BARN 8

A nest. Built of 14-gauge galvanized wire mesh, twenty-five thousand water nipples, a moss of dander and feed. Six miles of feed trough runs down rows, up columns. Staggered tiers rise ten feet high into the shape of the letter A, the universal symbol for mountain. Wooden rafters, plywood walkways. Darkness. Sudden light. Three hundred thousand prehistoric eyes blinking. The entire apparatus ticking and whirring and clanking like a doomsday machine. Above it the purr, coo, and song of a hundred and fifty thousand birds at dawn.

1

The moment Janey stepped off the bus she suspected her error.

Until then (through the long hours of the ride, pulling through town after town, the day dimming, the door sighing open and shut, the darkening, then the darkness, her head lobbing back and forth in a half sleep, stepping down to change buses in Chicago, waiting on the cement with her duffel, pulling out again into the dark, then the sunrise, the plaid day flipping by, her reflection laid against the window over the highway signs and strip malls) she’d felt she was at the start of a great journey. She’d peeled off from her former self, left the old Janey behind.

She could almost see the old Janey ghosting along her usual track, back in the city, headed to school. They were like conjoined twins torn apart: one would live, the other would die, and the doctors weren’t sure which was which, so the world watched, waited. She trembled with anticipation (the states widening, the land flattening, the fields turning into fields, not tangles of brush and trees, the God signs whipping by along the roadside). She, the new Janey, had stepped out of the line of her classmates and walked away, and who knew what would happen now. She could almost glance back across the country and see the line move forward without her, the old Janey inch up, follow those in front of her like a cow.

But now, a day and a half later, she got off the bus, climbed down on gummy legs, and the station instilled her first doubt. The clean plastic seats, the antiseptic smell, the collection of very badly dressed people, their suitcases wrapped in cellophane and piled on the floor like the components of a giant packed lunch.

Mostly, her father: not there. She didn’t know what her father looked like, but no man stood by the door with the expectancy and nervousness fitted to the occasion. No one shifted from foot to foot, turned a cap in his hands, glanced up at each person coming in from the bus. Or, a different version: no one waited in the middle of the room with a proprietary shine, arms folded across his chest, a batch of supermarket flowers wrapped in plastic in one hand, pointing toward the floor. No one around was the least bit interested in Janey’s great journey. No one was having a great journey themselves.

She hadn’t counted on him being at the station. He hadn’t said he would be. He had said nothing at all, since he hadn’t answered when she texted (the stupidity of a text in this circumstance) or called (“Uh, hi, this is Janey, your . . . daughter”). Janey lowered her duffel bag to the gleaming floor and checked her phone (another message from her mother, which she ignored). But she *had* counted on him being there.

Back at the other end of the long ribbon of the bus ride, on the other side of the country, the old Janey would be walking home from the train right now, school out at four, debate till six, a canopy of trees listing overhead. Janey could almost see her passing brownstones, swinging her backpack, tripping up the steps to the apartment, calling out, “Ma, you home?”

No, wait. The old Janey was an hour ahead of this one. She’d be eating dinner, settled into a chair, squatting with one foot on the seat, her fork in the air in a gesture of “holding forth,” her mother leaning against the stove, laughing. Meanwhile, the new Janey, the one who now paused in front of a line of concession machines, had lost her appetite, though she hadn’t eaten much on the slow, uncomfortable bus (she now conceded the discomfort, but while in transit she had posted photos of barns, hay, houses, population signs, along with cartoon faces expressing glee, humor, surprise, revelation, and other emotions she did or did not feel), concession machines of flat sandwiches locked in plastic compartments, cigarettes released by a coil. Jesus. She lifted her duffel and walked out into the cool spring evening.

Janey was fifteen years and five days old and she had found out five days earlier just where the hell her father had been all these years. Her mother had always plowed her with the old sperm bank story, and Janey had believed her, though really how could she have believed such horseshit? By the time Janey was old enough to count she should have figured out she hadn’t come out of a vial. What woman gives up and goes baster at eighteen, the pinnacle year of love and abortion? But Janey had believed her and longed for a father all her life. Then on Janey’s fifteenth birthday her mother had sat her down and said that Janey was old enough to know: her father was alive and well and back where Janey’s mother had left him when she’d run away pregnant to New York to give her coming daughter a better life, left him back in southern Iowa, a gray land of truck stops, crowded prisons, and mono­crop farming. Janey was lucky to have never laid eyes on the place. Her mother explained that Janey must not now develop debilitating parental issues that could bleed into the rest of her life. She was old enough to make a mature decision about meeting him and seeing the town of her conception. Her mother would take Janey herself when school let out.

In other words her mother (*the* *bitch!*) had *lied*.

School wasn’t out for a month and no one should keep a daughter that long from her father. Let alone fifteen years and counting.

Janey walked through the town, down a Main Street of imitation antique lampposts and shut shops, though it was only seven o’clock. She shouldered her duffel like a bandit, followed her phone’s glowing map. She found the address beyond the houses and platters of lawn, on one of two identical apartment buildings made of sad tan bricks. No buzzer, she just walked up the stairs to 209 and knocked. “Heyo,” she called. She put on her clowning-­around voice to cover the quaver. “Anybody got a beer in there?” She was not the sort of person to make stupid remarks but there you go. She did a quick thing with her hair.

The old Janey (the ribbon of road connecting them like a string and two cans, or like a game of telephone, the messages between them garbling, on the verge of losing meaning, dissolving) would be back in Brooklyn right now saying it wasn’t her turn to do the dishes. The old Janey’s mother would be at the computer saying it was always her turn to do the dishes. The new Janey’s mother was calling. Janey could hear the vibration in her bag. She saw the doorknob to 209 turning. The lock clacked, and in the second between that clack and when her father was revealed, the new Janey felt a surge of hope and longing, so familiar and compressed, as if from the innermost parts of her being, an old-­Janey ache.

She was startled to see a frightened grimace. She quickly corrected it into a smile.

“Surprise!” she said, lifted her arms. “It’s a girl.”

He was Fred Flintstone white, had the arms and stance of a bully.

She heard him (her father?) speak: “You’re early.”

She mock-­pouted. “Was I supposed to wait till I was thirty?”

The new Janey, grinning with the bravado of the old Janey (the old Janey, who’d had the courage to send the new Janey off, pack her bag while her mother was at work, wave goodbye from the apartment window), stepped into the apartment.

Janey sat at one end of a sofa. Her father sat at the other. She felt comically female, even in her tomboy garb, like an invasion of femininity bleeding into this dead-­fast male apartment. They were having a conversation that went like this:

Him: not meeting her eyes] I thought your bus got in at eight.

Her: t’s fine. I like to walk.

Him:  was going to come get you.

Her: nodding manically and looking around] It’s cool. So this is where you live?

Him: t’s a temporary situation, a stopgap.

Her: eah? Where are you going?

Him: his face going into his phone] Hang on. We need to call your mother.

Her: e have a sofa kind of like this. So what do you do?

Him: h, I’m in ag.

Her: having no idea what that is, resuming the nod] Cool.

[Silence. Nodding continues.]

Even his TV looked old-­fashioned to her. She’d never had a TV. All her screens had been computers of various sizes and shapes. She felt like she’d slipped through time to find her father and he’d turned out to be from a Smithsonian diorama, so obsolete as to be almost futuristic. And worse, he looked like he was *dying* to get away, shut out whatever was happening in the vicinity. He’d had about as much audience as he could handle in a day. This wasn’t going like it was supposed to.

Him: ou said you wanted a beer?

Her: ’m fifteen.

Him: ight. I’ll call your mother. [pressing button] It’s ringing. [raising finger] Hey, she’s here . . . yeah . . . yeah . . . [glance up at Janey] Uh, I don’t think so . . . okay . . . [holding phone out] She wants to talk to you.

The last thing Janey had said to her mother in her screaming tantrum after her mother delivered the news that she *knew* who her father was, and after Janey had demanded to know how her mother could have *lied* all these years, how she could have kept her away from the man who never even got the *chance* to be her father, how who on earth would *do* such a thing unless they were a *horrible* person, after all that, she screamed, “I’m never speaking to you *again!*” (little did she know), and the next morning she’d said into her phone, “How do I get to Iowa from here cheap?”

Now, sitting on her father’s (?) sofa, she crossed her arms and looked defiant. She didn’t want her mother to even *hear her voice*.

Him: returning the phone to his ear] Uh, I’ll have her call you back.

He put down the phone. “Your mother says you need to eat.” He rocked off the sofa and padded into the kitchen.

Not to mention, *that’s* why her sperm donor was white—­because her mother had had *sex* with him, not because she selected *white* on a form. Janey’s grandfather had been from Mexico, and Janey and her mother shared his name. Flores. Why didn’t you pick Latino? she’d always nagged. This really explained so much.

“You want a pop?” he called from the kitchen. “She always told me you’d come find me someday. If you’d waited a bit longer, I would have been better situated.”

“No,” she fluttered back, about to launch into a show of appreciation for . . . for . . . “No, this is nice. This is . . .” She looked around for some household object to compliment. She slowed. “Wait, what?” she said. “When?”

He was back in the room with a generic orange can. “When what?”

“When did she always tell you?”

“Tell me? Yesterday.”

Her head began to buzz. “No, when did she tell you I *existed*?”

He looked confused. “She always told me you existed. Since you existed.”

Janey felt a sudden sickening. It occurred to her for the first time: her mother hadn’t precisely said he hadn’t known. The buzz in her head grew louder. She couldn’t breathe. She found she was needing her full mental capacity to keep from crying. She managed, “And you didn’t want to come find *me* someday?”

He cleared his throat. “Well, I . . .”

A unit of air somewhere in there clicked on.

That’s when she saw it in a flash, the past, and a premonition of the future, the gravity of her error, her series of errors, her miscalculations, that: (1) He didn’t want her here. (2) He’d been dreading all these years the day she’d come find him. (3) He was scared of her, his daughter, was scared of all things female. He was one of *those*, her father. (4) This apartment was way worse than her apartment, and this town was way worse than her city. (5) She wasn’t going to know how to love, or like, or even how to know this stranger, (6) who was her father. (7) She was so hurt, angry, (8) (and yes, ashamed), (9) she wasn’t going to know how to go home.

How long they were silent, she didn’t know. Three minutes? Twenty seconds? She had her head in her hands.

He placed the soda on the coffee table, sat down carefully at the other end of the sofa. “So, kid,” he said at last, “how long are you staying?”

She raised her head. She felt in that moment (how long was she *staying*? so transparent and cowardly) the value of the two splintered lives, the old Janey who’d stayed behind and the new Janey who’d left, the worth of them switching sides, whooshing by each other, the life she’d catapulted herself into dropping in worth, down, down, plummeting, and the worth of her old life lifting, rising. She felt the vinyl under her (her mother did not and never would own an ugly-­ass couch like this), she could smell his old clothes, the cockroaches in the walls, and it was right then (she felt it, like a lock clacking shut) that the deadening began (though it took years), because she didn’t pick up her duffel and march back to the station that night, like she knew she should. She stayed right where she was because she was going to make this man know her, or at least pay for not knowing her.

“Great news, *Dad*,” she said. She kicked the duffel at her feet. “Forever!” (Little did she know.)

His expression did not change. He may have flinched a little. He scooched forward, his hand coming up between them—­to hug? to smack? to point the way to the door? She leaned in. She was ready for anything. He had something in his hand. Rectangular.

Fate is not determined by one mistake, though they train you to think so, starting with the Bible—­one wrong move and you’re stuck outside in the rain while the ark floats away without you, or you’re wandering the desert for decades. (Janey had gone to a Catholic girls’ school until she turned ten and finally triumphed over her mother and went charter.) In fact we have many, many chances to fuck up. And if we figure out how to fix what we fucked, we will fuck it up again.

“Well, that’s fine,” her father said, his face twitching (was that a smile or a frown? It was the kind of face you really couldn’t tell). “Let’s just check the scores.” He pointed the remote and turned on the TV.

No, it was not her only mistake, but it was certainly her greatest, as others have great loves, great ideas, or great tragedies that befall them. All else Janey could do would pale beside this error. She could kill a man. She could drown herself in a bucket. She could fail to obstruct a politician who would go on to torture millions. Whatever she did going forward would trace back to this, the nadir, the alpha.

She settled back on the sofa, the “scores” flickering across her face. She thought of the old Janey, her other self, the original, who hadn’t left, five states away, shimmering in her brownstone in Brooklyn. She could almost see her. That Janey was curled in front of her laptop, working on her Malcolm X paper, and her mother was passing her a bowl of ice cream, because it was that hour. The hour of ice cream.

She lived there with her father for two months and hated every minute of it, but she was too proud to call her mother and say she wanted to go home. She knew they were talking, her mother and “father,” trying to figure out the best means to make Janey go back quietly—­knew they talked because her mother left her long messages saying they’d talked, and did Janey have any idea how she’d scared her mother, disappearing like that? Did Janey know how lucky she was that she’d made it there without getting kidnapped or crushed under a truck wheel or on the wrong bus to Alaska?

Janey and her father lived like strangers in that apartment, keeping their stuff in bags and eating fast food with ketchup packets in the kitchen. She did try to “connect” a few times. Pulled out her mini–chess set (she was in the club at school), set it up, and asked him if he wanted a game. She instituted an apartment-­wide recycling program, plastic and paper in one bag, trash in the other, though she caught him throwing it all into the same dumpster.

But he never asked her to leave. Soon she was reading the *TV Guide* (which arrived in *paper* each week) and watching whatever went up on the screen. He worked as a something something for the USDA at a poultry processing plant, which meant he spent his days *inspecting dead bodies*. She slept until noon in the room he “set up” for her—­blow-­up mattress on the floor—­and then she prowled the apartment until he came home. She went through the closets, the drawers, the sticky cupboards, looking for what? Evidence. Not only of his failure as a father but as a person, of which there was plenty: his enormous saggy shirts, his rusty nail clippers, his bent shoes, expired cans of soup, not a book in the place, not a photo on the wall. Each day at 4:50 p.m. he turned up at the apartment, stinking of offal and carrying a bag from the same cheap IHOP restaurant filled with the same items off the menu for them both. He kept plastic gallon milk containers full of water in the refrigerator and drank from one while he ate.

Her mother left daily messages. Should Janey be skipping school like this? Did Janey know her Malcolm X paper was due? Did Janey recall the regional debate was next week, after all her hard work and her debate coach was . . . Well, she’d missed the end of school, was she proud of herself?

She watched him stooped over the sink or lifting plastic plates out of cupboards with shaky fingers. She wondered what her mother had seen in this guy. And then she stopped wondering because obviously her mother had seen nothing and that’s why she left and why Janey had been kept away from him all these years.

The old Janey had, if memory serves, rarely fought with an adult, but the new Janey had a mouth on her and said what she could to gall her father, or hurt him, or get any word out of him at all. The new Janey and the truant father had some spectacu­lar fights. Once she barricaded the door. Once she threw his clothes out the window and onto the parking lot where they looked like globs of color on the hot blacktop until he eventually went down and gathered them, stabbing them up with a long cooking fork and dropping them into a bag like the convicted doing their service.

Oh why had she left home? Surely it was excusable—­a girl wants to meet her father, right? People quest. People roam.

She could see her other self, her imaginary twin, the old Janey, skipping down the stairs to the street, high-­fiving the janitor on the way (this was an elaborated detail, since she’d rarely spoken to the janitor, but her coastal self was beginning to seem cooler and kinder than the actual Janey had ever been).

Her mother’s messages became longer. She talked about growing up in that small Iowan town, how her own father had come to the US as a teen, worked ag, become a citizen, and embarked on a (mostly failed) mission to unionize farm­workers in different parts of the country. He’d leave for months, return for a few weeks, and again leave, until one day he didn’t come back. Her mother worked ag admin, spoke English, raised her daughter to never love a wandering man. But Janey’s mother turned out to be the wanderer, a woman with her mother’s tongue, her father’s heart and name. Four months pregnant, nearly nineteen, she’d packed her suitcase and trained it alone to New York. She’d buy Janey a plane ticket whenever Janey was ready. She’d fly out herself and pick her up. She wasn’t going to force her, didn’t want to push her, but she loved Janey and missed her and was sorry . . .

It was July now and the mosquitoes had gotten so bad, the air so moist, Janey barely left the apartment. The claustrophobia was making her and her father yet crazier. She was so lonely, she thought she could hear her mother calling to her. Was it her fault she’d slept with this clod? her mother seemed to be saying. At least she’d gotten Janey in the bargain.

One night, her father hadn’t said a word in hours and Janey thought she’d explode. She came out of the kitchen, cupped her hands, yelled, “Anybody home?”

He glanced up, then back at the TV.

She was inexplicably enraged. She grabbed his phone off the table, first as a gesture of invasion of privacy, then, when she real­ized she didn’t know his password, as a threat. She ran over to the sink, turned on the water, and held his phone an inch from the stream. “Give that back,” he roared. He jumped up and, in a rare fit of retaliation, went for her phone on the coffee table, dropped it to the floor, his foot raised above it. They paused, horrified. She dunked. He stomped.

He had no landline, so neither one had a phone anymore.

He turned off the TV that night and they slinked phoneless through the quiet rooms, more alone together than ever. The sound of cicadas came in through the panes under the long breath out of the air conditioner. Janey sat on the sofa, arms wrapped around her legs. He went into his bedroom and shut the door.

The next morning she was still waiting for him on the sofa when he came out. She followed him into the kitchen, taunting, “You can’t believe I’m still here, can you? You have no idea how to run me off. Not as easy as running out, right?”

“I wish I knew how to run you off!” he said finally, his arms raised around his head in protection. “I’ve got a wild animal loose in my apartment. Why don’t you just go home?”

She stopped. Through it all, he’d never asked her to leave. That one sentence left unuttered she’d thought proof of something, however thin, but here it was at last. Go. I never wanted you.

“Guess what!” she screamed back. “You’ll never run me off!” (Little did she know.) She slammed out the door.

She sprinted at first, then slowed. She wanted her mother so badly she could almost touch her. She could see her mother’s retreating figure.

Her mother! Without a phone she hadn’t heard her voice since yesterday. How Janey must have hurt her by leaving, by not returning her calls, by being the worst daughter one could have given birth and devoted one’s life to. Her mother had been right to leave this town, Janey growing inside her, brave to set off across the country the opposite way Janey had come. She’d been a child, not much older than Janey then, and she’d left out of love, for Janey, while Janey had left out of rage, at her mother.

Janey ran to the Shop Stop and called her mother from the last pay phone on the planet. (Of course it would be here in this crap town.) She got change for a few crinkled bills. (How had it come to this? She didn’t even have a phone anymore? And she’d gone through all her savings?) Her mother didn’t pick up and Janey left a voice mail. “Hey, it’s me.” She leveled her voice, steadied it, didn’t want to sound *too* desperate, some sliver of pride still not sloughed off. “Call me as soon as you get this.” She left the number of the pay phone.

She hung up and sat on a cement parking divider a few feet from the phone and waited in the summer sun. She’d seen all she wanted. She’d made her point a few times over. She was done. She wanted to go home. Her mother would buy her a plane ticket, leaving in a few hours, and Janey wouldn’t even stop by the apartment for her bag. She’d go home without a stick that she’d come with but the clothes on her body. She’d walk, if she had to, to the airport, take off, fly over the land, and she’d never see that asshole, her father, again. She waited. The phone rang. It hadn’t been twenty minutes. She lunged for it.

“Janey?” a woman who wasn’t her mother said.

“Judy?” said Janey. Judy, her mother’s friend, the neighbor. “Judy, where’s my mom?”

“Janey, thank God. We’ve been trying to reach you and your father all morning. We were about to call the police.”

“Our phones broke.”

“Both of them?”

“I . . .”

“Janey, listen. There’s been an accident. Where are you?”

“An accident?” said Janey.

Her mother had died instantly. No one in the other vehicle was hurt.

So Janey flew home that day after all, though not in the way she had expected, her father driving her to the airport, murmuring apologies she couldn’t hear through the roar, could only see those detested lips move in her peripheral vision. Her father, seeing her through security, handing her some twenties for a cab on the other end, cash that she dropped into the trash in the women’s room, not wanting anything from that man. She sat through the wake, the funeral. People placed plates of food in front of her and removed them. People passed into her sight, touched her shoulders, looked earnestly into her eyes and moved their mouths. She was still frozen, had not even begun to thaw when, two weeks later, child protective services turned her around and shipped her right back—­to her father. He was her father, after all, and he said he’d take her. She’d been living with him at the time of the accident (that turned out to be the damning fact: *she’d been living with him*) and she agreed to go, had to, because there was no one else, no other family. Her mother’s will had named Janey’s grandmother, who was now in a nursing home upstate and Janey saw her twice a year for a day. Other than that there were a few cousins in Mexico whom Janey had never met, and why hadn’t her mother ever gone to Mexico and gotten to know them? So she went back, numb and barely speaking. Neither she nor her father seemed to know what to do about school, so she didn’t go. She wasn’t enrolling in the hick high with the shiny-­faced locals unless someone made her. Then a social worker came by and made her. Her father enrolled her as a junior in the local high school.

The first couple of years Janey was so put down by grief and guilt and her sense of no options that she couldn’t come out of her numb state without exploding. Her object was to stay as absent as pos­sible, which was plainly like her father. But what else was she supposed to do?

It seemed a bit harsh that for the rest of her life she’d have to pay for one childish mistake she made at age fifteen, the sort of mistake anyone could have made. Surely if she’d been in New York no one would have made her go live with a father she’d never met, who’d never contacted her, never paid support. Surely they would have pawned her off on a friend of her mother’s. Other people do stupid things at fifteen and it’s no big deal. They have to retake a class, or work winter break to pay for what they broke or stole or crashed, or they have to stay in every weekend for a month, or go to rehab. But her mistake was catastrophic.

It was this understanding, of her mistake, that led her to develop the game, or what was mostly a game. She’d think about the old Janey, the original, and the life with her mother she would be leading—­the one where she hadn’t left and therefore her mother hadn’t been in the car that day (theoretically) and therefore was still alive, and everything had stayed the same between them and around them. What would the old Janey, the original, the *real* one, be doing right now?

She wondered this at her new high school, where her teachers half­heartedly instructed from halfhearted textbooks, though the old Janey had learned those equations two years before and the new Janey really didn’t give a shit about school anymore. The new Janey had a long list of things she no longer gave a shit about: debate team, chess club, clubs of any kind, students of any kind, sports and all its subcategories, college, the future in general. The teachers left her alone after the first month, the students after the second. News of her bad luck spread and the whole school parted before her. Death-­marked, city-­stamped, only a quarter Latina, but not middle-­American white either. She might have found a place for herself had she made an effort, but she did not. She walked the hallways in a bubble, sank into the back row. She dispensed with her virginity early and unceremoniously (four months into sixteen with a grocery clerk). Meanwhile, the old Janey, the original, was back at her original high, surrounded by chums—­chums who at first wrote to the new Janey every day, but soon less, as Janey wrote less, and within a year stopped al­together since neither side was sure what to say.

She wondered what the old Janey would be doing her senior year. The new Janey (“new and improved” was her little joke) had only half a senior year. She finished early, took the exams in December with the morons who had failed the year before, got out of there fast, and wound up with a job at a massive shipping and trucking facility (at least it wasn’t ag). She made the same repetitive movements nine hours a day, four days a week, while all over the country people clicked buttons and summoned to their doors pink backpacks, noise reduction headphones, discount T-­shirts, sets of wooden spoons, and it was Janey’s job to ensure that trucks took off across the land, drove through the night, to deliver these products with the priority citizens deserved. The new Janey contemplated the old Janey, who would be applying to colleges with her friends, her mother taking her on walking tours across quads and into gothic buildings, to sample classes at her top “choices” (that word was infected now, had pulled a nasty prank on her) and her “safeties” (that word, *safety*, too).

She wondered it when she reached the legal age to vote. At that age her mother had left this town with Janey inside her, to find a richer life for them both, but Janey was now back, un­enriched, in possession of as much as her mother had had a lifetime before— a high school diploma and a fake ID—­but not enough inspiration to follow her mother’s ghost.

Meanwhile, the old Janey boarded a plane (the new Janey tracked the old in her mind, saw her walking down the JFK corridor), headed for a pre­college summer in . . . Morocco! where she learned French and (finally) Spanish (after all her mother’s urging), learned two languages in four months, plus a few decorative phrases of Arabic, wandered the architecture of a foreign land, fell in love for the first time, and so much more. The new Janey contemplated the old’s smarts and passion.

The new Janey, who was now “this Janey,” or just “Janey,” or “same great taste” (her joke when she went home with men and the occasional woman she met online), still lived with her father. When she wasn’t assisting the egress of urgent items for the public, she sat on the same sofa she’d sat on that first night, sat and watched football with her father because, well, who knows why. He passed her buckets of fried meat, coleslaw as a “healthy side” for his daughter, and enormous soggy containers of diet soda. This, while the original Janey, what should have been the real one, finished her first year of university with a perfect GPA, had an apartment in the cooler borough with her three best friends, and, oh, the fun they had. At night the old Janey rambled over bridges and down sidewalks and through the streets. During the day she pursued her dreams, which were sharp, not blurry, though the new Janey couldn’t quite see them. The old Janey, sophisticated yet romantic, joined the communal spirit of the city’s emergencies—­the hurricanes, the blackouts, whatever wars that managed to touch the city’s skirts with its black fingers, whatever causes the New Yorkers took over the streets over. She still saw her mother every week. They met at art openings, ate at sidewalk cafés under the awnings in the spring, her mother dispensing wisdom, Janey half pretending not to listen, but taking in every word.

Janey was most interested in when the two Janeys might intersect. It was a game she played. For example, what if the old Janey and the new would have said the same word at the same time? What if both Janeys said, or would have said, the word *hey* at the same moment, 2:04 p.m. CST / 3:04 p.m. EST? Or what if they said in harmony the same name? She said the names of the men she met—­“Bill,” “Shorty,” “Bus”—­said them a time or two extra, though she doubted the original Janey would have ever met, much less *slept* *with* a man named Bus. A woman, “Vicky,” with long black hair. She whispered the woman’s name into her hair. “Vicky, Vicky, Vicky,” thereby giving the original Janey three extra chances to connect.

She thought it each evening when her supervisor, Manny, emptied his coffee at the sink. “’Night, Manny,” Janey said. She sang the name aloud a few more times under her breath as Manny waved and left, “Manny, Manny, Manny,” as if calling to the other Janey, urging her to seek out someone by that name on her crowded far-­off island and thereby fasten a link between them.

“Did you need something?” Manny said, ducking back in.

It was the opposite of sci-­fi. She wasn’t interested in those alternate worlds where you do one thing different and the lives forever splinter off onto distant paths. Janey had done that already and was suffering the consequences. She was interested in when you do one thing different and the lives remain exactly the same.

It must happen constantly. Think of all the repetitive actions you would perform anyplace you were. All the craps you’d be taking anywhere in the world. All the shoes you’d put on and take off. All the idiots you’d say hello to. All the lies you’d make up to make people like you. All the hallways you’d walk down, all the times you’d write your name. Think of the inanities you say all day long like a song on repeat. Sentences uttered could flicker in and out, meeting and diverging and meeting again. Considered in this way, most lives are nearly identical.

She was wondering about this one night on her father’s sofa, a talk show running along on the TV, her laptop open to JobLizard. Manny had quit or transferred or dropped dead or moved several towns away from her when, after six consecutive Tuesdays in a motel off exit 67, he’d offered to leave his wife and Janey had laughed. By winter she’d been fired “with cause” for insubordination by his replacement. She scrolled through the jobs site, down and down, all the inconceivably shitty work she could do, an untrained, uneducated woman, twenty years old, who had once been in chess club, on the debate team, who had . . .

There was a third life, of course, which she occasionally considered and which came to mind now: the one where Janey would be dead. In that life she had not gone off on that thirty-­hour bus ride. She’d never met her father. He’d remained a mystery in her heart. (Would that have been so bad? she wondered, looking over at him, the slug. He could be counted on to be there with hamburgers and sodas, if nothing else.) She’d instead gotten into the car with her mother that day and they had been killed together on the highway going over the bridge. (Where had her mother been going? Janey had thought about that so many times and never been able to fathom. Only Ikea lay on that vast stretch of land.) If she’d died that day with her mother, the world would be silent of both Janeys. (Would that have been so bad?)

She reached the bottom of hundreds of job ads. Her father passed her a box of fries. He tossed a piece of paper onto her keyboard, folded in three, a brochure. “I grabbed this,” he said. “There was a pile in the break room.”

She picked it up. A photo of smiling ugly midwestern white people in uniforms on the front. “What’s this?”

“It’s nothing. I grabbed it for you.”

“Well, don’t grab things for me.” She tucked it between the sofa cushions.

“Your mother would have wanted to see you make something of yourself.”

“She would have wanted me to be,” Janey tugged the brochure back out, read off the front, “a layer hen consumer auditor? What the fuck is that even?”

Sometimes, as she did now, Janey imagined the dead Janey, the one who had died “tragically” with her mother in the crash. She imagined the dead Janey hovering above, looking down on both Janeys: Janey not dead in New York, Janey not dead in Iowa. The dead Janey was high overhead, an over-­Janey as it were, so that now, while the new Janey in Iowa was saying “consumer auditor,” words the old Janey would have little occasion to say, the over-­Janey could see into the new Janey’s mind, could see that her thoughts had tugged to a stop five seconds before, when her father said the word *mother*. The over-­Janey could see the word *mother* pressed across Janey’s mind as if ironed down there. And perhaps the over-­Janey could see the old Janey back in New York and, just maybe, she also had the word *mother* in her mind at this moment because, say, her (their) mother had just arrived home breathless and was shaking off her raincoat, launching into a tale, and the old Janey was looking up, grinning. The new Janey wondered fleetingly about the overlap of thoughts and whether that counted, whether the over-­Janey could observe a link between them as tenuous as this, at once as strong and frail as a spiderweb, the most elemental thought, surely the infant’s first thought before she could even put a word to it: *mother*.

“It’s steady work,” her father was saying. “They do college reimbursement. You get an education.”

“No way am I going to do what you do.”

“It’s not what I do. You improve yourself.”

“I’m improved enough and fuck you.”

But who knew if thoughts counted? Thoughts, which hurry through at the speed of light—­are thoughts like light?—­and are accompanied by so much else. Thoughts are like nets on an ocean floor, dragging along with them sand and sadness and shells and shit. She looked at the brochure. “I don’t have any of these qualifications.”

“You can get around the qualifications. I know the lady.”

“You know what lady? You don’t know any ladies.”

“She said she’d give you a job.”

“A lady. This your new girlfriend?”

“Don’t be cute.” He cleared his throat. “She knew your mother.”

The afternoon not making it through the blinds, the TV dinging a win or mock-­win, smiling faces on the screen, hands raised in joy or in imitation of it, the air around Janey full of oxygen and ions, ozone, dust.

“Your mother babysat her when they were kids.”

On this day Janey could feel the significance of each of her words twinkle through her. She could feel the over-­Janey watching.

“You have to do the training course. It’s just four days.”

She was certain it was happening, that a word was about to unite the two Janeys, old and new. Both were opening their mouths to answer a question. But what was the old Janey being asked, her mother adjusting her raincoat on the chair, drops of water falling to the tile? Should they step out for rainy sundaes? Should they go this weekend to the zoo?

“Do you want me to call her?” her father said.

Even if they said the same word, Janey knew, it would have a different meaning—­the context was different, the two Janeys were different—­but the fact of a crossover could not be denied, the connection.

Well, the over-­Janey wasn’t going to give either of the Janeys the satisfaction. She wasn’t going to let the new Janey say the word, wasn’t going to allow the link to fasten. She was going to keep it from them both, hold it back in her tight little fist (a.k.a. heart). But the old Janey—­the original, the best, the one who might have lived and gone on to greatness, or at least happiness, or at least somethingness, had she not made the one ter­rible error—­was stronger than any of them. The rest of the Janeys were mere shadows fading in light. If anyone could do it, pull the Janeys together, it was she. The old Janey would say it and if the new Janey could hear her, she’d say it with her. The old Janey was opening her mouth. Flight, consciousness, time: so much was possible that should have been impossible. Janey strained to hear. Would she say no? Would she say yes?

Cleveland had known her as Olivia. She’d been seven when Olivia Flores first turned up on a bright Saturday night while Cleveland was filling and unfilling a universe of buttons—­galaxy M82, Andromeda, Halley’s Comet in glitter—­on the floor. Her mother had bent over the arrangement, “Well, what have we here?” but teenage Olivia, in a paisley dress and red lipstick, barely glanced down. “Jupiter has sixty-­seven moons, not the dozen or so you have there. And did you know that outer space is completely silent? There’s no atmosphere for sound to travel through.” Cleveland already disliked most people, so when she dropped a bottle-­cap black hole and sat up, her mother sighed with relief.

Olivia came that Saturday and then on a string of Saturdays and other days in an ill-­advised attempt to save Cleveland’s parents’ marriage (the plan worked, but some people shouldn’t stay together). Cleveland liked collecting alarm clock parts and jumping on her mini­trampoline, but Olivia got her to go trick-­or-­treating, which she had refused to do since she was four. Olivia insisted they form their own tambourine and xylophone band, despite Cleveland’s flat lack of talent. Olivia taught her Spanish verbs, the table of elements, the waltz (there still exists a video of Cleveland bravely careening around the sunroom), the sad spotted history of labor rights in this country, and the proper way to assemble a taco. Olivia was sophisticated, brilliant, beautiful, ambitious. Beside Cleveland’s parents, who looked like dumplings, she was everything Cleveland thought a person should be. She sat for five years, a year longer than Cleveland’s mother felt necessary (but what was the harm in paying someone to be her daughter’s friend?), then she vanished and that was that.

Cleveland received a postcard of buildings, another of a statue, nothing else. She missed her sitter for years and years, heard rumors of her life far away (daughter, bright city), summoned her in her mind in times of need, mourned when she heard of her death. In sum, never saw her again.

On the day Cleveland took the hen, a numb Iowa afternoon in February, she had not seen Olivia in twenty-­one years, which isn’t as long as you’d think. She still contemplated universes filling and unfilling, but the universes were smaller now, empty of comets and planets, full of animals and excrement and equipment, in other words, *barns*. Not the barns of once upon a time, retro or relic, that red-­planked national emblem—­hayloft, chicken coop, horse stall, pitchfork—­but the barns of now, the powerful machines, the massive robot super­computers, the human-­made megafauna. And on the day she took the hen, she stood before one of them: 480 feet long, nearly a football field and a half, the size of the four largest dinosaurs ever to walk the planet lined up end to end (she loved that image), this single structure filling and unfilling with forty million eggs a year—­unremarkable for this type of barn, but the highest number of eggs per hen in the history of the earth.

The wind yammering over the fields. The cold sun battling it out behind the gray. Cleveland had been recently promoted to the head of Iowa layer hen farm audits. The audit: certifying best practices for consumer safety and hen welfare, navigating a star map of guidelines. Even at seven Cleveland had been good at games involving rules and organizational expertise—­jigsaws over drawing, times tables over pretend. The job was a good fit.

In five minutes she would take a hen from Happy Green Family Farm and change the course of her life forever (though she did not yet know she would do it).

“If you have a moment, sir?” This was three weeks earlier in her first meeting with the regional director. She lifted her tablet. “I’d like to present a few ideas.”

His eyes blinked to his screen and blinked back. “All right.”

She had ideas about farmhand training. She had thoughts about feed logs. It was now in her job description to “revise for betterment all audit tools and templates.”

“The sanitary procedures are undependable,” she said. She tapped her tablet.

“If I may,” she said, “the entire transportation section of the audit is little more than an honor code.” She tapped madly, scrolled. “Now, about cage space allowance.” There was the lighting section, the manure section, beak trimming.

But the director was rubbing his face. “I’m going to stop you right there, Cleveland.” He dropped his hands. “See, this was my hesitation in the first place. We’ve gone over this. You assured us.”

“In the interest of accuracy . . .” she began.

“This is not your job. You describe what is or is not in compliance. You do not participate in the problem-­solving process.”

She lowered the tablet, knew what was coming.

“What are we doing here, Cleveland?”

“Feeding the country, sir.”

He sat back with satisfaction. “The egg is the perfect unit of nutrition.” He spun a little in his chair. “Protein, B-­12, D. Vitamins of the bones and the mind.” He pointed to his temple. “Strength and intellect. A dozen eggs and the poor man eats like the rich. The American dream, Cleveland. The democratic solution.” His eyebrows went up. “Raise the price of eggs and the poor man’s family doesn’t eat.”

She didn’t know how happy the poor man was going to be when it turned out the certification he put his trust in . . .

“It’s science, Cleveland. This is philanthropic work. The ethics of survival. Sustaining civilization.”

“Understood,” she said.

“All right then. For the last time.” His eyes shifted to his screen. “Is that absolutely everything? Are we done?”

She walked back down the hallway, the gap between the director and herself filling with carpet and drywall. She traveled across the divide, widened it. Her phone beeped.

*Janey registered for the training.*

Olivia, galaxy creature. She’d had an exuberance and freedom that had entirely escaped Cleveland, though she tried hard to learn it, through memorization, imitation, repetition. Olivia would have known what to say. (Olivia, lifting her chin, tossing her hair, straightening to her full height, opening her mouth . . .) Cleveland was, well, *afraid* was too strong a word, but *unsettled* about finally meeting the daughter. Cleveland wanted to measure up.

Three weeks later Cleveland was walking along a line of barns that could be seen from airplanes and rocket ships. The land piled up, stacked in the distance. The feed silos twirled into the sky like turrets. She’d just finished the Green Farm annual audit. Her briefcase was heavy with the outdated electronic equipment of a dubious, maybe meaningless task. Over by the farm office, Farmer Green waved goodbye as he shut the door. Cleveland, cheerless, waved back. (Everyone knew his sister had run off and become an animal rights activist.) She got into her car, drove out of the small lot. But there was a white blur in front of her. She slowed. A shade lighter than the gray ground, and so small.

A hen, strolling down the road, as if it was time to just walk away.

*Loose hen on property.* That would fall under Structural Access.

She eyed the hen from behind the steering wheel. The universe—­the one full of darkness and silence and mud—­thrived on coincidence and free will, error. But in the barn, error meant collapse. If hens could get out, other animals could get in, spread disease, kill off half the North American egg eaters, and so on. Cleveland would have to go back, tell the farmer he had a bio­security violation out there. She’d have to redo the audit form, subtract two points under House Security and Access, sign again, issue a Corrective Action, fill out a Biosecurity Plan form, refile the . . .

Or she could just drive around the hen and keep going.

She looked at the hen, stared into its center.

Olivia dropped into her thoughts like a stone. (Olivia raises one blue-­painted nail to point out the windshield, turns her indignant face to the director, says . . .)

It may have made the difference, it may not have. The human mind is a mystery.

Hens are in constant motion. They do not freeze like rabbits. They do not “lock eyes.” Their eyes work separately, have multiple objects of focus. When they cock their heads they’re getting a series of snapshots from different perspectives. But this hen stopped. Her eyes “met” Cleveland’s.

Cleveland pulled over and got out of the car.