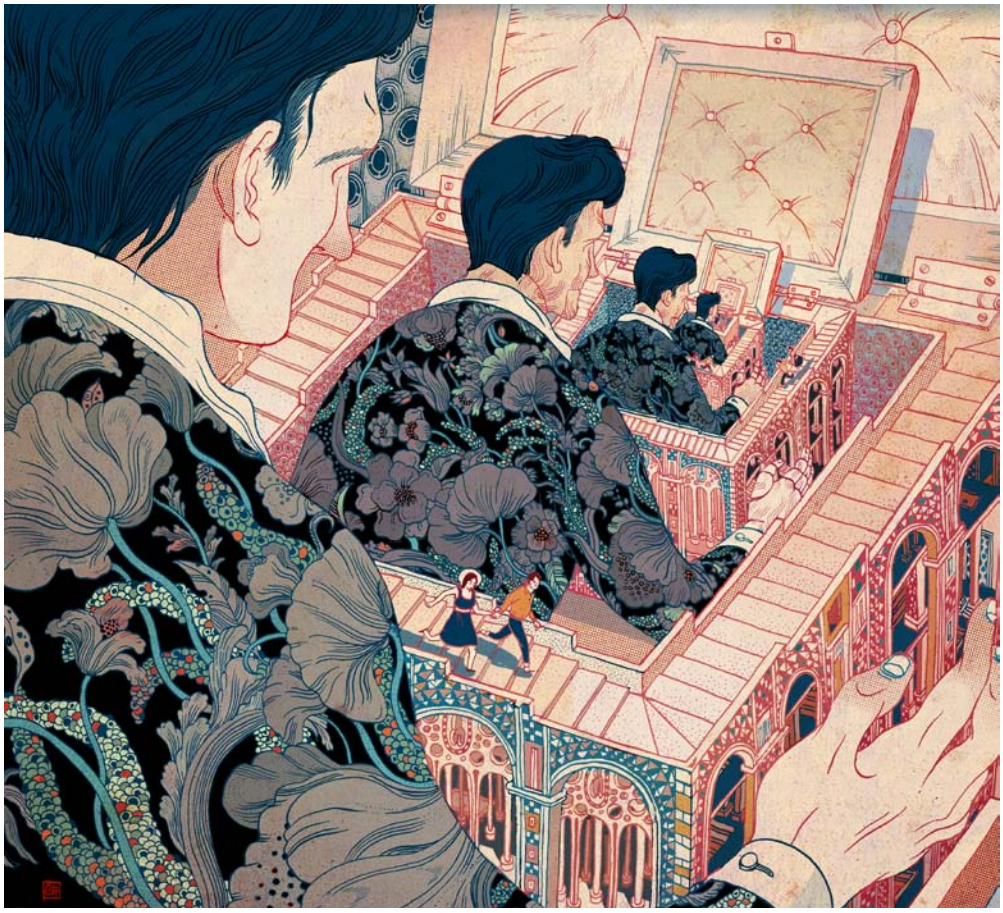

NOVELLA

A Window or a Small Box

Jedediah Berry

illustration by **Victo Ngai**

They were on the run and forgetting how not to be. He wore his flowered shirt and she wore her straw hat so they could always spot each other in a crowd. The goons were a few steps behind them—had been since that day at the empty house by the sea—but they made friends where they needed friends, they bought bus tickets and street maps, and sometimes they stopped long enough for a movie or a beer, or for a quickie in a borrowed room. They were far from home, but they didn't know how far. They figured everything would turn out all right in the end.

"Everything will turn out all right in the end," she told him.

He was having a dark moment, crouched on the sidewalk with his hands on top of his head. At the bus stop on the corner, two boys wearing bulky backpacks exchanged a look.

"See," she said, "it's kind of like Los Angeles here."

Only this Los Angeles had too many doors: doors in the sidewalks, doors on every side of every house, little doors in the trees. Most doors didn't have anything behind them. They'd checked a few.

"Your aunt Meg probably thinks I kidnapped you," he said. "She's going to be so angry."

She crouched behind him, ignoring the looks from those kids, and put her arms around his middle. "My aunt Meg is always angry about something," she said.

They stayed like that for a while, she with her hair falling over his shoulders, he slowly unclenching. Then a bus pulled

up to the curb, and the driver threw down a rope ladder. The two boys climbed aboard, and the babies in their backpacks woke and went wide-eyed at the ascent. Babies, fat and shining, grinning, everything new to them.

Because that was the other thing about this Los Angeles. Everyone here had babies.

"I need a drink," he said.

They'd seen a town where powdered wigs were strictly required. A town where the laws were made by observing how the alpacas grazed on a particular meadow. A town that was just a train station. They'd been in the country, and then in the mountains, and then in the desert. They learned to stop asking where they were, because people here didn't understand that question, mistook it for a joke. A big grin and "Why, you're right here!" was the typical reply.

What they wanted was to get home in time for the wedding—their wedding. They held hands as often as they could. They got used to not getting used to things. They knew that his name was Jim and that her name was Laura, and sometimes that was all they needed.

In the Set-It-Down Saloon, the bouncer bounced a baby on his knee. At every table, in every booth, at least one baby lolled. The bartender had a baby slung over his chest and a second laid out on a blanket next to the taps. "I'll tell you what you kids need," he said to Jim, and Jim thought he was going to say *a baby*, but what he said was "You need a sure thing. My cousin Louis, for example. This guy has a sure thing. Have you ever heard of muffins?"

"Muffins, yes, I've heard of muffins," said Jim.

"Louis is in the muffins business. It's going to be huge, you know? When people get a taste of these muffins, they're all going to want in on them. They're going to eat these things until they burst. Standing room only. There's a sure thing right there."

"I'll be right back," said Laura, and went off to find the restroom.

Jim took a long sip of his beer. "There are these goons," he said.

"Goons?"

"Thugs. Pinstripe suits, shiny black shoes. You can smell them when they get close. They smell like fried eggs."

"Fried eggs," the bartender said, wiping down the bar. "Never heard of fried eggs."

The baby on the bar—a boy baby—started peeing. The stream of urine splashed over the bar and over the baby's own legs. The bartender waited until it was done, then lifted the baby's legs, cleaned up underneath, and cleaned the baby, too, all with the same rag.

"A window or a small box," Jim said. "Does that mean anything to you?"

It was a fortune teller in Phoenix (except it wasn't *really* Phoenix) who'd said it to them. She lived in a little white house with a very green lawn and a sign out front with a picture of a crystal ball on it. She was out front, too, on a lawn chair, sunning herself in a two-piece. She was maybe nineteen. "You look lost," she'd said dreamily, and they *were* lost, and feeling a little desperate, so they followed her inside, and she'd gazed into her crystal ball and told them: "Your way home lies through a window. A window or a small box."

"I've got plenty of boxes out back," the bartender said. "Take all you need." The baby on the bar was crying now, so he swapped it for the one slung over his chest.

"I don't know if we're getting any closer," Jim said. And then, though he knew how this would probably go, he asked, "Hey, can you tell me where we are?"

"Now there's the first sensible question you've asked all night," the bartender said. "You're sitting at my bar, kid. It's called the Set-It-Down Saloon, and people come here to set things down, usually themselves. I've worked here for thirteen years, and sometimes I think it must be the absolute center of the universe." He looked around. "You smell something? I've never smelled anything like that. Like something frying in butter."

Jim rose from his stool and said, "Where's Laura?"

Laura had found too many doors at the back of the bar, none of them labeled *women* or *men*, l*adies* or *gents*. No helpful pictograms. So she'd picked a door at random and opened it on to darkness.

When she felt for the light switch someone grabbed her wrist, pulled her in, and closed the door. "Hi," someone said.

She reached for the doorknob, but the man in the dark got ahold of her other wrist and danced her deeper into the room. Then she was in a chair, and a lamp was on, and on the table next to the lamp was a half-eaten sandwich on a white plate. The man sat beside her. He was big in his big pinstripe suit, and he had big blond hair and a handsome smile.

"How'd you know which door I'd pick?" she asked.

"Didn't," he said. "But things usually go my way. Hungry?"

They were in a storage room, surrounded by open crates of promotional materials from breweries: neon signs, pint glasses, coasters, baby bibs.

"I'm not hungry," she said.

The man shrugged and took a bite of the sandwich. Cheese, it looked like. "So, you still with that guy?" he said. "What a loser."

"Guess how many," she said.

He stopped chewing. "How many what?"

"Tents. Guess how many tents we rented for the wedding."

He blinked his big blue eyes. "I don't want to guess."

"Three," she said. "One for the ceremony, one for the dinner, and one for the dancing."

"I don't want to talk about dancing," said the man, the man who was the leader of the goons, the goons who were out to get them, though he seemed to be alone this time. "I want to talk about love."

The room felt colder now.

"Do you love him?" the chief goon asked. "Do you really love that loser out there?"

"Guess how many guests," she said.

He threw his sandwich onto the plate. "I hate your questions. Your questions bring me to the very edge of doing something terrible."

"One hundred eighteen guests," she said. "Do you know how difficult it is to herd that many people? To make sure they all have a place to stay? To make sure they're seated at tables with people they don't hate?"

"Do you *love* him?" the chief goon asked again.

Laura thought of Jim on the sidewalk, thought of him weak and needy, and the only thing she felt was a hollow kind of anger. "I don't know if I love him," she said, and then she heard him outside, calling her name.

She ran for the door, but the chief goon moved faster, pinned her against the wall, and held her face in his big white hands, very gently. She screamed.

They were just two kids from upstate New York. Before, he'd been working for an agency that tracked fish populations. Seven hours each day, in a room he and his coworkers called "the dungeon," he sat at a window with a view on to a streambed, watching for flashes of silver in the murky light. He kept a counter in each hand, clicking one for shad, one for lampreys. Sometimes a lamprey would attach itself to the glass with its mouth and stay there for hours. Jim would try not to look at it, at its rings of teeth, at its flat yellow eyes.

"Weird as anything we've seen here," she'd said to him a few days after they'd crossed over (and this was how they referred to their arrival in this place, which they didn't remember, didn't understand).

"There were turtles sometimes," Jim said. "It always felt good to see turtles."

She'd been commuting into the city to work for a company that predicted trends in film, television, fashion. She'd earned a promotion and a measure of fame among her peers for her work on a report titled "The New Escapism," which proved to be about 90 percent accurate. The interns referred to her as "the seeress" and competed for the right to do her photocopying. Whenever someone asked her what she saw coming next, she usually said, "Me getting fired," and knew she sounded a little hopeful when she said it.

"I'll fire you if you want," he'd told her one night. They were alone on his parents' porch with a candle and bottles of beer.

"It would be kind of hot if you fired me," she said.

"You're fired, then. Completely, totally terminated. Don't even clean out your desk."

"Mm, nice," she said, sipping from her bottle.

"Don't stop by the water cooler. Don't try to take any interns with you. Your life is one big pink slip."

"Okay," she said, laughing. "That'll do, boss."

"Welcome to the real world," he said. "It's hell out here, and you're part of it now."

"Jim, that's enough," she said.

He was shaking and he didn't know why. He licked the tips of his thumb and index finger and pinched out the candle flame.

When Jim came through the door with a bottle in his fist, the chief goon let go of Laura and backed away. They all looked at one another for a moment, then Laura went to Jim. He smashed the bottle over the edge of a crate. The glass shattered and fell from his hand, useless.

The chief goon chuckled, and swept back his big blond hair. "People are placing bets, you know. On how long before I catch you. I give you another day or two, tops."

They ran. Out in the bar, everyone was crouched low at their tables and booths, leaning protectively over babies. A half dozen goons, rubbery in their pinstripe suits, slid like jellyfish from vents in the ceiling, through the windows, from under the jukebox. They shifted in their shiny black shoes, ankles wobbling as they solidified.

Laura grabbed her backpack from the bar and pulled Jim toward the door.

"Trouble at six o'clock!" the bartender cried, which was strange, Jim thought, because no one here told time that way, but apparently six o'clock still meant *right behind you*, because there was one of the goons, smiling and ready to pounce.

Jim swung at him. His punch connected, but Jim's fist sank into the still-gooey head. The goon's face bulged, looking like a balloon that's been squeezed on one side. His smile stretched and swelled.

Jim hollered and pulled back, but his hand was stuck fast, somewhere just below the goon's left eye. The goon was laughing now, and so were all the other goons. Jim's hand felt warm and tingly in there. It didn't feel good.

"Kid, I don't know what to tell you," the bartender said.

Laura swung her backpack at the goon's head. He was

solid enough now that the impact meant something, and the goon's eyes fluttered shut. He fell against the bar, and Jim was free.

Free, but he only stared at the fallen goon, his face blank. Laura grabbed him by the arm, pulled him from the bar, pulled him down the sidewalk past the goons' black sedan, all the way to the closest monorail station, because this Los Angeles had a monorail. A train pulled in just as they passed through the turnstile. They hopped aboard, keeping low, and found two empty seats between a puppeteer and a woman with a basket of bananas on her head.

"At moments like this," Laura said to him, "I need you to work with me. And to move a little quicker, okay?"

Jim didn't look at her; he was staring at his right arm. Which ended, Laura now saw, just past the cuff of his flowered shirt—nothing where his hand should have been. The flesh was smooth and rounded, as though he'd never had a hand there.

Laura took his arm and held it between them, then held him close so he couldn't look at it.

The puppeteer, who had hissing snake heads on his fingertips, was watching. He leaned close and wagged the fingers of his right hand. "Can't take any chances," he said. "That's why I got these puppies insured."

They bought tickets for an afternoon show and sat in the back row. There were no movies in the city, only live theater. Jim stared at the spot where his hand used to be, ran the palm of his left hand over the stump. "Maybe this one will get more dexterous over time," he whispered.

At first he'd wondered how he was going to count shad and lampreys when he could hold only one clicker at a time. Then he wondered whether Laura would want to marry someone with one hand. There were things he did with that hand that she liked.

"This play is one of my favorites," she said, as though she'd seen it before. The play, as far as Jim could tell, was about stones that dreamed they were turtles.

"Could we trade seats?" he said.

"Why?" she said, then understood: he wanted to hold her hand, but he couldn't now unless she was on his left. She said, "Let's just watch the play, all right?" She kept her hands in her lap, under her straw hat.

He glanced toward the door, still expecting the goons to burst in. No sign of them, and not a trace of fried eggs, so he watched the play.

The stage, lit with blue and green lights, was covered with stones, most of them round and smooth. It reminded him of the bottom of the stream back home, the stream he'd come to think of as his stream. Offstage, someone played a zither. Turtle puppets with slowly moving limbs swung suspended in the light. From his perch on a bridge above, a curly-haired boy reached for them with an enormous net. When he caught a turtle, people in the audience clapped and bounced their babies on their knees.

"I don't get it," Jim said.

"They're happy because he caught a turtle," Laura said.

He went to get something to eat. The girl behind the lobby snack bar must have been from some other city: no baby, though she did have a chicken on the counter. She was teaching it to sort paperclips into little piles.

He didn't see any popcorn, but he asked anyway, and the girl set a packet the size of an old cassette tape on the counter. Jim opened it and looked inside. Not popcorn, exactly, but some kind of soft, white candy.

"Twenty cents," the girl said.

He fished two dimes out of his pocket, and she dropped them into the register without looking. This was something he and Laura had going for them: the currency here was similar enough that no one noticed the different set of faces on their coins and bills, and the exchange rate seemed to be in their favor. The few twenties they had with them when they crossed over were going a long way.

"I think that's for you," the girl said.

The lobby telephone was ringing in its booth.

"Why do you think it's for me?"

"It was for you last time it rang, and the time before that." The girl stroked her chicken with both hands, smoothing its feathers. "Please just answer it," she said.

Jim stuffed the not-popcorn in his pocket and went into the booth, closing the door behind him before he answered.

"I can't believe I got you on the line," someone said. It was a woman's voice, eastern European accent but not quite, and anyway did they even have an eastern Europe here?

"Who is this?"

"Who is which of us? You're Mr. Jim, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm Jim, but who are you?"

"I know who I am, thank you. Oh, but you are doing that amazing thing you do. That funny way of speaking."

Jim could hear a scratching sound on the line. "Are you writing this down?" he asked.

"I'm writing it up," the woman said. "I'm a biographist, and I'm working on your biography. It's coming along nicely."

"I don't need a biographer," Jim said.

"Biogra*phist*," the woman said, laughing. "Listen, I want to meet you. For an interview? We could live together, maybe, just for a year or two. My publisher would be so pleased."

"No," Jim said. "Stop writing. Please, I don't want to be

interviewed. Why would anyone want to publish my biography?"

"Haven't you been reading the papers? You are just wowing them, Mr. Jim. Wowing them with your . . . I don't know what to call it, exactly. But I want to figure it out, and turn it into something you can taste. Something you can slick back your hair with, you know?"

Jim hung up and stumbled out of the booth, suddenly nauseous. He went back to the snack bar and asked the girl if she had a copy of today's newspaper.

"The one with you on the cover?" she said. "Right here."

The photo showed him in profile, talking to someone at a bus station, holding out a map, asking for directions. He scanned the article—some of the words were different, but it was close enough to American English—and yes, he was apparently famous, and dozens of people he'd spoken to since they crossed over had been interviewed, and specialists of various kinds were giving opinions, opinions that didn't make much sense to him.

There was no mention of Laura, only references to a traveling companion. He was the one they were interested in.

He returned the newspaper, noticed that she had Purple Pow-Pow behind the counter and bought a bottle, then tucked that in his shirt pocket and went back into the theater. The boy with curly hair was center stage now. He stirred a cauldron of turtle soup and sang a kind of dirge.

Laura leaned forward in her seat. "This is getting really good."

"Yeah," he said, wondering: If he was famous here, why wasn't Laura famous? Probably because he was the one who talked too much, who got them into trouble, who bumbled through everything they were up against. And people here found that interesting.

"You get something to eat?" Laura asked.

He shook a few of the whatever-they-weres from the envelope into Laura's hand, then almost tried to pour some into his own right hand before he remembered. He tipped them straight into his mouth instead.

"Ugh, these are weird," Laura said. "Don't they have popcorn?"

"I kind of like them," Jim said.

She kept her eyes on the stage. The boy was still singing, stirring and singing, crying as he sang.

"Did you hear that?" Laura whispered.

Jim hadn't been paying attention to the words, but now he listened. "I want to go home," the boy sang. "I want to go home." And then, more quietly, "All I need is a window, a window or a small box."

. . .

After the show, Jim convinced the girl behind the snack bar to show them the way backstage. They found the young actor in his dressing room. He didn't want to talk about the play, didn't want to talk about the song he'd sung, or who'd written it. "I'm going to do bigger things," he said. He nodded at Jim and added, "He knows. He understands."

"Sure," Jim said, "you're obviously going places."

The boy smiled.

"Please," Laura said. "May I see the script?"

The boy rolled his eyes at Jim, knowingly, as though in some private understanding. Then he opened a trunk and brought out a stack of bound pages. "I think this is the one. I don't know. Maybe it's the last one I did. Or the one before that."

"All the Swimming Things," Laura said, reading the title. "But who wrote it?"

"This conversation is so boring," the boy said. "Can't we talk about something else? Let's talk about *feelings*."

He was still looking at Jim, and Laura noticed this time. She gave Jim a hard look.

Jim hunkered down and said, "So, thing is, we know this play's just pig and pepper to someone with your talents." Pig and pepper was a popular game here. At least, lots of people talked about it, though neither Jim nor Laura had seen it played. "But we really need to know who wrote this play. A lot of . . . a lot of feelings are riding on this. Ours, and some other people's. Our families, our friends. People with some pretty big feelings."

The boy nodded slowly. This was making an impression.

"So, what do you say?" Jim asked. "Can you help us out?"

The boy looked at his feet. "He's mean," he said. "Like, alpaca-spit mean."

"Who is?" Laura said.

"The man who wrote the play. He hurts people, and I don't like talking about him."

Laura knelt beside the boy and put one hand on his shoulder. "We won't tell him that we saw you," she said. "This can be our secret."

The boy looked at himself in his mirror, then looked at Laura. "He comes every few days, to drop off more pages. He gives us presents, presents that we hate. He makes us open them in front of him. He says we aren't good enough for his plays, that we should be happy just to know him. His name is Gray."

"Gray," Laura said. "Gray what?"

"Just Gray," the boy said.

The door opened and a tall man with a handlebar mustache ducked through, a marionette draped over his arms. Seeing it, the boy's face went pale. The man set the marionette in a chair.

"My contract," the boy said to Jim, as though he'd know what this meant.

Jim rose from his seat. "You're all right?"

"I'm great," the boy said, though his voice was flat. The man with the handlebar mustache lifted him into his arms, and the boy went limp.

"Where are you taking him?" Laura said.

The man didn't look at her, didn't answer.

"Our secret, like you said," the boy told her.

She nodded, but the boy's eyes had closed, and the man carried him from the room, leaving them alone with the marionette. Jim was about to say something, but she shook her head to stop him, because she'd already seen it, seen the puppet's curly hair and brown eyes, its delicate fingers. It looked just like the boy.

"I want to go home," she said quietly. "I really just want to go home."

They'd been fighting about something, the day they crossed over, but now neither of them could remember what the fight was about. They couldn't remember how they'd crossed over, but they had their passports with them and their passports had been stamped. Were there customs officials? Inspections of some kind? Neither of them could say. The first thing they knew of this place was a roadside diner, and a menu they couldn't make sense of. Then a hot meal of something syrupy that came in three bowls, each a different color, each with a little plastic ship floating on top, then a panicked conversation in the parking lot, and apologies for the things they'd said that they couldn't remember.

"I do want to marry you," he'd told her, meaning it for the first time, maybe.

"I want to marry you too," she said. "Let's just get home in time, all right?"

The wedding was about two months off: plenty of time to find their way back. There were roadside hotels, and more diners, and drive-in movie theaters with big playgrounds under the screens. It was summer, and fireflies flashed in broad fields, and once they even managed to rent a car, but there was something in the contract they didn't understand, and an agent of the rental company came and took the car from them, shaking the wad of paper they'd signed and shouting about how hard his job was because of people like them.

They asked everyone they met which way to the border, but no one knew what they were talking about. They showed their passports, pointed at the stamps they'd been given, but got only shrugs and vacant looks in return. They asked, "Where are we?" until they learned not to bother asking.

On a bus, following a hint that a retired colonel in a seaside town might know about the country they'd come from, they decided to work on their wedding vows. "I don't want the usual nonsense about sickness and health," she said, tapping her pen against the notebook.

"You mean you'll leave me if I get sick?"

"Come on. What kind of marriage do we want, here? I thought you were looking for something a little off the beaten path."

"I don't know. Beaten paths are sounding good to me these days."

He saw the whiteness of her knuckles as she squeezed her pen. She needed this, needed something to hang on to, and he did too, maybe. So he said, "Okay, how about this? I promise, at least once a year, to learn a new craft and to craft something for you."

"Really?"

"Write it down."

She wrote it down and said, "Then I promise to bring you fresh flowers sometimes, especially on days for which there is no expectation of flowers."

"Thank you," he said. "I promise to do that thing you like when I—"

"You can't say that in front of my aunt Meg."

"Just put the first part, then. I promise to do that thing you like."

She wrote it down and said, "I promise to never make you feel bad about yourself on purpose, or to criticize you for making reasonable mistakes."

"And I, too," he said solemnly, "shall keep in mind that you are a fallible human being."

"But I won't have sex with other people," she said.

"Okay, ditto that one for me," he said.

And they were going to keep at it, but then the brass band at the back of the bus started rehearsing again, so they just held hands and watched the alpaca ranches roll by, until they came to the town by the sea, and to the colonel's enormous empty house, up there on the cliffs, and that was where the goons caught up with them, and they'd been running ever since.

They left the theater and found the nearest newsstand. *Newsstand* wasn't really the word for the thing. These roadside stalls, common to most every town they'd visited, were stocked with tools, small appliances, old photographs, and bits of junk neither of them could identify. But there were also books, maps, glossy magazines, and copies of the latest newspapers. They scoured the papers for mention of the play, for anything having to do with its author.

New merchandise was unloaded at a neighboring stand, and the other patrons swarmed away. A man in shiny green

shorts came up to Laura and said, "Take these for a minute?" He dumped two babies into her arms and was gone before she could say anything.

"Unbelievable," Laura said, though it wasn't the first time this had happened. Because Laura and Jim didn't have babies of their own, people here thought it was fine to lend them theirs.

"Take one," she said to Jim.

He held up his handless right arm to protest, but she pushed the baby at him, and he bent to take it in his left.

Laura searched the magazines while Jim stood there.

"So, when did you first meet him?" he asked her.

"Meet who?"

"That asshole goon. There was something about the way you two looked at each other in the bar. Like it wasn't the first time you'd talked."

She kept turning pages as she spoke. "He came up to me in the first week, I think. You were—I don't know, in some store, looking for that soda you like."

"Purple Pow-Pow."

"He said he just wanted to talk. To explain some things."

"And did he?"

"No better than anyone else. He said they'd be keeping track of us. They're like border guards, I guess. And now he just kind of checks in with me sometimes."

"That's really great," Jim said, bouncing the baby against his side. "So as long as you guys are pals, do you think you could get us deported home or something? And while you're at it, maybe you could ask him for my hand back? Because I really liked having a right hand."

The proprietor of the place, who'd been dozing in a big rattan chair with three babies sprawled sleeping on top of him, opened his eyes a little.

"It's not like that," Laura said. "He doesn't want to help. It's more like he's waiting for me to slip up. Like he's looking for an excuse to—I don't know what. To do something really bad to us."

Jim tapped the stump of his arm against what looked like a toaster oven. "He already has done something really bad to us, Laura. But apparently you've got too big of a crush on this guy to worry about it."

He looked horrible to her, then, with his stump, with the baby on his hip starting to cry, and she felt horrible for thinking it. "I guess I'm pretty useless to you," she said.

"I guess you are," he said. He knocked over the thing that looked like a toaster oven, and trading cards of pig-and-pepper athletes spilled everywhere.

She said, "I've been counting, you know."

"Counting what?"

"It's tomorrow, or maybe the day after. The day we were supposed to get married." She shoved the other baby at him—now he had one on his left side and the other wobbling under his right arm. Both babies were red-faced and bawling as Laura ducked out of the stall and walked off.

Jim let her go, and he didn't watch her leave. He thought: I'm going to change out of this flowered shirt first chance I get.

He went over to the man in the rattan chair and said, "You know this guy, Gray? Gray. Turtle soup, singing. Come on, help me out here."

"Gray, sure, sure," the man said, standing up, shaking himself free of the babies. He took a utility knife out of his pocket and cut the twine from a bundle of thick books, then set them aside until he found the one he was looking for. The cover said simply *Gray* in big, blocky type.

Jim put the two babies in the rattan chair, and the other three immediately started crying, as though they'd caught it from the new arrivals. The proprietor looked flustered, but he handed the book to Jim.

It was heavy, the size of a big city phone book. Jim set it on the ground and flipped through pages of very small print, then found some pictures: a long-haired older man standing among alpacas, papier mâché alpacas on a stage, the same man kneeling by a stream, pointing with a stick at some turtles on a log.

"His biography," the proprietor said.

Jim flipped to the back of the book. "A Window or a Small Box" was the title of the last chapter.

"Twenty cents," the proprietor said. "But for you, my friend, who are so famous and so dashing, you can have that volume for free."

"Laura!" Jim shouted after her.

The man went back to the rattan chair and leaned over the babies, whose cries had turned to a chorus of shrieking. He cooed at them, but they only got louder.

"Laura!" Jim said again.

She'd already disappeared around the corner. Jim closed the book, tucked it under his arm, and ran in the direction she'd gone. He thought he spotted her straw hat, bouncing above the downtown lunch hour crowd, but it was just the basket on a melon salesman's head.

He shouted her name again, spinning in place. All around him, people went in and out of doors, and there were doors in everything, doors in the street, doors on second stories with ladders leading up to them, doors built into doors, doors in those doors.

"Laura!"

But she was gone, and he was lost, sweating as he wove through the crowd, the biography getting heavy under his arm.

. . .

"West or east?" he'd asked her one day. They were on a train that sped along the edge of a deep, river-hewn chasm. "I just want to know if we're going west or east."

"Sweetie," she'd told him, squeezing his hand, "I don't think they have west and east here."

That night, Jim sat in a sculpture garden in what he thought must be the center of the city. There were statues of cats, of moons, of arches shaped like horseshoes. It reminded him of something.

"That cereal," he said to the musician who was sharing his carafe of spiked Pow-Pow. "That breakfast cereal with all the little marshmallows in it!" But the musician just shook his head, and plucked a few notes on his zither while his two babies splashed in the fountain.

Jim used Gray's biography for a pillow, and in the morning it was all he had, because someone had stolen his knapsack and his shoes while he slept.

Laura hadn't gone more than a block from the newsstand before the goons got her.

She was so angry that she didn't even see the black sedan until it pulled up to the curb, didn't notice the smell of freshly cooked breakfast until the smell had engulfed her, until the swollen, gelatinous hands of her pursuers took her and dragged her into the car.

It was completely dark inside. The windows were no-way windows, tinted on both sides. But the engine roared, and the car veered and rattled, and somehow the driver was driving. The radio was on and tuned to something old-timey. The air was very cool, though Laura could feel the press of many bodies around her.

"You did the right thing, ditching that guy," came the voice of the chief goon from the front passenger seat. "It never would have worked out between you two."

"Take me back," she said.

"Remember that day?" said the chief goon. "The house by the sea, the second time I saw you? Stay, I wanted to tell you. Just stay with me."

She remembered: a cloudless afternoon, a dusty road out of town through tall grass, the ancient house on the high sea cliffs. The door was unlocked, and the retired colonel—the one they'd been told might know the way home—was dead or away or had never existed. She and Jim wandered countless bare rooms, dizzied by views of rock and wave and sky, until back in the entry hall they heard for the first time the sickening slosh of the goons' arrival. Only the handsome one, the one with thick blond hair and a big grin, the one who'd told her weeks before how it would go, walked in on solid feet. She thought maybe she could reason with him, but instead she'd said to Jim, "We have to run," and they ran, and kept running.

"Please," she said to the goon now. "Please just tell me where we're going."

"Going? Darling, we're already here. This is it."

"This is *what*?"

"This is what happens when we catch you. We drive around together, and you say interesting things for as long as you can."

The other goons were chuckling. There were more of them than could possibly fit inside that car: dozens, maybe. They could have filled a small theater.

"Keep it interesting, though. Because as soon as we get bored . . ."

More chuckling, and Laura's instinct was to fight—to kick and punch and claw her way out of there—but she'd heard the doors lock, and she knew what had happened to Jim when he tried to fight them. So she swallowed that back and said, "What do you want me to talk about?"

"Snacks," one of the goons said.

"Dinner," another said.

"Talk about the constellations," said a third.

"Zip it," said the chief goon. "I want to hear about the wedding plans. I always find your wedding plans so interesting."

"You hate it when I talk about my wedding plans," Laura said.

"You're right," the chief goon said. "That was a trap."

"I'm going to tell you a story," Laura said, and then goons were hushing other goons, and one of them switched off the radio, and for a moment all she could hear was the noise of the car's engine, which came as though from deep in the earth.

"The story is called 'A Window or a Small Box,' and it's about some stones at the bottom of a stream—"

"Boring," said one of the goons.

"Some stones," she said, "that dreamed they were turtles."

The same goon said, "Oooh," and Laura could hear the slopping sound of him as he settled back into his seat.

"They dreamed that they were turtles, and the turtles swam in the waters of the stream, up above the rocks that dreamed them . . ."

Jim wandered until he came to the bus station. He sat for a while, watching the drivers raise their rope ladders and motor away. Then he walked over to a food stall and watched sausages turn under the heat lamps. He was hungry but his money was gone. He said to the boy in the stall, "Hey, can I have one of those sausages and not pay you for it?"

The boy said, "Sure," and gave him one on a hard roll. Jim ate the sausage quickly, even though it was probably alpaca, and so far he'd managed to avoid eating alpaca.

He felt a little better after that. He stole a pen from a ticket booth window, then found a stack of leaflets advertising masks and baskets. The backs of the leaflets were blank. He made posters, drawing Laura's face with his left hand. The picture looked like something a five-year-old would make, all squiggly lines and smudges. But with some practice he got her eyes right, and the length of her hair.

Lost, he wrote at the top of each sheet, and then at the bottom, *Please tell Jim if you see her.*

A janitor saw what he was doing and gave him a little pot of glue. Jim put the posters up all over the bus station, then went outside and stuck them under windshield wipers. He pasted them to telephone poles, to construction site barriers, to windows, to doors. When he was hungry, he found an open-air market, ordered a bowl of noodle soup, and asked if he could have it for free. The chef just shrugged and said, "Sure, Jim, it's all yours."

He made more signs. He wrote, *Jim wants to marry this girl but he can't find her!* He plastered one neighborhood with them, took a bus to another neighborhood, plastered that one too. Sometimes people recognized him and cheered him on. A kid gave him a pair of nice blue sneakers with stars on them. They were too big, but he wore them anyway, letting them flop around as he walked.

By evening he was exhausted. He found a door in the base of an overpass, opened it, and went into the empty room on the other side. He curled up on the cement floor, said Laura's name aloud to himself, and slept.

" . . . the boy whose job it was to count the turtles sat on the shore all day, eating sandwiches and keeping a tally on his abacus. Sometimes the turtles floated by on logs, and he wasn't sure if he'd counted them or not, so he started painting white spots on their shells."

"Why did he have to count the turtles?"

"Because there are people who want to know how many turtles there are. The real problem, though, was that no one had counted dream turtles before. Should they be counted like regular turtles? And what if the stones woke up? What would happen to the turtles then? The boy knew he needed some good advice, so he went to the girl who could predict the future."

"Where did this story *come from*?"

"It's a collaboration between me and a writer named Gray. Have you heard of Gray?"

They chuckled, and their chuckling sounded a little dangerous, so she kept talking.

"Now, the girl who could predict the future was making a lot of money, but she was sad and she didn't know why. When the boy who counted turtles came to see her . . ."

Jim was awakened by a gentle knocking and the orange light of morning in his eyes. A woman stood in the doorway. She was short with short pale hair, and very pretty. "Mr. Jim?" she said. "Mr. Jim, I wonder if I could speak with you now?"

He knew her voice from the telephone. It was the biographer—no, the *biographist*.

"Um," he said, sitting up.

She took a notebook and pen from her vest. "Are you sleeping in here, Mr. Jim? I never thought of that before. Anyone could just walk right into one of these rooms and take up residence!"

"It wasn't locked."

The woman leaned against the doorway as she laughed, her knees buckling slightly. "Of course it wasn't!" she said. "Is this the real you, Mr. Jim? It is, it is. How can you keep it up?"

Jim realized that the biographist didn't have a baby. She wasn't from this city, and maybe not from this country. The thought dizzied him: other, stranger nations in this already too-strange place. "Listen," he said, "I think you've got the wrong idea about me. I'm not supposed to be famous. Back home, I'm pretty much just like everyone else."

She wrote that down. "It must be a *very* funny place."

Jim rubbed his cheeks. "You're right," he said. "It is a funny place."

She knelt beside him and looked him in the eyes. Her seriousness made him feel serious as she asked, "And tell me, are you interested in the work and life of the author Gray?"

She tapped the biography with her pen. A dozen times yesterday Jim had nearly left the book behind: hard enough hanging all those posters with one hand. But he'd kept it, and last night he'd used it as a pillow again.

He flipped through the biography as the biographist watched. "Yes," he said at last. "Yes, I am very interested in the life and work of the author Gray."

She was writing this down.

"I'll make a deal with you," Jim said.

"I have never made a deal before. How do we make it?"

"I say what I'm going to do for you, and also what I expect you to do for me, and then we negotiate."

She swayed back and forth a little, thinking. Then, "I am ready," she said.

"I'm going to take you on as my biographist."

"Really?"

"Yes, but listen. First you have to help me find Gray. That's the deal. What do you think?"

"We negotiate now?"

"Yes," he said.

"I accept!" she said, and hugged him. He put his arms around her and patted her back, twisting a little to keep them both from tumbling over.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Is this part of the negotiations?"

"No, I'm just wondering what your name is."

"In that case," she said, and tapped his nose with her pen, "I am not telling."

She stood and walked out the door. He followed her. There was a bright yellow car parked beneath the overpass.

"Is this your car?" he asked.

"No, silly. It is Gray's car. He sent me to find you."

" . . . and just when the dream turtle soup was starting to get cold, the boy added more logs to the fire, and stirred the ladle in the cauldron. Turned out that a lot of people wanted to know what dream turtle soup tastes like, and a line had formed."

"What *does* dream turtle soup taste like?"

"It tastes like regular turtle soup, except fizzier, and it evaporates on your tongue. The boy ladled the soup into wooden bowls, and everyone had a little, and they all thought it was very good. But the girl who could predict the future arrived late, and there wasn't any left for her, and she told them about the bad things that were to come: the storm, and the battle, and the waking of the stones—"

"I hate this story," said the chief goon. "It's making me sad."

"It's not a happy story," Laura said, "and it doesn't turn out well." She took a breath to keep her voice steady, but when she tried to speak again her voice wasn't there at all. How long had she been in this car? How many hours, how many days? The silence, without her voice to break it, was terrible.

"Is that it, then?" the chief goon said.

"It," she said, trying to make it a question but failing.

Grumbles, now, from the dozens of goons in the audience. She had never heard annoyance sound so menacing.

"I want Jim," she said without thinking.

The grumbles got louder. She could feel the goons crowding close.

"Is that part of the story?" the chief goon said.

Even now, she thought, that monster in the front seat was enjoying this, enjoying his job. The goons loved getting angry, loved knowing that she would eventually disappoint them. Loved having the excuse they needed to snuff her out.

She choked back tears and said, "And the thing about this soup? Everyone who ate it was soon dreaming *they* were turtles, swimming in the stream and floating on logs in the sunlight . . ."

The goons settled in again, but as she told her story, she could tell they were no longer listening. She'd failed, somehow. The driver shifted gears, shifted direction. The car swayed, moving fast now, and Laura braced herself against the seat to keep upright, to keep herself from falling into one of those vile forms in the dark.

The biographist drove Jim into the hills, along winding roads choked nearly to the narrowness of a footpath by flowering bushes and vines. A gentle rain fell, but they kept the windows cracked. There were bottles of Purple Pow-Pow in a cooler in the back seat, and Jim helped himself. He had to hold the bottle between his legs while he twisted off the cap.

"Isn't it good?" the biographist asked him.

"Tastes like medicine, but it reminds me of home," Jim said.

An hour passed before they turned off the road and through an open wrought-iron gate. The biographist stopped the car there and let the engine idle. She gave Jim another serious look and said, "You don't have to do this."

"Do what?"

"Gray can be very mean to people. I heard he gave terrible, terrible presents to his own biographist. But you and me, Mr. Jim, we could keep on driving. Do you know how much coastline we have here? It just goes and goes."

Jim twirled the purple liquid at the bottom of his bottle. He could say yes, he thought, and his own old world would never know the difference. The two of them would drive, and he would talk, and she would write things down and laugh, and who knows?

But he was already shaking his head. "I have to talk to him. I have to find out if he knows where Laura is, and if anything here adds up to anything else."

She nodded, very solemn, and put the car back into gear. Neither of them spoke as they rode through more bushes and then out over a green meadow. The sun was clear of the clouds now, and the air was hot and damp. Beyond the fields, the broad valley was dotted here and there with houses and swimming pools.

But Jim didn't have time to take in the view, because the biographist was driving the car straight into something that looked a lot like a carnival.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Mr. Jim," she said sadly, "this is your wedding."

Before he and Laura crossed over, Jim had tried hard to love planning their wedding. He read wedding magazines, and pitched his ideas, even the ones he knew Laura's aunt

wouldn't go for. "Everybody has doves," he said at dinner one night. "What would really liven things up is a falconry demonstration. And let's have a medieval feast. People can eat with their hands and drink tankards of ale."

He knew how far he could push things before Laura got upset, and he pushed things just that far, then stopped. The wedding he was talking about wasn't a wedding at all, but a spectacle meant to make people scratch their heads. A ceremony that didn't mean what it meant, because what it meant scared the hell out of him.

But nothing he'd come up with compared to what was underway here on this field in the hills.

Three great pavilions were festooned—*festooned* was the word—with streamers, blinking bulbs of glass, and giant glittery suns and moons. Beneath the tents and spilling out over the lawn were hundreds of revelers, people in suits and dresses but also in masks and wigs and corduroy clown costumes. People on stilts, or riding alpacas, or driving miniature cars with plastic eyes on the hoods and big furry wheels. Babies, painted bright colors and decorated with ribbon, rode laughing on shoulders or careened over the grass.

There were ice sculptures: birds, mountains, helicopters, treasure chests, symbols that might have been religious or might have been signs for money or mathematical functions, all melting into clear pools. Music came from one of the pavilions. It sounded like a brass band, heavy on percussion, piped through a Theremin. The noise made the car rattle.

The biographist must have brought him in through a back way, because more people were arriving by the minute, in cars and on motorcycles, sliding down ladders out of buses. She touched his hand. "We had only so much to go on. But the wedding, it sounds very important. So we wanted to build it proper."

Jim got out of the car. People saw him and cheered. They held up sheets of paper: the fliers he'd plastered all over town. *Jim wants to marry this girl!* Laura's poorly drawn face, hundreds of times over.

He ran through the crowd, and the biographist followed him. She had her notebook out again. "Mr. Jim, Mr. Jim," she said. "What are you feeling right now?"

Jim was thinking too much to think about what he was feeling. He was thinking about these tents. One was full of food (enormous aspics jiggling between piles of olive loaf and stacks of Pow-Pow), one was for dancing (laser lights bounced off euphoniums and shining steel drums), so maybe the third tent was for the ceremony. And maybe he'd find Laura there.

Streamers and flash bulbs popped as he strode over the lawn, his too-big sneakers flopping. People touched his arms, back, and neck, then whirled away screaming, as though they'd won a prize. A corduroy clown on stilts leaned back and bellowed, "No telling what'll happen, folks!"

Jim found the tent for the ceremony, the smallest of the three, heaped with pillows for people to sit on. In the center, a kind of altar: overlapping rugs, candles flickering on five-foot-tall holders, and suspended from the ceiling a great green sea turtle made of wire and fabric.

As soon as Jim entered the tent, the music stopped and the crowds hushed. A few people followed him inside and sat on pillows, set babies in their laps. Others peered in from just outside. Others, he saw, watched live feeds projected onto screens out in the field. The biographist kept close, and kept taking notes.

Standing at the altar was a man in loose-fitting brown clothes. Jim recognized the long hair, long nose, and wide eyes from the pictures in the biography. Gray opened his arms and said, "Jim, my boy. There you are. Such a long time I've been waiting for you."

In the darkness one of the goons said, "Ready?" and the dozens of others responded together, "Ready," and Laura heard a sound like a thousand bubbles popping. Her captors were going liquid.

The car stopped, doors opened. She closed her eyes against the light. The chief goon took her arm, and she grabbed her hat as he pulled her outside. His hand felt cool on her arm. "This isn't how I wanted things to go," he said. "I wanted a happy ending."

Damp grass brushed against her ankles as he led her forward. She put her hat on and pulled the brim low, squinting to see. She'd expected some nameless spot in the desert, buzzards overhead, a shovel to dig with, but here was a lush green place, full of people and noise and music. It looked as though a party was underway.

"What is this?"

"Dunno," the chief goon said. "It's Gray's thing. He said to bring you, but I figured if it worked out between you and me . . ." He threw his head back and set his jaw, making a show of not showing how hurt he was.

"Gray?" she said. "Gray the writer?"

The goon didn't answer, but led her across the field toward something so bright she couldn't look at it directly. An enormous mushroom, growing dome-like over the grass. No, it was a tent, and there were three of them. Three, just like she'd told the chief goon a few days ago at the Set-It-Down Saloon.

The goon must have seen the hopefulness on her face, because he said sharply, "Come on," and dragged her more roughly along. A dozen pinstripe suits slithered through the grass at their feet.

. . .

Gray. The wedding guests loved him. Loved him as he strutted over the rugs, telling Jim and Laura's story. They already knew how it went, but they loved hearing Gray tell it: the bus rides and train rides, evenings camped out in strange bars and diners, those jellyfish men close behind. The biographist, in a trance, listened and wrote everything down while the others swooned and held their breath.

Jim thought maybe he loved Gray, too. There was something familiar about him, like an uncle he'd forgotten he had. Or like all the mad scientists in all the movies that had mad scientists in them. Gray hugged Jim, and Jim hugged him back. Gray said, "Are you ready?"

"For what?" Jim said.

Gray turned to the crowd, arms wide. "For what, he wants to know!"

The people laughed and bounced their babies, and the babies laughed or cried or stared at other babies.

"Ready for your own marriage," said Gray, "so long in the making!" To Jim he added quietly, "And for the premiere of my greatest work to date. Congratulations, my boy. We're so pleased that you could be part of it."

He told the rest of the story. Told how Jim lost his hand—*gasp!*—told how the goons captured Laura—*groan!*—told how the goons had her still. "My footmen," Gray called them. Did they report to this man, then? Had they hunted Laura and him on Gray's behalf?

"I knew you'd come one day," Gray said. "But you got here on your own, didn't you? You found the clues I left."

Gray looked at him and waited. Everyone looked at him and waited. It was his turn to say something. He said, "It was in your play. *Everything That Swims*."

"All the Swimming Things," said Gray.

"And we'd heard it before. A fortune teller told us how we'd get home. 'A window or a small box,' she said."

Gray clapped his hands together. "A window or a small box! That's the ticket!" And the guests laughed and cheered again.

Jim went close to Gray and grabbed his arm. He wanted to talk to him, not to everyone. "So you know what it means," he said.

Gray pulled his arm away. "Know what it means?" he bellowed. "No, I have no idea what it means!"

That got the guests going again, and while they laughed and applauded, Gray turned to Jim and spoke quietly and quickly. "A fortune teller said the same thing to me once. An old drunkard, lived down by the docks. He spread his cards over the top of a barrel and told me how to get home. 'A window or a small box,' he said. If it were a window *and* a small box, then maybe we'd have something. It might have to do with an arrangement of some kind: window, box, box, window. But which of the two is it? And which of the million windows and small boxes? For a while I thought it was a local turn of phrase, and I tried it out on everyone I met. Best I can tell, it doesn't mean anything at all. It's just something fortune tellers say to people like us."

"Like us?"

Gray frowned. The crowds were quiet now, trying to hear. It felt to Jim as though a thousand bodies leaned closer all at once.

"Don't you understand?" Gray said. "I'm not from around here, either. We're over the wrong rainbow, Jim. East of east of Eden. But it's ours, don't you see? I don't want to go home, and neither will you. They love us here. These people will gobble up anything, just anything. It pains me how easy it is. Watch."

Gray turned and raised his arms. "A wedding!" he said. "With the great turtle presiding over the ceremony!" The wire-and-fabric turtle suspended above the altar moved its head and legs, and the wedding guests roared.

Now Jim spotted a familiar face. The curly-haired boy from the theater walked up the aisle, carrying a plain hinged box in both hands. When he reached the altar, he stopped, knelt, and held the box up to Jim.

The guests hushed. The biographist stopped writing. She looked terrified.

"Ah!" said Gray. He clapped Jim on the back. "And now, my boy, it's time for your wedding present."

The chief goon dragged Laura through the crowds. People saw them coming and hopped out of the way; some danced and shrieked when they saw the goons in the grass. Laura glimpsed a screen in a field, and for a moment Jim's face appeared projected. She moved toward it, but the chief goon pulled her close.

"I know you'll only ever hurt me," he said to her as they walked. "And my wild, madcap heart can't bear it. I have to let you go, don't you see?"

But he didn't let her go, only pulled her more and more quickly toward the tents. The music had stopped, and the sun was going down. The chief goon said, "I wish I didn't feel like this. You've turned me into something I'm not, Laura. I never used to care. I never gave two bits about anyone!"

It's all right, she wanted to tell the goon, *everything is going to be all right*, but she didn't think that would help, and she didn't think it was true. Into the smallest of the three tents they went, and here was candlelight, and hundreds of people perched on pillows, and some kind of ceremony underway. A man in what looked like yoga clothes stood at the front of the crowd. And beside him was Jim, her own Jim.

She called his name, and the wedding guests turned and gazed at her. They shuffled to their feet and said, "Oooh!" as the chief goon led her down the aisle. Music struck up from the next tent over. It was a wedding. It was her wedding or something like it, and aside from the fact that Jim was here, it was all horribly, horribly wrong.

The other goons stood up, filling their shoes with themselves as they walked.

Jim, hearing Laura's voice, seeing her straw hat, pushed the box aside and went into the aisle. Gray took his arm and hissed, "Jim, you do want to open your present, don't you?"

What Jim wanted was to grab Laura and get the hell out of there. But the goons had her, and just seeing them made the stump of his arm tingle.

Gray pushed him toward the box. The old man was surprisingly strong. How long had he been stuck in this place? Long enough to get used to being the most interesting thing around, Kal-El under a yellow sun. But this superman was jealous and spiteful, and when Jim and Laura's wedding began to eclipse him, he must have decided to claim it for himself.

Jim watched that big goon walk his bride grimly down the aisle. She stumbled, but he kept her marching. Would do worse, Jim thought, if he didn't stick to his role. So he put his hand on the box. It was warm to the touch.

The biographist, writing again, shook her head and said, "Oh, Mr. Jim," as though the whole thing was already written. And maybe it was. He found the catch and slid it aside.

He thought he heard Laura say, "No," but the box sprang open.

A small, spindly doll lay curled inside. Its wooden limbs were hinged, like those of a posable artists' mannequin. It wore blue jeans and a floral print shirt, and its face, Jim thought, looked a lot like his.

The doll stretched its arms and legs. Then, clacking and moving fast, it climbed out of the box and onto Jim's arm. It crawled up past his elbow, moving like a bug. Jim tried to fling it away, but the doll held tight. He screamed.

Laura screamed, too, and the wedding guests went silent. A few fainted, and babies began to cry. The music screeched to a stop. The goons grinned, all of them except their leader, who just looked sad about the whole thing.

"Now," Gray said, and stood at the back of the altar, smiling a benevolent priestly smile. Jim thought to charge him, to knock him over, but the thing on his arm seemed to know his thought, and it clambered up to his throat and squeezed.

Gray gestured with his left hand. The puppet didn't stop squeezing until Jim took his place there at his side. Even then it kept a strong grip.

The biographist wiped tears from her eyes as she scribbled notes. Gray gestured with his other hand, and the goon brought Laura forward. She stepped onto the rugs, but turned and took the goon's arm in both hands. "Please," she said to him. "Please help us."

The goon sighed and looked at Jim. "Look," he said, "I'm a free agent, but he's under contract now. Nothing I can do."

He sounded genuinely sorry. The other goons only smirked. She recognized the one from the Set-It-Down, the one that Jim had punched and that she had knocked out with her knapsack. She went to stand in front of him and his smirk fell away. He looked at the chief goon, as though for instructions, but Laura didn't give them the chance to talk it over.

She tore the goon's shirt open and plunged her hand into his chest. The goon's eyes widened, and his breath went out of him. The sound was echoed by the hundreds of wedding guests in the tent and beyond. Laura felt around in the gooey mess of the goon's innards, cool jelly between her fingers. She found what she was looking for and pulled, but the goon, showing his teeth, wouldn't release her.

Her hand began to tingle, and her fingers went numb. She looked at the chief goon. He seemed to understand what she was up to. He nodded at the other goon, and, frowning, the goon let her go.

In her hand was Jim's missing hand, perfectly preserved and dripping goo. The guests gasped at the sight, and Jim felt weak to see it there. His hand! They'd done so much together. He wanted to talk to it, wanted to hold it in his arms, his own baby.

But Laura didn't give it to him. She tossed it straight into the box the doll had crawled from, still open in the actor's hands. It landed with a thump and the boy looked at it.

The thing on Jim's throat perked up. It knew that the hand had something to do with Jim, and it was on to the scent. It crawled back down his arm, head turning as though to sniff the air.

Jim brought it closer to the box. The doll leapt down to investigate, and the boy snapped the lid shut.

A cheer rose up from the wedding guests. They laughed and bounced and held babies bouncing over their heads. Outside, people shouted and honked horns.

Gray went to the chief goon and grabbed him by the lapels. The guests were loving it, though, and the goons saw their new part in the show. They circled their former employer. He shouted at them to desist, to make room. But the chief goon gave a signal, and Gray vanished in a whirl of pinstripes.

Jim in Laura's arms, Laura in Jim's arms, the curly-haired boy clapping and hooting in his biggest role yet, and the

food, and the dancing, and the biographist scribbling, scribbling, scribbling.

Later, there were fireworks, but Laura slept through them.

They got married. Not that night, but two weeks later, with just a few friends in attendance at the Set-It-Down Saloon. They were hoping for a cake, but no one knew what cake was, and when Laura explained the recipe to the chef, he laughed and said, "But alpacas don't lay eggs!"

Instead there were muffins, or something like muffins. The bartender's cousin brought them, and they were a hit, a sure thing. "Here's to a sure thing!" the bartender toasted.

They didn't dress up for the ceremony. He wore his flowered shirt, and she wore her straw hat, and the vows worked fine. For their honeymoon, they asked the goons to chase them for a while, and the goons obliged. They took buses and trains from town to town, and saw a lot of the country they hadn't seen before. They saw things that didn't make much sense to them, and some things that did. When they got back to the city that wasn't Los Angeles, Laura found one of the signs Jim had made glued to a telephone pole. They decided to stay.

For a while they lived in an apartment above the Set-It-Down Saloon, until one day the chief goon came by and offered them a gift: Gray's old house.

"Where is Gray?" Jim asked.

"Still in the car," the goon said. "He's churning out happy endings by the dozen."

"And when he runs out of them?"

The goon shrugged. "Maybe we'll go easy on him."

The house was at the edge of the field where Gray had tried to marry them. It was dark and low-slung, but Laura discovered a room in the back with a view of the broad valley below. "We'll take it," she said, though only Jim was there to hear her.

She began to write. She had some ideas for a play—for a few plays, it turned out. The plays did well, and one of the bigger productions made a real star of the boy with curly hair, who was free from his old contract. The biographist moved in, and when she was done with Jim's biography she started working on Laura's, and when Laura and Jim had children—a boy and a girl—she wrote their biographies, too.

Their children, Jim and Laura admitted to themselves, were a little strange to them. They went to school and were given babies to raise, and they were experts at pig and pepper, and they spoke to each other in a way that was different from how they spoke to their parents. But the children listened patiently to stories from the far-off land of upstate New York, like the one about the warrior who stalked the forests and was the last of his kind, and the one about the schoolteacher who saw a rider with no head, and the one about the man who fell asleep in the mountains and woke to find the world changed. Then they didn't want to hear those stories anymore, so Jim and Laura stopped telling them.

There were some hard times: Their son was often sick, and he did poorly at school. He ran away, got into some kind of trouble they didn't understand, trouble that plagued them for many years with documents and visits from officials. Later, the chief goon took him on as a kind of apprentice, and after a few years he went full-time, and they didn't see much of him after that.

Jim learned crafts. He learned to knit one-handed, and he learned how to brew Pow-Pow, and he learned spelunking, which wasn't a craft, exactly, but he took Laura with him into the caves. It was a popular thing to do here, and they made friends with fellow spelunkers, and got spelunking newsletters in the mail, and Laura wrote a play about spelunking that proved to be her biggest success.

She brought flowers from the garden sometimes, and presented them to him, and he put them in vases.

They got old, they got used to things, but sometimes they felt as lost as they had felt at that roadside diner all those years ago, and a panic would overcome them. Then he would say to her, "If only we could find a window or a small box," and Laura would laugh and they'd feel a little better.

They were sitting out back late one afternoon, watching the sun set over the mountains, and while they were talking they figured it out—*a window or a small box!*—of course, the answer was so obvious, how hadn't they thought of it before? But they didn't want to go back now, it was too late for that, and they stayed where they were.

"But where are we?" he asked, and she took his hand in both of hers and said, "Here. We're right here."