” She pointed at the bike landfill next door. Mike didn’t look at the yard to confirm her story; he took his bag inside and let the screen door snap. Iris and Angie started inside too,

“Angie could we play Barbies?”

Mary pushed back a clump of gray hair. She wanted to cry but didn’t have the energy. Mike would go to the bathroom, turn on the fan and smoke a bowl to unwind. The girls could sequester themselves to play. The orange eyes felt like they were everywhere on her, she resented them for knowing her already, for making decisions about her. Mary reached into her shorts and pulled out a cigarette. She walked as close as she felt safe to the emus and took a deep drag. She puckered up and blew smoke in their faces.

R-E-P-U-B-L-I-C. Mary filled in the solution for 18 across. Beating her previous personal record of 57 minutes, Mary had finished this puzzle in a flash. She tossed the finished

puzzle onto the tile floor of the bathroom and readjusted. She turned the faucet to the H and tucked stray hairs back into their banana clip. *I hope Cathy's not late again*, she thought, *I wanna get started on this flower bed asap*. Mary laid back and stretched out her shapely legs. She closed her eyes as the bathwater pulsed from the hot jet. It was Sunday morning. No more straightening or cleaning to do. Mike took the girls on his errands. Last night replayed in Mary's mind.

*Mike put his hand on Mary's thigh, under the blankets, with the lights out. It was late; drinks with Phlegm had lasted longer than anticipated. As he kissed his wife's arm, shoulder up to her throat, Mary could smell the eau de Vodka permeating his skinny body. Isn't this what I want? She thought. Mike reached under her nightgown and ran his fingers over the curves of her belly, lightly pecking around her collar. Mary couldn't breathe; his touch was so foreign. It wasn't a dust bunny or an old blazer to be packed up for the Salvation Army. It wasn't a naked Barbie doll or a Fuzz Buster. Mike touched her cotton underpants and quickly Mary shifted her body away from him and inched closer to the edge of the bed.*

*Bold with vodka, Mike followed her and began fingering the elastic of her panties again, his lips sloppily sucking at the nape of her neck. A finger toyed with her slit, without any sort of romantic finesse. Mary's eyes were fixed on the dream catcher hanging on the wall, unmoving as her husband crawled on top of her, poised.*

*"Mare, you don't hold my hand anymore." Mike clasped her hand and pressed it into the pillow. He forced his finger inside her.*

*"Why don't you hold me?" Mary's ring dug into her fingers as he pressed more firmly, blood was rushing to her head. She felt it coming, she felt herself floating away. She had to stop it. She shoved her husband off and rolled out of bed, "I can't do this Michael. Don't ask me*

*to.” Her husband struggled for balance and his mouth was held open. Mary went to the basement and curled up on the sofa.*

Mike left a note the following morning, “Taking the girls out for the day, be back late. Always, Mickey.” She hadn’t called him that in years. Mary turned the faucet all the way, making the water hot as possible. *What was he saying? What did ‘Mickey’ mean?* Mary opened her eyes and watched the steam rise up from the basin as her creamy skin reddened with the warmth. The phone rang from downstairs, Mary turned off the water so she could hear the machine.

“Hey Mary it’s Cath. I’m gonna be a little late, gotta drop Jeremy off at Voegtle’s to pick up his car before I come over. See ya in a bit.” Mary tried not to get irritated, *she’s always late, just think of the flowers. It’ll all get done today.* She was going to have day lilies in the farthest corner of the yard, a big bush of color. Sedum for ground cover, lambs ear too. Mary’s mind drifted over the annuals, perennials, columbine and her favorite, the morning glory.

*I know where I’m gonna put ‘em too, right where those damn birds squawk. It’s a dead zone, but that’s where they’re goin’.*

“Well, I should get out. Gotta find my trowels before Cathy gets here.” She said to Sire, who had poked his head in to investigate. Mary pulled the plug and stepped out, toweling herself off vigorously before the vanity mirror.

Sire whined at her, *Put my dish down please.*

“I know, Beast. It’s not your time yet.”

Sire whined again, *Okay but see, I’m hungry now.*

“When the clock says twelve p.m., I’ll put your dish down. You still have a half an hour to go, now go on! Beat it Sire.” The cat turned away, pissed.

Mary smiled at the black cat and then looked into the mirror. She put her hands on her hips and took a deep breath, straightening her posture and sucking in her stomach. Her mirror-self put on her best pout and tried to pose. Searching to satisfy. *Not such a bad suit, a little paunchy in spots. Still have my legs.* Mary tossed back her hair with faux bravado and opened her towel. It dropped to the tile and she gasped, mystified at her body. Across her stomach were two long, angry red lines. She pulled at her skin to get a better look.

“What the fuck?” She asked aloud. Her caesarian scars had turned a bright, stinging color. The two incisions, one for Angie and one for Iris, were inflamed with color. The stain of her past pregnancies reared its ugly head. Mary gazed at herself the mirror, *I look like I was cut in half.* She looked at the rest of her body for more red—long legs, the plump Mount of Venus on her palms, breasts that had swelled with her pregnancies, dark freckles on her shoulders. No other marks, no pain either. A belt of red. Sire mewled loudly from the kitchen.

“I’m coming!” Mary snapped. Her body was no longer warm.

“I know.” Sire rubbed his head against Mary’s leg. He had his fill of kibble, now lovins’. After a few, Sire accompanied Mary to the garage. Whenever she went outside to go to the car or sneak a cigarette, the birds watched, craning their necks over the chainlink fence. The sharp amber eyes always trained on Mary, poking her. She tried to refuse.

Mary took a spare half hour to give her Buick a good scrub-down. She pulled the car out, set down her tub of sudsy water and started with the hood. Back and forth, soap and rinse, she began. A few yards down near the house, emus were watching. The taller came close to the fence, surveilling her long, strong arm move over the metal, making it shine. The shorter emu of

the two remained cloaked behind an adolescent evergreen in the Walker's yard. Mary forced herself not to look back, began humming a Joni Mitchell song.

The emus would not lose. Quiet at first, they let out tittering taunts. Purposefully, Mary plunged her sponge into the soapy water and then wrung it out over the pavement, excess water spattering over emu sounds. They got louder. They kept pushing. Calling out to her in strident tongues. They knew. They saw the way she scurried and hid. Anxiety plagued her husband as he walked up to the screen door at night. Their vision pierced through the passive unsaid of the family. They would be heard. Mary looked back at them. They stopped and stared. Feathers twitching with sensitivity. The moment was so ripe, juice was beading off it. Mary clutched the sponge in her hand and squared herself to the birds. *Win.*

"Say it to my face!" They pulled back slightly, Mary got angrier. "C'mon! Out with it! What am I missing!" She stalked toward them, jabbing the sponge at them, yelling. "Tell me! You have my attention you motherfuckers, now *what do you want?*" She walked right up to them and without hesitation squirted water in their faces. She grinned smugly for a moment; the taller emu reached out and snapped his beak at her, inches from her face. Mary gulped and staggered back. The emus kept a strong eye on her, not dropping their gaze. She stiffened, her lips tight and her eyes not backing down. After a while, Mary nodded her head respectfully at them, signaling the end of the communication.

Mary sat at the kitchen table with nothing to do. Cathy never made it. Mike had brought home packages of raw chicken to grill up for dinner; the girls were occupied outside at the emu fence. The packages of morning glories were unopened, still in the garage. With no more crosswords and *The Prince of Tides* pages from ending, Mary felt shut down.

Earlier in the afternoon, he had talked to Mary about the emus. She was cleaning the meat. He sat at the table, watching. He had to say something.

“Y’know Mary, I dunno about these birds. These things, they’re... they even allowed to be here?”

“I don’t know.” She stuck to cleaning.

“Well, y’know they aren’t supposed to be here. Shouldn’t be. These are the suburbs, I mean it’s batty!” Mike looked out. The emus were busily grooming each other. “I mean, who should I even call?”

“I don’t know, Mike.” She was terse.

“I’m gonna call the cops on these, the Walkers? They can,”

“No!” Mary turned around, chicken breast in hand. “Don’t do that. They’re not doing anything wrong. It’s none of our business.”

“None of our business?” Mike was incredulous. “We have *kids* Mare. What if one’a these hell buzzards tries to take a bite,”

“They wouldn’t do that. Just let. It. Go.” Mary turned away. Her husband retired to his lair for a joint.

Mary went to the basement. She had an old notebook from college on her lap and her *Richard Pryor Live in Concert* record on the turntable. She listened intently to the storyteller, soaking up élan. She felt waves of pleasure from the vinyl as Richard killed. She began to write, letting all words rush out. She allowed it to run her and salivate all over the page.

“Girls, come in now. Time to set the table.” A voice called from inside.

“Coming Mom!” Angie called. “Okay Iris, I think we’re done now.”

“Are you sure? I dunno, I wanna sit here some more. I wanna ask ‘em somethin’,” Iris pleaded.

“But we gotta help Mom set the table. And besides, they got it.” Angie assured her little sister.

“Are you really sure?” Iris got up to follow her sister into the house.

“They told me so.” With certainty, they walked into the kitchen as Mary was getting out a Miller Light from the fridge. “Hi Mom.” Angie said hesitantly. Her mother had been different; she wasn’t sure how to act around her.

“Can you girls just get out the silverware and plates? What do you want to drink?”

“Root beyuh!” Iris was excited. Mary smiled genuinely.

“Me too.” Angie said. “Hey Mom, we talked to the emus.” She baited her mother. Mary could see right through it, but continued with curiosity.

“Oh yeah?”

“Angie says they know stuff.” Iris opened the drawer. Mary took a swig of her beer.

“They do.”

Mike turned over the meat slowly and kept an eye on the emus. He wanted in. Mary watched aside.

“Hey! Hey you ‘moos!” The emus were caught unawares. This was earlier than expected.

Mike walked away from the grill. “Hey, ‘moos! Yeah, I’m talking to you. What did you say to my girls? Y’know, Mary wants to keep you. I don’t understand it; you talk? Will you talk



to me?” Mike didn’t allow an answer. He giggled, high. “Well, I’m ready. Say what you will, oh Great Moos of Dawes Avenues! I hearken to your every call.” Mike flailed his arms with gusto.

Mary pulled up her shirt—the red belt was fading.

At 3AM, Mary took her paper to the fence. Now or never. Barefoot in her mint nightgown, Mary sat cross-legged before the emus. They were just as eager.

“I need help; I need myself. I need to feel the...vibrations. The...electricity? The forces.” She folded up her slip of paper and extended her arm toward the taller one’s mouth. “Please.” The emu paused a moment, making sure. Flashing, his beak snatched and swallowed the missive. Mary couldn’t help but smile, feeling like falling. Feeling like a penny down a well. Anew.

*I’ll put in those morning glories first thing.* She didn’t sit out with the birds too much longer, her mind running over the close of her note.

Mary returned inside; door unlocked. At 6:15 the next morning, Animal Control arrived.