

# THE NEW MOTHER

Eugene Fischer

**The author tells us, “I’m a thirty-year-old Texan, originally from San Antonio where I grew up and got a degree in physics. I’m a graduate of the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers’ Workshop, and, more recently, got my MFA from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. While I was at Iowa I developed curricula for science fiction and fantasy focused writing courses. After I graduated I stayed on for a year as an adjunct professor, teaching a course I designed on Writing and Reading Science Fiction—a course that, I’m proud to say, was very popular and is still being taught.” Eugene now lives in Austin, where he’s working on a novel set approximately twenty years after his character, Tess, begins to discover the unsettling repercussions of becoming . . .**

## THE NEW MOTHER

*The girls were spayed. That is the only word for it. Four sisters, the oldest five and the youngest barely two, with dirt-crusted fingers and baggy T-shirts, huddled next to a police van. They are identical in the way of twins; different sizes but, excepting perhaps some scars and birthmarks, their bodies are the same. The picture of them standing together next to the van is like a textbook illustration of early human development. And hidden under their shirts, carved low across the belly, the one scar they all share.*

*None of the many news services that reported the story said that the girls had been spayed like bitches. In the articles, they were “subjected to hysterectomies,” or similar overly clinical distortions. But the video of the police raid on the Charismatic Church of the Redeemer shows the Reverend Kenny Kendall’s eyes wheeling in their sunken sockets as he is led out in handcuffs. While there are no known videos of the sermons he delivered to his followers in their South Texas compound, if they were anything like the screeds on his website then he told his congregation that “a person in whom a seed has not been planted cannot have a soul, and so is not a person true, but an animal grown obscenely person-shaped.” It seems clear that what Reverend Kendall saw growing up and wearing out shoes in his perfect community were not little girls. They*

were vermin. Only a matter of years away from becoming a pestilence. What he had ordered done was a veterinary procedure.

Interviewed in prison, Reverend Kendall explains. "It took a while to realize what we had, of course. What they were. I'd imagine it takes a while for everyone, you know. And how could we suspect? None of us knew what Candace had done." Candace Montross, the girls' mother and former member of Kendall's congregation. "But once Johnnie had his accident, everyone knew it weren't his seed showing in Candace. Then the truth came out, as it is wont to do."

Candace was taken to Camp Kendall (as locals in nearby Wharton call the church compound) by her parents at age eleven. At seventeen she ran away and hitchhiked to Houston, but found herself ill-equipped for independent living and called her parents to beg money. She was tracked down, taken back to the compound, and married to Johnnie Montross. Her oldest daughter was born nine months later. She's now twenty-three and still legally married to Johnnie, fifteen years her senior and paraplegic since falling off a roof a year and a half ago. She's also pregnant again, for the second time since Johnnie's accident.

"She whored herself in Houston, obviously, and caught it and brought it back with her. Couldn't do anything to her directly with her parents right there in the pews, a man and a woman. But even they eventually came to understand it weren't an abortion. They were as disgusted as anyone at the idea of Candace bearing more of those monsters. All with their own daughter's face! What does it mean, I ask you, for the institution of motherhood, for all of us, if we let that sort of thing happen?"

There are certainly monsters in this world. Sometimes they ask valuable questions. What does it mean, indeed?

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The light slanting through the windows had dimmed to nothing while Tess typed. A moth landed on the screen of her huge new monitor, now the brightest thing in the room. She had spent years of her life submerged in her recliner, cup of coffee at hand, ancient heavy laptop balanced on her stomach. Judy had long offered to replace the battered machine, but Tess was attached. She liked how solid it was, the familiar heat of it, every well-earned scratch in the plastic. She'd swapped out the keyboard twice and the screen hinges once. No other laptop felt right to her. But when Tess finally started to show, Judy came home with a new TV stand, wireless keyboard, and that thirty-inch beast of a monitor.

"Your computer is a fetus panini press," she said. "You can have it back in five months. Until then, it's living on the stand."

Judy had developed a brooding concern for Tess's physical well-being. Judy's sister had quipped it was "typical Daddy anxiety," but Tess knew it was also partly guilt over having won the donor argument. Judy's position that they should use an unknown donor, that it was more important to control for all-too-common legal risks rather than astronomically unlikely medical ones, had eventually won Tess over. But in the aftermath of that victory, she had become overprotective of Tess's health, solicitously interrogating every groan and snuffle. Tess had told her to knock it off, but it was kind of gratifying.

So now Tess typed her articles on keys that felt fragile under her fingers. And the mug by her side was just milk with a splash of coffee for flavor. Her obstetrician had recommended that she quit coffee entirely. Something about her chronic borderline anemia. The first trimester was supposed to be bad enough all on its own, but she had a private theory that the worst of her troubles, from muscle aches to nausea, had really been due to caffeine withdrawal.

Tess got up to turn on some lights and brush away the moth. The screen was radiating a haze of heat and she flushed with mild resentment. She leaned over the laptop

on the stand to review her words. Tess guessed that her editor might complain about the “spayed like bitches” line. She moved to change it to something tamer, then stopped herself and left the line intact.

It was her first time working for this editor. She had spent the last four years freelancing for the alternative press, building an audience writing articles for *The Hiccup* and *Bentedge* and *The Stage Left*. An audience that apparently included Lynette Robin, features editor for *American Moment*, who had contacted her out of the blue with a contract offer for a story on HCP. The police raid on Camp Kendall had gotten a lot of attention and Lynette wanted to publish an overview article on what had befallen Candace and her daughters while the news was still hot. Tess had been reporting on the issue for long enough and was Texas-local; could she, Lynette had asked, meet an aggressive deadline for a feature story? If she could, the job was hers.

Tess turned on networking, and all the new email alerts popped up in the corner of her screen. There was no sign of the message she was hoping for, the one from Candace Montross’s attorney saying that his client had finally consented to an interview. But right at the top of her inbox was Lynette, writing back about the outline proposal she’d requested Tess send.

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*Outline looks good. Just a few things: I’m not sure about a whole section on the Chinese one-child policy. Not because it isn’t relevant, but just because American Moment has something of a mandate to focus on contemporary American culture. Maybe we could include a condensed version of that content as a sidebar? Or spin it into a follow-up article once we’ve built interest? Let me know what you think. Also, you need a section detailing the mechanisms of the disease. I know that sort of thing wasn’t necessary when you were writing for The Hiccup, but for much of our readership your article will be their introduction to this condition. I think it’s worth nailing down the specifics. Other than that, green light all the way. I’ve attached the travel reimbursement form, just fill in the blanks for your expenses. And start sending me copy when you have it. I’m excited about this one.*

—LR

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She was so hands-on. Cheerful about it, but still Tess bristled. She’d never been asked to submit in-progress copy before. The request felt invasive, like she was being asked to spread her closet out on the front lawn. The readership was worth it; an article for *American Moment* would get ten times as many readers as anything else she’d written. More, even. But the thought of several weeks of back-and-forth made her tired.

Everything made her tired. She slapped her laptop closed, and the monitor spasmed through a handful of test screens before settling sullenly to black.

Upstairs, in the glass and cherrywood cavern of their bedroom, Tess found Judy already in bed. She was propped up on a pile of pillows, reading glasses tight under her eyes, pallid in the wash of light from her bedside lamp and her tablet. When Tess came in, Judy gestured at a suitcase standing in the corner.

“I packed your bag,” she said without looking up from her screen. “We’ll throw it in the car and I can take you straight to the airport from the party. Look through it. See if I forgot anything.”

Tess dragged her fingertips over the rough nylon of the suitcase. She rocked it back on its wheels and pinched the black rubber trim. “Did you forget anything?”

“No.”

Tess abandoned the bag and wandered off toward her nightclothes. "What are you working on?"

"Schools. Still schools. Not sure there's a preschool in this city that'll do. Three visits this week, and I've come away three different flavors of disappointed. I'm on the verge of deciding to just start my own."

Tuesday night, and already three more visits. "Do you know anything about how to run a school?" asked Tess, shrugging into her pajamas.

"Nothing. Yet. But somewhere in this city there's a brilliant educator who's spent a decade banging her head against incompetent administration. She knows. Probably there's a dozen of her. I'll find them all and pick the best one. If I get started in the next six months, by the time Decaf is three we'll own the best preschool in town." She clicked off her tablet and dropped it on the charging mat by her bedside. "I think I'd do this one as a nonprofit. I've been wanting to do a nonprofit."

Tess got into bed and flopped over, buried her face in Judy's hip. She felt Judy's fingers comb across her scalp and inhaled an atmosphere of fabric softener and banana body wash. Judy always showered at night. Tess usually showered in the morning. "Suppose this was inevitable," she mumbled toward the mattress.

Judy had a habit of turning personal obstacles into entrepreneurial opportunities. Inspired by her own turbulent youth, her first company was a child access center, providing supervised exchanges and visitation for the children of violently estranged couples. When the private ambulance company for which her stepsister worked as an EMT collapsed under the weight of an embezzling scandal, Judy bought three of the vans in liquidation and founded a replacement, moving her sister behind a desk to handle the day-to-days. When she built her house, she'd worked with an architect willing to study up on sustainable building practices, then partnered with her on a consulting company for green renovations and remodels. Tess had profiled Judy after that company's winning bid on a convention center renovation. "I like service industries," Judy had explained to Tess in their first interview. "Business contexts change, but people are a constant." The two of them met up later that week in a sushi bar, then again the very next night at a wild game restaurant Judy knew about in a one-hundred-year-old log cabin. Tess moved into Judy's house when the lease on her apartment expired eight months later.

"Did the editor write back?" asked Judy.

"Yeah. I've got a fancy travel spreadsheet to fill out and everything. It's all covered. Except for China."

"Were you planning on going to China?" She slipped her glasses to the tip of her nose and stared down at Tess over the rims. "You're supposed to tell me before you go to China."

"Take those off. I was going to write about it. But everything else is a go. Including the interview with the Montross girl that I don't actually have yet. I think her attorney's ignoring me now." Tess rolled over on her left side and felt marginally more comfortable. "I promised I could get her."

Judy planted a reassuring palm on the round of Tess's hip. "You'll get her."

"What if I can't?"

"Then you'll have to rework the article. But you will. You got an interview with the guy in prison, didn't you?"

Kenny Kendall had talked to Tess against his attorney's advice. Before the interview, she thought it was because her article was the biggest microphone available to a man in love with his own voice. And maybe that was part of it; he'd struck her as someone who'd been waiting his whole life to paint himself as martyr to a cause. But it wasn't just that. He'd recognized Tess. Knew her by name. Had leaned back in his orange jumpsuit, pinched at his eyebrows, and said he'd expected someone bigger.

Tess tried to put it out of her mind. Being part of the story, rather than just reporting it, would make talking to Candace even more complicated. Her inability to find Candace at all was enough to worry about for now.

“Are you still using the light?” she asked.

Judy turned the lamp off and the soft LED gloaming of idle electronics filled the room. Tess stole pillows from Judy’s hoard, one for her head and one for between her knees. The comforter flapped against her body and Tess felt Judy’s arm slip under her own and drape across her ribs, warm breath on the back of her neck. Tess moved Judy’s wrist so it wasn’t pressing on her breast.

“How important is it that I go to the party?” Tess asked.

“You have to go to the party. It’s for you.”

“It’s going to be crowded,” she said.

Judy didn’t answer.

“I’m too focused on this trip.”

“You can handle it,” Judy said. “It’s gifts and sitting, you’ll be fine.”

Was there anything more awful than gifts and sitting? Tess curled in her knees. “I wish I could take a pill.”

“No flippers for Decaf?”

“No flippers for Decaf.” It was a phrase worn smooth, a call-and-response begun in the months since Tess learned that she had to quit her anti-anxiety medication for the duration of her pregnancy.

Judy’s breath slowed and evened. Tess shifted, twisted onto her back. Judy stirred but didn’t wake, just tucked her narrow nose into the pillow and pressed pale knuckles to her mouth. Judy’s was an accommodating sleep that came when called. Tess’s sleep, like her ability to enjoy her friends, came usually from a medicine bottle. The pills used to sit out on her nightstand, but were now shut away in the bathroom cabinet. Tess wondered what, if any, meds would be in the bag Judy had packed for her. None of her normal ones. She wouldn’t be surprised to find instead one of the herbal supplements with which Judy decorated their pantry. Valerian or something. Tess had no faith in substances she couldn’t imagine being synthesized in gleaming, sanitary laboratories, surrounded by starched white coats and lasers. Taking one of those grassy capsules was like eating off the floor.

Without her prescription bottles, all she had left were words. Pliant letters on the page. The story was what mattered. Losing the cross-cultural angle would change the balance of the piece. She let the article fill her mind, then experimentally plucked out China. She shut the country away in the cabinet and watched her words twist and flow to fill the hole. Contexts shifted, sentences blossomed, and paragraphs slid over and through each other until, eventually, they began to blur into dreams.

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*Candace Montross’s condition has yet to be definitively named. It was first called Human Asexual Reproduction Syndrome, or HARS, a term that proved less than fully accurate with the discovery that the disease is sexually transmitted. The name is no longer used within the medical community, though it remains in use online, where reactionary commenters still make references to “HARS whores.” Terms in more common use are Human Communicable Parthenogenesis (HCP) and Gamete Diploidy Syndrome (GDS). HCP is the popular term among the affected; the most widely read news site for this growing culture is titled The Hiccup. But GDS has become the preferred nomenclature in the medical journals, and is the term that will be used in this article.*

*All of these names are attempts to capture precisely how it is that babies are being made now in a way they have never been made before. Recall the old, familiar recipe: two cells, a sperm from a man and an egg from a woman, fuse into a single cell that*

*grows into a baby. The sperm and the egg can fuse this way because they are, at a genetic level, different from all the other cells in the body. Every cell contains our complete genetic code, split up into twenty-three chromosomes. Most cells have two copies of each chromosome (one from Mom, the other from Dad) for a total of forty-six. This property of having two copies of every chromosome is called "diploidy." Almost every cell in the human body is diploid. The lone exception are the gametes, the sperm and the egg. Gametes are "haploid"—they only have one copy of each chromosome. Being haploid is what allows two gametes to fuse into a single diploid cell with a new mix of chromosomes that will develop into a genetically distinct person. This is sexual reproduction, the way human beings have made more human beings from the beginning of the species until sometime in the last six years.*

*Candace Montross's eggs, like the eggs of a growing number of women around the world, are not haploid. They are diploid. Her eggs are fully capable of implanting in her womb and growing into a baby that shares every one of Candace's genes, a perfect clone of her only biological parent. They weren't always that way. Her gametes were altered after she was raped by a man in Houston who also had diploid gametes, and who also wasn't born that way. They both, now, have GDS. Since diploid sperm are nonviable, Candace's rapist is a sterile carrier of the disease, which renders all men who contract it sterile. But they can still transmit it to women, whose diploid eggs will put them at risk for pregnancy whenever they ovulate. Their genetically identical children will themselves be carriers, and will similarly begin auto-impregnating when they reach puberty. This is a new form of reproduction that crowds out the old, and only time will tell which method is more robust.*

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There were giant ants in the Atlanta airport, six feet long at least. They stretched across the ceiling in a curious, seeking line that curled down the wall of baggage claim. One lone ant had been installed on the floor, and Tess ran a hand over its copper and urethane carapace as she walked by on her way to the car rental desks. When she got to her hotel room, she found ants there too. These were alive and more traditionally sized, clumsy brown specks swarming the lid from a pudding cup that had fallen behind the nightstand and been overlooked by the housekeeping staff. The second room she tried stank of cigarettes and sent her, retching, back into the hall. The third was tolerable.

In the morning, Tess found that her lavender blouse didn't fit right anymore. She wasn't that much bigger in the chest, but still the fabric gaped between the buttons and pulled tight around her shoulders. Her skirt sat lower than she was used to, also. She tugged and adjusted, but there was no fixing it. At least her jacket still fit, if she wore it open. The sides hung down like a charcoal frame for her belly. It hadn't made sense to Tess to buy a whole new professional wardrobe for something that would be done within a few months. And how often did she need to get this dressed up for work anyway? Before the Kendall raid, almost never. The last time she'd talked to Dr. Long-Kamal it'd just been a day of intermittent emails. She'd done the whole thing in sweatpants. Tess gave her hems a final tug in front of the mirror, then looked over her notes until it was time to head to Emory.

Eleanor Long-Kamal. Forty-six, unmarried, no kids. Undergrad at UC Santa Barbara, Ph.D. in epidemiology from the University of Colorado. Discovered what she called at the time "Human Asexual Reproduction Syndrome" a little under two years ago, while faculty at the University of Texas Health Science Center. "Discovered" in that she was the first scientist to notice the disease; thousands of women, of course, knew about it already. Tess was one of them. But Dr. Long-Kamal's discovery was the tipping point for the medical community. This would be Tess's first face-to-face encounter with her, and their first full interview.

Dr. Long-Kamal was out when Tess arrived. "She's on joint fellowship with Rollins and the CDC," the department secretary explained. "There's an off-site lab where she spends a lot of time. Can't be she's gone long though, sweetie. I know she's expecting you." She led Tess to a break room with a long folding table, an assortment of orphaned chairs, and a love seat where a grad student napped with his knees bent over the armrest, blue and gray sneakers dangling. The secretary roused him and gave the seat to Tess.

"You want some coffee? Or there's usually some Cokes in the fridge." She yanked open the refrigerator. "There's no Cokes. But can I get you coffee? Or some water?"

"No, it's all right. I probably shouldn't drink anything."

"Oh, I know how it is. I've got three myself, two boys and a girl. The bathroom's out this way, end of the hall on the left. You come and say if you need anything. Or send Derek. He's not doing much, is he?"

The grad student had dragged three chairs into a row and stretched himself over them, trying to get comfortable enough to go back to sleep. When the secretary left, he shrugged into a seat back and said, "I've got two hours left on my protocol before the centrifuge." Tess nodded, and the grad student closed his eyes.

The walls of the break room were covered in posters and announcements. There were false color micrographs of cells, cutting-edge smears in neon blue and green. There were handwritten signs and notices. "Please rinse out coffee mugs thanks." "This fridge is for FOOD ONLY!" Taped up on the wall near Tess's head was a print-out of a graph with the words "FUCK YES." written above in marker. The figure, all dots and trend lines, was utterly incomprehensible.

Tess shifted in her seat, chased an itch under the edge of her shoe. She felt a stretching bulge, a brief squirming that she still couldn't quite convince herself was Decaf moving inside, and not just some intermittent digestive insult. She glanced at the grad student, dozing again with a white-sleeved elbow creased over his eyes. She realized she was holding herself frozen, taking shallow sips of air, like this was his bedroom and she was tiptoeing through. She dug her phone from her purse. IN A WAITING ROOM AT EMORY, she texted Judy. FEEL LIKE A SPECIMEN FOR DISSECTION. BUTTERFLIES AND PINS.

Her phone buzzed a moment later. YOU'RE THE JOURNALIST. YOU'RE THE ONE WITH THE SCALPEL. DID YOU TAKE A PILL?

Judy had packed one of her alternative remedies. Homeopathic, it looked like. Tess had found it the night before in a plastic bag with her soap, shampoo, and the new toothpaste that didn't make her gag, as the flavor of mint now did. In there too was a brown glass bottle around which Judy had taped a label in her own neat script reading, "Placebos. Take for anxiety."

Tess texted back, NO, BUT I SAW THAT. FUNNY.

THE EFFECT IS REAL. THAT'S SCIENCE, sent Judy.

WHY'D I EVEN FLY OUT HERE? CAN GET ALL I NEED FROM YOU.

A woman in a striped polo appeared in the doorway, hands braced across the frame. She had a name badge dangling from her shirt by a shiny metal clip and vibrant red frames resting on the deep cheekbones that Tess recognized from photographs. There was a streak of gray in her tied-back hair, though, that wasn't in her faculty headshot. "You must be Ms. Mendoza," she announced. She tumbled forward into the room and scooped Tess's hand in warm, strong fingers. "I'm Eleanor Long-Kamal."

"Tess."

"It's a pleasure, Tess. So glad we're finally doing this. I'm terribly sorry about the delay, I . . ." she stopped as she noticed the grad student lying across the chairs. She pulled away the one supporting his legs, and Tess started at the sound of his soles slapping the floor. Eleanor said, "Derek, is that a lab coat in the break room?"

The grad student hunched up on his elbows. "It hasn't been in the lab. It's an extra. Clean from my office." He glanced up at the wall and added, "I've got two hours left on my protocol."

Eleanor loomed over him. "Sure, you know it's clean. Anyone else walking by just sees one of my researchers napping in a lab coat. Do you want the undergrads thinking that's okay? Or any reporters that should happen by, like our guest here?"

"I only grabbed it 'cause they keep this place freezing."

"Bring a jacket. I can't have the press thinking I don't care about contamination in my lab." Eleanor turned back to Tess. "Come on down to my office."

Once they were out of earshot of the break room, Eleanor said, "Hope I didn't make you feel on the spot, using you to bludgeon Derek like that."

"So he's not supposed to wear a coat outside the lab?"

"God no. The stuff we work with? He should have known better. I'm big on lab safety. When I was in grad school I used to see people eating in lab coats sometimes. Turned my stomach."

Eleanor's office was a long, shallow room dominated by an ornate mahogany desk. The desktop was immaculate, but the floor surrounding was a shantytown of papers, journals, and books in teetering piles. Eleanor hefted some binders out of a cracked leather wingback by the wall and dragged the chair over, nudging stacks out of the way with the side of her boot.

"I'm a pretty organized person at home," she said. "I've only been in this office five months. I guess that's a long time, actually. But you know how things get away from you. Sit, please. So," she said, lowering herself into her desk chair, "before we begin, if it's not an indelicate question, can I ask how much of a personal stake you have in this topic?" She gestured with her chin at Tess's abdomen and leaned back in her seat so the springs creaked.

"I don't have it, if that's what you mean," said Tess, sitting down. The wings of the chair jutted in her peripheral vision like broad palms waiting to squeeze her skull. She felt a press of claustrophobia. She swallowed it back, but inched forward in the seat and leaned to retrieve her voice recorder. "But everyone has a personal stake, I think. Some people just don't know it yet."

"It's so nice to do an interview with someone who gets it," said Eleanor. "You know, you were the first to look for me. I'm surprised you're writing for *American Moment*, though. Their science reporting is usually terrible. No offense. I mean, obviously I still read it."

"It's my first time writing for them," said Tess. "And this won't be a science article. I'm focusing on the social implications of the disease. The future of motherhood. Things like that." She put her recorder on the desk between them. "May I?"

"Absolutely. I'm happy to answer any questions I can."

Tess turned on the recorder. "Okay. So you were the first to discover GDS. Tell me how that happened."

"I began looking into it about, oh, twenty months ago. This was back in San Antonio. I was primarily researching *Toxo* at the time—that's *Toxoplasma gondii*—and I read an article in the *LA Times* about a new psychological condition that was hitting pregnant women and new mothers, where they refused to believe their children really belonged to them. People were calling it 'maternal dissociative disorder.' As a *Toxo* researcher, I was used to thinking about possible infectious causes for psychological changes, so this was pretty interesting." Eleanor leaned sideways in her chair and plucked something off the floor behind her desk. A plastic ball that expanded when she tugged on the sides. She played with it in her lap, colorful struts thrumping together as she spoke. "Of course, in the end it turned out not to be psychological at all. That initial misconception made people miss it for a long time."

“That’s my next question. Why did it take so long for the medical community to realize this was something new? Because, as I understand it, we now think that GDS has been spreading for at least six years. Are you saying that the whole time it was just doctors who wouldn’t listen to their patients? It really took six years for someone to believe that women knew what they were talking about when they said there was something strange about their pregnancies?”

“That’s a little unfair,” said Eleanor. “You have to understand that there was nothing about this disease that would show up on the radar of the public health community. Even my initial interest was purely speculative. The only solid evidence for GDS was demographic. A slight bump in the birthrate and more girls being born than boys. No scientist looks at that data and thinks infectious disease. You see that and you look for social and environmental factors. Abstinence-only education and hormones in beef. We’re talking here about an STI whose only visible symptom is sexually active women getting pregnant. It was impossible to figure out what was happening until we started seeing it in infusion patients. Before that, there was no way to tell.”

“You can’t say there was no way to tell,” Tess said. “You could tell by listening to what women were saying. The alternative press started reporting on unexplainable pregnancies four years ago. I know, I wrote some of the stories.”

Eleanor shrugged. “They started being right about it four years ago. Fringe publications have been writing about virgin births a lot longer than that. As a scientist, you don’t start writing a grant proposal until you see it happen five times in the same hospital.”

Tess jotted *grant prop* in her notebook, a reminder to quote that line. *Profit motive. Perverse incentive?* She felt flush with uncharitable objectivity. “Okay, then. So now that you do know the condition exists, are you any closer to understanding what causes it?”

“I can’t answer that, actually. I have a paper on the subject under review right now. I can’t discuss results that are pending publication.”

“So you have learned something new about the cause.”

Eleanor gave a thin smile. “I promise, I’m not just being coy. I really can’t talk about that. Come back and ask me again in a few months.”

“All right. So then, officially at least, we still have no idea what’s causing it. Everyone thinks it’s a virus but—I know, you can’t comment on that. But we do know what it does. So what happens now? How do you see this situation developing?”

“That’s a multivariate question,” said Eleanor. She put down her toy, went to a bookcase, and started scanning titles. “It could develop a lot of ways, and will certainly develop differently in different places. For the U.S., the best case scenario is still that GDS turns out to be a curable condition.”

“So things could go back to normal?”

Eleanor laughed, a single sharp breath. “What do you mean by ‘normal’? If normal means how things were before GDS, not a chance. There’s a way for women to reproduce without men now, and thousands of people already have it. That genie isn’t going back in the bottle. Ah, here it is.” Eleanor pulled a thick oversized paperback off the shelf and brought it back to the desk. “But in the U.S., best case, we could have a new normal. One where individual women choose whether or not to be parthenogenetic. This raises a whole host of political questions, though. Should sexual reproduction be considered the default? Should girls born with GDS be compulsorily cured, or allowed to choose for themselves when they reach puberty? If we let them choose, what do we do in cases where girls begin ovulating before the age of informed consent? Put them on birth control? If we don’t, they’ll never experience what we consider a normal childhood, but handing out the pill to children is going to be controversial.” She wheeled her fingers in dismissive circles. “It

just goes on. Even if we can cure it, things stay complicated. And that's for our country. Look at this."

Eleanor flipped through the book, found a chart, and turned it around for Tess to read. "This is *Trends in Maternal Mortality*. The World Health Organization publishes it every couple years. For every country they calculate the maternal mortality ratio, the number of maternal deaths per number of live births. In the developed world it's negligible, but in places like Sub-Saharan Africa, giving birth is one of the most dangerous things a woman can do. If you're a woman in Chad, your estimated lifetime risk of dying in childbirth, today, is one in fourteen. And that's with only, on average, six children per woman. Call it . . ." Eleanor flipped the book back around and looked up something in an appendix. "Call it seven or eight pregnancies total. A girl born with GDS could naturally experience over thirty pregnancies during her reproductive years. At those rates, if you happen to be a woman in Chad, you might as well just expect to die during childbirth."

Eleanor turned the book toward Tess again and went back to her chair. "Barring both a cure and a revolutionary change in the way we do foreign aid, the best-case scenario is that in thirty years the world's undeveloped countries overflow with orphans. Picture NGOs setting up quonset huts packed with tiny bunk beds. Soup lines of just little girls. That sort of thing. The famine is going to be on a whole new scale."

Tess pressed down the glossy page so she could look over the tables. Afghanistan, 1 in 11. Congo, 1 in 24. Haiti, 1 in 93. United States, 1 in 2,100. She copied down numbers and flipped to another page. "What's the worst case?" she asked.

"In the undeveloped world? Short term, infanticide, maybe genocide of the infected. Long term, extinction of the male population and massive reduction in average life expectancy," Eleanor said. "You can take that book if you want. They'll be putting out a new one soon."

Tess closed the book and put it in her bag. The follow-up article Lynette had proposed was already taking shape in her mind. "And in the developed world? What's the worst case scenario here?"

"Ah. I wish I could answer that one. It's something I think about a lot. But this is where I have to remember to wear my CDC hat," said Eleanor. "The CDC is a federal agency, and I've got three grad students and a post-doc working on money from the NIH. The truth is that for a wealthy nation like us, what constitutes the worst-case scenario is a policy question, not a science question. It's important for me to stay nonpartisan or I could put my funding at risk." She spread her hands in a *mea culpa*. "I think I'm more effective as a researcher than I would be as an advocate. I'm sorry. I know that's an unsatisfying answer."

"I understand," said Tess. She scratched another dollar sign in her notebook, out of fidelity to her earlier impulse to cast Eleanor as a kind of disease profiteer. But her heart wasn't really in it anymore.

"What I can tell you," said Eleanor, "is that our limiting factor won't be poverty. It'll be consensus. We have hospitals and access to hormonal birth control. However things end up, it's going to be the result of a series of collective decisions about values. So our job—I'm talking yours *and* mine now—is to try and make sure those decisions are as informed as possible."

Tess raised her pen and swirled it between her fingertips. "Working on it."

"And of course, there's nothing stopping you from advocacy, is there? I'm looking forward to seeing what you write. I promise not to call it terrible." Eleanor grinned, then shook a large rubber watch down her wrist and checked the time. "Do you have any more questions? I have a meeting, but I can go a few minutes more if you need."

"I think I've got enough here." Tess stopped the recorder and put it back in her bag. "I can get back in touch with you if I need to?"

“Oh, sure.” They got up, and Eleanor shoved Tess’s chair back against the wall. “Are you parked in the lot off Clifton?” she asked. “My meeting’s across the street. I’ll walk down with you.” Eleanor grabbed a small backpack and slung it over one shoulder. “Who else do you have on your dance card while you’re in town?”

“Tomorrow I sit down with Donald Noyce of AABB,” Tess said. “Then I spend a week in D.C. Talking with people who can go on the record about policy.”

“I know Don a little. He’s a good guy. A good guy with a bit of a talent for rubbing people the wrong way. But he knows his stuff.”

“I’ve heard good things.”

At the end of the hall Eleanor turned toward the stairwell. Tess paused by the elevators. It took a moment for Eleanor to notice.

“Wait, what am I thinking. We’ll take the elevator.” She came back and pressed the button. “Habit. Sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“So when are you due?” Eleanor asked.

“October twenty-second,” said Tess.

“A little Libra. Unless he shows up late. Do you know what you’re going to name him?”

The elevator chimed and the doors slid open. “My partner and I have been calling it Decaf. We don’t know the sex yet. I’m scheduled to get a sonogram when I get back from this trip.”

“Oh,” said Eleanor. “Sorry. From what you said earlier, I just assumed you already knew.”

“Not yet. Not for a bit. I think I’d be fine with not knowing, but my partner. She couldn’t handle it.”

The elevator counted down the floors with soft beeps. Neither of them said anything more, the first time Eleanor had stopped talking all afternoon. Tess leaned against the wall, letting the steel handrail press comfortably into her lower back, until the elevator spat them out at ground level.

As they walked outside into the Georgia sunshine, Eleanor asked, “So did you use a known donor?”

Oh. “No. No, it was an unknown donor. It’s much safer. Legally safer, I mean. There’s no risk that years later the guy decides he wants to try being your kid’s father.”

“Right. Of course.” Eleanor nodded. “That makes sense.”

Eleanor visored her hand over her glasses and scanned the sky. Then she caught Tess’s eyes again.

“Okay, this is none of my business, but given what you said before . . . I mean, you’re going to talk to Don about the blood banks, so you’ve probably thought of it already. But you do know there’s a chance the sperm banks are going to be a problem too, right? That’s another thing we might have to deal with.”

Did she know about the sperm banks? Of course she knew. She and Judy had argued for weeks. It was almost certain that the sperm banks were contaminated to some degree. For Tess, at least at first, how great that degree was didn’t matter. Any chance was too much. *The amount of time you’ve spent researching this has you paranoid*, Judy had countered. *Every medical procedure has some risk. We’re in a state hostile to gays. The most important thing is to protect our family.* In the end Tess had conceded. Judy was right that, of all the dangers associated with pregnancy, GDS would be the most minor. She was right that their legal risks as same-sex parents dwarfed their medical ones. She was right that they could, if Tess was worried, reduce the chances even further by selecting sperm that had been frozen for several years. And she was so invincibly certain when she said *whatever happens, we can handle it*, that she was probably right about that too. But still.

"Do you have any statistics?" Tess asked.

"On sperm banks?" said Eleanor.

"Or demographic data. Anything unpublished. If it's out there, I'd have seen it already. I've looked."

"I can't discuss unpublished—"

"Off the record. Please."

Eleanor probed at a pebble of asphalt with the toe of her boot and wiped sweat from the back of her neck. "Census data isn't granular enough, is the problem. There's a longitudinal study underway. Where are you from?"

"South Texas. Houston."

"The birth rate bump in Texas has been slightly higher among Hispanics. Probably that's attributable to the Catholic distaste for condoms. But to do any meaningful risk analysis, you'd need to account for selection bias. What cross section of men choose to donate, and what, if anything, do the banks disproportionately screen for? I'm not sure we have that data."

"Yeah," said Tess, "I didn't think it was out there."

"The chances are really low. Honestly, almost all pathogens are taken care of by the sperm washing process. Usually sexually transmitted infections are due to exposure to semen, not sperm. With this one, though . . ." Eleanor seemed lost for what to do with her hands, and pushed them down into her back pockets. "I just wanted to make sure you were aware."

Tess sighed. "I think I know about as much as anyone does."

Eleanor nodded, and paused again. Tess was ready for goodbyes, but then Eleanor said, "'Off the record' means you absolutely can't publish it? Under any circumstances?"

"Yeah. Don't worry, I won't write up any of this."

"It's not a virus."

"What?"

"GDS. It isn't a virus. It's a massively drug resistant bacterium. An obligate intracellular parasite. Like chlamydia," said Eleanor.

"Chlamydia?"

"It's not chlamydia, that's just another organism with a similar life cycle. Kind of like a bacterium that wants to be a virus. It lives in the cytoplasm of the host cell and reproduces there. So if sperm washing doesn't work, that'll be the reason why. That's all I can say for now, but we're figuring this thing out. Seriously, come back and talk to me in a few months. I'll have things to tell you. Ones you can publish."

Tess reached out for a handshake. "Thanks for sitting down with me," she said.

"Good luck with your article." Eleanor lingered a moment. "And on the rest of it. Good luck." She let go of Tess's hand and headed off.

Tess went to her car. She thought about her trip to the sperm bank with Judy. The two of them had looked through the database and decided on an unknown Anglo donor. (Anglo so that their child would share an ethnic heritage with both of its parents. Though the scrubs-wearing teenager who handled their paperwork at the clinic had helpfully informed them that "mixed-race sperm" was available, in case Tess wanted her baby to look just like her. Ha.) They'd settled on a five-year-old sample, the oldest the clinic could provide. They'd taken every reasonable precaution. And maybe, in a few months, Eleanor would tell her that it wasn't a problem anymore. A shot for her, a shot for Decaf. Perhaps a shot for Judy, too, if it was even necessary. There was just no way to be sure.

Tess got out her phone to map the way off the campus and found a text from Judy, a stale response from their earlier conversation: THAT'S WHAT I ALWAYS TELL YOU.

She put the phone away.

There was some event going on in the school's auditorium, and Tess ended up in a long, creeping line of cars, most of them turning one by one into a parking structure. The single-file inching reminded her of the giant worker ants in the airport. She wondered if there was any way to tell, as they swarmed the building in their statue stillness, whether they were supposed to be taking the place apart or putting it together.

\* \* \*

*Donald Noyce is a forty-year veteran of the blood industry. He has been a phlebotomist, worked for the American Red Cross, and now works for AABB, a nonprofit that promotes safety standards for blood-based medicine. He says there are two words being whispered behind closed doors in his field: profiling and speciation.*

*"The real question we are struggling with is: when are we going to bifurcate the blood banks? I can tell you, we're going to have to sooner or later."*

*The first cases of GDS to get widespread attention from the medical community were the result of blood transfusions. One might expect, then, that donations and transfusions would be primary areas of focus as our healthcare institutions adapted to this new reality. That turns out not to be the case. In the nearly two years that the medical community has been aware of the problem, there have been no changes to national policy on blood collection and distribution.*

*"We're all still waiting for an assay," says Noyce, meaning a blood test that can identify GDS. "Once we know what the bug looks like, things will be a lot easier. But you can't just put transfusions on hold while the science gets done. And if you can't screen blood directly, the only ethical choice is profiling. Now that's a dirty word, right there. But it's a lesser of two evils thing. It's more important that you don't get sick when you need blood than it is that everyone who wants to can donate."*

*The profiling Noyce refers to is the practice of barring members of statistically high-risk groups from giving blood. During the early years of the AIDS epidemic, that meant deferring intravenous drug users and homosexual men. Noyce worked for the Red Cross at the time, but was driven to resign by what he saw as the organization's inability to react in a timeframe necessary to save lives.*

*The nonprofit Red Cross didn't start deferring homosexuals until several years after the for-profit companies that buy blood and process it into expensive medications. "And then," says Noyce, "they forgot to ever switch back after we had a blood test, but that's a whole 'nother kettle."*

*Today the high-risk populations would be women who have given birth to daughters in the last six years and fathers of those daughters. (Girls younger than six would technically be on the list, too, and will have to be added if there still isn't a blood test when they are old enough to donate.) The more daughters a woman has recently had, the higher risk she is. Companies in compliance with AABB recommendations are now deferring women with three or more daughters under the age of six. There are no mechanisms currently in place to defer potential male carriers.*

*"It's not a perfect solution," Noyce admits, and runs a hand over his bald scalp. "Profiling is just a stopgap, anyway. We'll get an assay eventually. But when we do, we can't just throw away the positive blood. There are going to be a lot of these people. Eventually we're going to have to store their blood just to keep up with the population boom. But we can't get started on updating our infrastructure because of the [expletive] FDA."*

*The Blood Products Advisory Committee of the Food and Drug Administration is responsible for setting the guidelines that publicly funded collection agencies are required to follow. They commissioned a white paper on GDS, which ended up recommending precisely what Donald Noyce wants to see happen: the establishment of a dedicated infrastructure for collecting and storing GDS-infected blood. The recommendation became controversial, due to what Noyce identifies as an impolitic choice by the paper's authors.*

*"The poor bastard who wrote it never realized the trouble he was causing. His heart was in the right place, really. You read the report. The projections in there are sound, the timeframe is perfectly reasonable. It was just the words he used."*

*Enter "speciation." The white paper used this term to describe why it was necessary to double the number of categories in the blood industry, implying that, due to their different reproductive strategy, women with GDS should be considered a different species than men and women without. The debate over the accuracy of that assessment has incapacitated the FDA.*

*"No one wants to pull the trigger now. They're all [expletive] terrified of being the person who officially splits the human race down the middle." Noyce has several unpub-lishable alternatives for what the letters of the organization stand for. On the subject of speciation, though, he is agnostic. "I'm happy to leave that one to folks who have a bet-ter idea of what a species is than me. What I think about is that, whatever they are, they're people. And there's bound to be a lot of them. And they're going to need blood."*

*No one disputes that there will be a lot of them, but not everyone agrees that those who have GDS are people. While the FDA is paralyzed by fear of endorsing the idea that those with GDS constitute a different species, in other branches of government there are already attempts underway to enshrine the notion in law.*

\* \* \*

Tess was daunted by the access afforded her in D.C. as a reporter for *American Moment*. As she sent her bag through the x-ray machine at the Hart Senate Office Building and spread her arms for the wand-wielding security guard, she felt the fam-iliar, irrational queasiness that all the eyes and sensors would peer through her credentials and spot an impostor. No matter her rituals of reassurance, the anxiety had only mounted during her time in the city, through all the meetings she'd already taken. She'd interviewed three representatives involved in GDS legislation and had an appointment with a fourth. There were lobbyists seeking her out, fighting each other for face time. And now she was about to sit down with Bailey Rogers, senior senator from Texas, who had unexpectedly found a free quarter-hour in her sched-ule. Members of her own family were harder to get ahold of than the politicians she wanted to see. After years of "could not be reached for comment," it made Tess feel as though she'd tricked her way into a sudden, fragile celebrity. But just as all the oth-ers had, the security guard waved her through without incident.

Tess consulted the building directory, then leaned her face close to the glass of a door so she could smooth down flyaway hair in her reflection. It wasn't really about her, of course, she thought as she headed for the Senator's office. It wasn't even that she was working for *American Moment*. It was because she was writing a profile on the Montross case, that was what people cared about. Anyone involved in GDS legis-lation wanted a chance to shape the conversation around the disease, and the infur-riatingly absent face of that conversation was Candace Montross. Candace was the celebrity. Tess was, at best, her influential surrogate.

If Tess were actually a celebrity, Bailey might have deigned to touch her. Instead she waved off her assistant and cooed honey-voiced delight at Tess's presence while standing an arm's length away, then said, "Forgive me for not shaking your hand. It's not personal, you understand." She beckoned Tess to a seat in front of her desk. "My husband says I might as well quit, announce I won't run again, if I'm not going to kiss babies anymore. I told him, my career's okay, I can still kiss the ones in blue!" Bailey's wide hoop earrings jounced when she laughed, a contrast to her pile of sil-vering hair, which barely moved at all. The wall behind her was covered in framed photos. A campaign victory party in Dallas with Bailey surrounded by her four sons. Bailey in a cranberry pantsuit, shaking hands with the former secretary of state. Bailey sitting on a bipartisan panel at a breast cancer fundraiser.

“One of your staffers shook my hand when I came in,” said Tess, sitting and getting out her things. “Might want to have a chat with him about it.”

Bailey sat too, and laced her fingers together in what looked to Tess like a practiced pose. “We’re all struggling to get used to these changes. That’s why leadership on this issue is going to be so important.”

Tess flipped past her notes on Bailey to a blank page of her book. The notes weren’t extensive; Bailey’s motivations for sitting down with her were transparent. The Senator was a member of the appropriations committee for Health and Human Services, where she was working to keep tax dollars from going to GDS patients. Unfortunately for her, GDS patients had an inconvenient tendency to be pregnant women. Tess believed that Bailey had only agreed to the interview because she was worried about tarnishing the family-first reputation she had spent her career cultivating, and which was so critical to the electoral success of female politicians in Texas. Tess had voted against her two years prior.

“Let’s go on the record now,” she said, and clicked on the recorder. “How long have you been aware of the spread of GDS?”

“It was first brought to my attention three months ago.”

“How did you learn about it?”

“An aide briefed me. I have my staff keep me informed about what our former colleagues in Austin are doing. Can’t lose touch with state-level needs while I’m stuck out here in D.C. It was Texas research that discovered GDS, you know. We’ve been a leader on this issue from the start.”

“I know,” said Tess, scribbling *leader!!* in her book and adding a wavy underline for absurd emphasis. “You’ve put language into the latest HHS funding bill that would prohibit federal funds from going to any organization that provides prenatal care for women known to have GDS. Can you explain the reasoning behind that for me?”

“Absolutely. This is a measure consistent with the track record I’ve shown my entire career. I have always promoted solid public health policy, with a special focus on women’s health issues. That’s what this new regulation is.”

“How is it in the interest of public health to deny care to pregnant women?”

“You’re looking at it completely backward,” said Bailey. “The question is, how is it in the public interest for the government to subsidize the spread of a plague? Because that’s what we’ll be doing if we let taxpayer money go to increasing the number of cases of this disease.”

“But you’ve campaigned on child welfare. Surely this is a child welfare issue.”

Bailey nodded. “I agree. It is.”

“Then how can you reconcile that with an amendment that will necessarily mean higher infant mortality?”

“There’s nothing to reconcile, Ms. Mendoza. My voting record is perfectly consistent. I’m protecting the normal, healthy children in those hospitals. We can’t risk the health of the majority of mothers and children by exposing them to a disease we’re just beginning to understand. One which, from all appearances, will warp their entire lives.” Bailey placed manicured fingers gently atop the monitor on her desk. “I could show you dozens of letters from women in Texas distraught that they or their daughters may never have the opportunity to be normal mothers now. I could show you even more from men who fear that they’ll never get to father children at all. Until we know exactly what this disease is, the situation calls for the utmost caution. If we don’t handle this correctly, it could literally be the end of mankind.”

It was nothing Tess hadn’t heard before. The tune was so familiar she could sing along if she wanted. The only difference with Bailey was a little more polish, a better memory for the talking points. It actually made her a less interesting interview than the representatives, who occasionally slipped up in interesting ways. Gale Schoening of

North Carolina had distinguished women with GDS from those without by referring to the latter as "real mothers." Matthew Hock had said outright that his constituency were "the natural-born citizens of Houston." When Tess observed that in just twelve years the first girls born with GDS would reach voting age, he had said, "We'll see. A lot can change in twelve years." But aside from personal quirks, responses were so alike Tess could practically write her notes in advance. GDS is a disease. We have to protect healthy people. Men could become extinct. Think of the at-risk men.

Given Bailey's facility for staying on message, there was only one interesting question left to ask. "Have you read Governor Buford's article?"

Bailey's eyes dipped and she pushed a sigh through her nose. "I have."

"And do you agree with his interpretation of pro-life politics?"

Cal Buford, former governor of Virginia and now senior partner of a conservative think tank, had just published an op-ed titled "Life Without Conception?" in which he mused that his long opposition to abortion stemmed from his belief that human life began at the moment of fertilization. He concluded that the lack of any such clear moment, combined with the risk that GDS posed to the male population, was enough to constitute an exception to the standard pro-life reasoning. He came out in favor of abortion for GDS daughters, and urged conservative lawmakers to do the same.

Some were already describing Buford's piece as representative of a split in conservative ideology, but to Tess the response looked more like a scramble. Everyone she'd spoken with had dodged the question. Even Representative Hock had limited himself to saying, "Cal is a smart man, and his opinion deserves weighty consideration of a kind I've not yet had time to devote to the issue," and refused to comment further.

Bailey, though, actually answered. "I've always prided myself on voting my conscience. I've broken with my party in the past, on occasion. On certain matters of principle. I respect the governor a great deal, and can only imagine that's what he thinks he is doing now. But there is no practice more contrary to the well-being of children than abortion. I've opposed it my entire career, and I continue to oppose it. I find it unfortunate that Governor Buford, intentionally or not, is supporting those who would exploit this disease to roll back the measures to protect children we've managed to pass in the last few years."

Her willingness to take a firm position was a surprise. But then, Tess supposed Bailey had been playing the game longer than anyone else she'd interviewed. In addition to her time in the Texas legislature, Bailey had spent eight years in the House before moving up. She didn't need to wait for the safety of consensus. She was entrenched, with solid connections, deep-pocketed backers, and a well-trained staff. After the interview concluded, Tess was able to walk out of Bailey's office without having to pretend to ignore the whispers and sideways glances that had followed her around Capitol Hill.

She was certain she was still being talked about, though. They were just courteous enough to wait until she was out of earshot to start speculating. The reporter from *American Moment* isn't just pregnant. She has it. She's a carrier. That's why the magazine sent her. Tess felt like people were wiping down the seats the minute she was out the door. Matthew Hock's office had been the worst, men shuddering inside their suits and gawking as she passed. On the Metro people saw her belly and deferred to her on the platforms, gave up their seats in the cars. It was whiplash, going from being coddled on the trains to being Typhoid Mary on the Hill.

Tess decided she'd had enough of being around people, friendly or fearful, and hailed a taxi to take her back to her hotel. She could expense it. She was meeting with a spokesperson from the American Family Association later, but needed time to recuperate from her morning. In the back of the cab she unwrapped the half-sandwich she'd saved in her purse. She was starving, and carried a taut discomfort

under that hollow hunger, like she was an instrument Decaf was learning to play. Tess tucked the seatbelt under her arm and read through email on her phone as she ate.

Lynette had sent back the first round of edits, and a general note that Tess needed to tone down her rhetoric. *You've been on the story longer than anyone*, she wrote. *It's only natural for you to be opinionated. And I love your passion, but you have to hide it under a bushel for us.* As expected, Tess was losing the “spayed like bitches” line. She also couldn't talk about “HARS whores,” or use the word “rapist” to describe someone who'd never even been charged with a crime unless she preceded it with “alleged.” And she couldn't call Kenny Kendall a monster. Lynette had changed that line to a list of charges he'd be found guilty of “if convicted.”

He was going to be convicted. Kendall had pled not guilty, but seemingly just as a formality; the man wanted a trial. Outside the courtroom he'd all but admitted to it. To sterilizing pre-school-aged girls. Tess sent Judy a furious text. She wondered if she could have gotten away with calling him an *alleged* monster.

When she'd gone to see him, he had been thrilled to talk to her about GDS. To her, specifically. He'd recognized the name Intessar Mendoza from her articles. Apparently, before his arrest, he used to trawl left-leaning news sites for topics to inveigh against in sermons. “You're smaller than I imagined you,” he said. “You write big, but you're just a slip of a thing.”

Eventually, everyone would know. GDS was going to change the world. Children would grow up knowing about it. Would grow up having it. It wouldn't be a secret for much longer. But Kenny Kendall had learned about it from her. Everything after—the brutalization of Candace and her daughters, the contract from Lynette, the conversations with congressmen—was a result of her articles.

It was almost appropriate, then, that the one person Tess couldn't get in touch with was Candace herself. In addition to Lynette's email there were messages from two more lobbyists, a reminder from her OB-GYN's office about her sonogram appointment, and some mailing list background noise. But still nothing from Candace's attorney.

There were supposed to be other ways in. If you can't interview the subject, interview neighbors. Coworkers, teachers, relatives. A real professional is able to find the story. But everyone who had known Candace since she was a little girl was locked away, either behind the high steel fence of a religious compound or in prison. The court records were sealed. Tess had been so confident with Lynette, had told her how the HCP community was tightening, how everyone knew each other. But her normal contacts had been useless. No one had heard from Candace. She, apparently, wasn't interested in trying to meet other people like herself.

So Tess was left emailing Candace's attorney over and over again. It was like trying to open a jar with wet hands, but it was all she had. Maybe if, in the next letter, she revealed some information about Matthew Hock's opinions of her family, Candace would be moved to provide a counterpoint.

Judy texted as Tess was pushing through the revolving door to her hotel lobby. DON'T WORRY ABOUT THE EDITS. SOME THINGS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES. DID YOU CALL YOUR MOTHER?

PHONE TAG, Tess sent back.

TRY AGAIN. TELL HER BABY SHOWER GIFT ARRIVED. CAR SEAT. V. NICE.

After her two children were out of the house, Tess's mother had abandoned the southern California home where she'd raised them and moved to D.C., where she worked in human resources for a polling company. Tess had arranged to extend her travel an extra day to spend time with her. Tess didn't consider herself close to her mother, but it was still a different class of relationship than she had with her father,

who hadn't been a meaningful part of her life since her parents divorced when she was four. And Judy's parents—though she had worked hard as an adult to establish functional, if not always amicable, relationships with them—weren't people Judy or Tess wanted having any influence on their child. So when the two of them decided that it might be important for there to be a grandparent involved in Decaf's life, Tess's mother was the default choice.

Ensnconced in her room with the blackout curtains drawn, though, that decision seemed very distant. Tess remembered the conversation, that they had agreed readily enough. But now her conviction seemed slippery, diffuse.

Rest first, she decided. She shed her clothes and started a bath running. Rest, and then the lobbyist. She set an alarm on her phone for half an hour before she was supposed to meet with the AFA guy. Sparring with an intractable special-interest ideologue would be a fine warm up for dealing with her mother again.

\* \* \*

*In the past two months the legislatures of Arizona, Tennessee, Texas, Kansas, and California have all seen bills that would make it a criminal offense to intentionally contract or transmit GDS. Most of these aim to classify it as a form of aggravated assault, but the Arizona bill calls for transmission of GDS to constitute manslaughter, and explicitly references speciation. Thomas Conklin, the bill's author, argues that GDS makes one nonhuman, therefore it reduces the number of humans, therefore spreading it is something akin to murder. He justifies a provision against intentionally contracting the disease as an extension of the laws against suicide.*

*In thirteen states there have been efforts to criminalize the sale of GDS-infected biological products. The sponsors of these bills say that it is an obvious, pragmatic public health measure. But these measures, so far, have less political support than the bills based on speciation, as they would effectively shut down the \$16 billion private blood industry until a test is developed.*

*Nine states are in the process of revising their laws on maternity leave. Fifteen have held hearings on what do to about letting GDS children into public schools. None have an answer yet, but they all agree it's an issue. On the judicial side, the American Civil Liberties Union is pursuing several test cases designed to establish a precedent of equality under the law for GDS-infected women and their children.*

*Even within political parties, opinion is sharply divided. There has been a split inside Texas's Republican-dominated legislature, with the Senate passing GDS exceptions to the state's tight restrictions on abortion that the House refuses to support. If we are, as a society, moving toward consensus on this issue, it remains a distant target. But while no broad agreements are yet forthcoming, the terms of the debate itself, in Washington at least, are starting to become clear. The battle lines are shaking out as a woman's right to choose versus a man's right to exist.*

*Those whose focus is on protecting the rights of women argue that GDS is not inherently different than the birth control pill, or in-vitro fertilization. It's just one example of the many ways that human reproduction has changed, fundamentally unrelated to personhood. If those with GDS are to have fewer personal freedoms, the argument goes, then why not also test tube babies, or those conceived with the help of fertility drugs? No one has ever seriously suggested that these individuals are not people, and so neither should personhood be an issue in the case of GDS.*

*The men's rights camp argues that the crucial difference is that GDS, left unchecked, will necessarily make the male population dwindle to zero. This side sees GDS as an existential threat that permits no peaceful coexistence. Their fear is markedly similar to Reverend Kendall's dark vision of a feminine pestilence. Or, as Nancy Forsythe, a lobbyist for the National Organization for Women, explains it, "Feminism isn't merely a threat to male privilege anymore. Now a woman's right to*

*biological self-determination is viewed as targeting not just the patriarchy, but the very existence of men.”*

*Some of the methods these supposedly endangered men (and, as Bailey Rogers would remind us, no small number of women) favor for self-preservation harken back to controversial periods of our history. Colin Langley of the American Family Association has begun making speeches reimagining the eugenics movement, in which he attempts to knock the stigma off of forced sterilization. He is fond of saying things like, “A sane society will not allow itself to be swallowed whole,” and, “All men are created equal” is an idea worth protecting.” Other proposals take as their spiritual antecedent the Japanese internment camps of World War II, arguing that people with GDS should be rounded up and quarantined. Not forever, of course, but until a cure is found. A more modern twist on what is essentially the same idea would have people diagnosed with GDS fitted with tracking devices, like those locked around the ankles of criminals on probation.*

*Forsythe views the claims that men face potential extinction as empty fear-mongering. “Even the most virulent of STDs has never infected anywhere near 100 percent of the population,” she says. “Heterosexual men and women are going to keep on breeding, just as they always have. What men are facing is not extinction, but a demographic shift into minority status. And like any historically powerful majority facing a demographic shift, they’re scared of being marginalized. So they’re over-reacting. These proposed laws are nothing more than an attempt to retain power.”*

*But not all who advocate legislation to curb the spread of GDS cite the need to protect men. Some of them say that new laws are necessary to protect women, and motherhood itself. Representative Matthew Hock of Texas argues that motherhood draws its virtue from being an unconditional loving relationship with a genetically distinct child. Of women with GDS and the children born to them, he says, “It’s wrong to call it motherhood. Mothers are women who bring a new person into the world. But these aren’t new people, are they? Just younger versions of people we already have. This disease takes a mother’s love and turns it into the grandest narcissism.”*

*Hock has sponsored legislation that would require known GDS carriers to register their movements with the government, in a manner similar to the National Sex Offender Registry. Women’s rights groups have already dubbed Hock’s proposal the Asexual Offender Registry, and say that he is attempting to criminalize having a medical condition. Hock counters that GDS carriers have been altered on such a fundamental level that simple prudence demands that they be watched. He notes that his legislation carries no requirements other than that those with GDS be monitored, with specifics of implementation and punishment for noncompliance left up to the states.*

*Hock’s opinions—that GDS women aren’t real mothers, that people with GDS are fundamentally different than those without—are especially worth noting, as he is the representative for Texas’s 22nd congressional district, covering a significant chunk of the city of Houston. Hock makes plain that he does not consider the GDS community to be among his constituency, but the fact remains that Houston is home to some of his grand narcissists. Candace Montross is one of them. By now she should be used to the leaders of her community claiming that she is not really a mother, nor her children human beings. It certainly is not a first for her.*

\*\*\*

*Ms. Montross has no further statements for the media, and asks that her family’s privacy be respected.*

*Candace’s attorney had finally written back, and that was the entirety of his message. Tess had read it a half dozen times, hopelessly revisiting it over and over in search of some ambiguity or hidden opening. But there was nothing. The short*

sentence was a barrier with no chinks or cracks. This was the final denial, an ultimate dead end. Still, she kept pulling it out and parsing it anew.

Tess was looking at it outside the hotel lobby when her mother Layla pulled up. She rolled down the passenger-side window of her teal sedan, propped her sunglasses above her eyebrows, and called, "Is that my daughter I see?" She came around the car. "Look at you." she gripped Tess's shoulders and looked her up and down. "Let yourself go, huh?" She gave Tess a kiss on the cheek.

"Yeah, I just keep eating and eating. No reason for it. Can't help myself, I guess," said Tess.

"Well hop in, then," Layla said. "Let's enable you."

Tess stuffed her phone away, swung her suitcase up onto the back seat, and got in the car with her mother. They crept along the narrow street near the hotel, then out onto a wider avenue. Layla turned down the radio chatter and said, "So how are you? How's your woman?"

"I'm fine. Judy's fine too. Going a little overboard about schools, but she's always happiest when she's going overboard about something."

It was quiet in the car for a moment. "Shopping first or food first?" asked Layla.

"Food."

"I'm taking you to the new best Lebanese place for lunch. This one's a hole in the wall, but the best restaurant kafta I've had in years. And their mujaddara."

"Funny how the best one is somewhere different every time I visit."

"They go through their ups and downs," her mother said. "Plus, it's not like you visit that often."

The row houses slid by like a flip book, whole blocks of fake stone and plaster in a dozen colors, masking the dull uniformity of identical façades that huddled behind perfunctory patches of lawn. There were grungy-looking convenience stores and liquor marts on the corners, and the sidewalks were populated with laconic dog walkers and midday stroller jockeys.

"So," Layla said, flicking the turn signal and swiveling to check her blind spot, "What are you all worked up about?"

"Excuse me?"

"What's pissing you off?"

Tess felt an old, familiar empty space open in her chest. "I'm fine, Mom."

"You're stiff as a plank and I can hear you grinding your teeth. Are you going to tell me what's wrong, or are we going to spend the day cordial and bored?"

Tess's mother had always been like this. It wasn't that she didn't believe in privacy, it was that she didn't seem to think Tess specifically was entitled to any. Her brother Emilio got a long leash, but her whole childhood her mother had insisted on total access. She offered guidance for each grade school intrigue, opinions on every middle school disaster. By Tess's teenage years, her mother's ubiquitous advice had sparked a cold war between them. Or maybe lukewarm. "Cordial and bored" was new, but Layla had no shortage of ways to call her petulant. Her mother's many disappointed dictums had been swirling in Tess's head for months, a mental inventory of things to remember not to say when Decaf was older. "Do you think families are built on secrets?" was one she used to like. "I'm just trying to provide perspective," was another.

When Tess came out at sixteen, her mother's response was that she was too young for those kinds of labels. That she wouldn't really know what she liked until she was older. In the face of Tess's self-righteous fury, she'd invoked it again and again: *the perspective of age*. The words still rang sharp in Tess's ears a decade and a half later.

She thought about Judy's advice, her key to interacting with her own parents: don't let their presence turn you back into a child. Hold on to the knowledge that the

hurts are old, while you've become something new. Tess breathed deep and let her jaw fall slack in her mouth.

Her mother wasn't wrong. She was upset. And it wasn't because of anything between them. "I just got some bad news," she said. "Work news. For the GDS story I'm writing."

"That's the same one you've written about before? The disease that lets women have babies without a man?"

"Don't say it like that."

"What?"

"It's nothing new to have a baby without a man. I'm having a baby without a man."

"Come on, Tess. Don't be difficult."

"It's the same subject," said Tess. "But I'm writing for *American Moment* now. They read my earlier work. I'm making a name for myself in STDs."

"That's repulsive," her mother said, smiling. "What's the bad news?"

"I'm not going to get to interview someone important. Have you heard about Candace Montross?"

Layla thought, and shook her head. "Not ringing for me."

It was oddly pleasurable, her mother's ignorance. A reminder, despite how they had swallowed her life, of how fringe the issues still were. "Well. She's kind of the heart of the story. But I just heard from her lawyer that I can't talk to her."

"You've started taking 'no' for an answer now?"

"I've been at it for a while, Mom. After a certain point, the line between tenacity and harassment starts to be kind of blurry." Tess put her forehead against the window, then pulled back, wiped at the face-print with her sleeve. She tucked her head into the hollow of her elbow instead. "I don't know. It's getting to me more than it should. I'll be happy when the hormone flood is over."

Her mother just laughed.

They went past an old building with a new sign that read *Mashawi Lebanese*, and Layla announced "Here we are." She turned up a side street and looked for a spot to parallel park, passing up two that Tess thought were manageable before finding one to her liking. They walked back around the block and up to the flaking green door of the restaurant. Inside the tables were all four-tops with plastic tablecloths and silverware rolls in paper napkins. There were no customers, but there was a man in an apron standing near the door, with half-receded hair and a lined face. He smiled when they came in.

"Back again?" the man said.

"I brought my daughter Intessar with me this time."

"A pleasure," the man told Tess. "Your mother is one of our best customers. She comes here all the time."

"She knows what she likes," Tess said.

He led them to a table, poured two cups of water, and handed them a pair of laminated menus. Layla gave hers right back without a glance. She ordered kofta and labneh and said that they both wanted bowls of *adas bis silq*. "And tea for me, and I'll bet my daughter wants coffee."

"We only have instant," the man said.

"That's okay, Mom," Tess declined.

"What, it's good enough for you to hide in your room, but no good now?" her mother said, and turned to the server. "Instant will be fine."

When Tess was fourteen years old, her burgeoning coffee addiction had been a scandal between them. Her mother thought it some kind of unconscionable toxin, one that would ruin her complexion, her attitude, her entire life. She'd reacted to finding a stash of red canisters under Tess's bed as though they'd been packed with drugs.

Sitting across a table, watching her mother be so forcefully considerate, Tess wondered how much it was Layla's disapproval that fueled her earliest affections for the stuff.

"You know we're calling the baby Decaf, right? I'm not supposed to drink coffee."

"Aren't you in the second trimester now?" her mother asked. Tess nodded. "Then you're out of the danger zone. Don't let them push you around. Drink what you want."

Tess recognized the olive branch hidden in her mother's thorny insistence. And Judy wasn't around to judge. She conceded, and handed over her menu. "Mother knows best."

Layla grinned and ordered for them both. The man withdrew to the kitchen and returned with a teapot and teacup for Layla and crazed brown mug of coffee for Tess. She took a sip, and felt every cell in her body pucker to attention, welcoming a long-absent friend. Not just four months absent; it had been years since she'd last had instant coffee. Judy hated the taste of it. At home they had a fancy German coffee robot that ground beans individually for every cup. But to Tess it was the flavor of sneaking out her second-floor window and staying up until sunrise. The flavor of road trips and finals week and late internship nights. It was being alert and capable in a way she always used to feel, but now never did. Even Decaf seemed thrilled, kicking an enthusiastic tattoo as the warmth from the drink suffused her. It was too fast to be a reaction to caffeine. Had to just be that when Mommy's happy, Baby's happy.

Tess downed the rest in two gulps and handed the mug back for more when the man arrived with their soups. "Well? Still with us?" her mother said.

"Yeah. I think I should have enough time left for a last meal, at least."

"It's a good one," Layla said, and picked up her spoon.

The soup was all soft lentils and onions glowing against dark green wilted leaves, garnished with a wedge of lemon. Tess squeezed in the lemon juice, stirred, and tasted. It was good beyond all reasonable measure. If the coffee had been an overdue reconciliation, then the soup was an epiphany. Tess thought, not for the first time, that her pregnancy had turned eating into something she felt like she shouldn't be allowed to do in public.

"It's impossible to describe how good this is."

"Aren't you supposed to be the writer?"

"The words for this don't exist."

The *kafta* and *labneh* were just as good, and the entrees when they arrived. Over dinner they talked about their work, Tess about her meetings with politicians and Layla about the internal bureaucracies at *Samplemetrics*. Layla described the software she'd just bought to try to resuscitate her Arabic. Tess catalogued all the new things she'd gotten at her baby shower.

"Oh, Judy told me that a car seat arrived from you. She said it was nice. Thank you."

"It's green. I didn't know if I was buying for a boy or a girl, so I just got one to match your car. You still have the green car?"

"For now. Might need something bigger soon. But green's still fine. The whole point of having the shower before we learned the sex was so we wouldn't get gendered gifts."

"It was the earliest shower I ever heard of."

"We missed you there, Mom. Why didn't you come down?" They'd invited her. Judy had even offered to buy her ticket and put her up in a hotel if she liked. But Layla had declined.

"I work, Tess. A regular nine to five. We don't all get to make our own hours. And not everyone is as comfortable living off generosity as you are."

Tess's food went down wrong and she went into a fit of coughing. She had to duck her face into her napkin, then swallowed half her water in one go.

"Are you okay?" her mother asked.

Finally Tess was able to choke out, "What does that mean?"

"What? Just that I don't need your girlfriend buying me plane tickets."

"No, the living off Judy thing. I don't live off her. I work too. That's the whole reason I'm here."

"But who bought your plane ticket?"

"*American Moment* bought my plane ticket. I'm writing for one of the biggest news magazines in the country. I have an expense budget."

"Well, that's very convenient. But I'm sure she would have flown you out if the magazine had made you pay your own way."

"Why is that a bad thing, Mom? Judy supports my career. We've been together for years. We're having a baby."

"You're having a baby, not her. Why do you think that is?"

"Because she's ten years older than I am."

Layla shook her head. "It's because she holds the purse strings. I'm sure Judy supports your career, but she's sharp. People don't get where she is without being smart. She knows what she's buying with her money."

Tess's eyes already burned from the coughing. Now her focus wavered and started to slip. Echoes bounced around the hollow place in her chest, sending tremors through her body.

"Give me the car keys," she said.

"Oh, come on, Tess."

"Give me the keys!" She held a trembling hand across the table, and her mother sighed and dropped the keys into her palm.

Tess went outside and walked back around the block to the car. When she was a child, this is when she would have run away entirely. Out the front door or, if that wasn't possible, through her window. And back then she wouldn't have been crying, just too furious to speak. The crying was a new thing, one that seemed to draw energy from reflection. Thinking about it made the tears come more strongly, which made her angrier still.

It was several minutes before her mother joined her. Layla slid into the driver's seat, but didn't say anything, just listened to Tess's bitter sniffing and reached behind Tess's seat for a packet of tissues to offer.

Tess took the package and said, "I'll reimburse you for the food."

But her mother didn't take the bait. Instead, she said, "I cried all the time when I was pregnant with you."

"Why? Did someone tell you your spouse was a conniving manipulator?"

"No one had to tell me. It was obvious."

Tess barely remembered the divorce, but knew that it hadn't been amicable.

"Still," Layla continued, "that's not why I cried. Not the only reason, anyway. I never cried with your brother, but with you. There's something awful about carrying a daughter. With a son it's not so hard to pretend that the world will stand aside and let him through. But with a daughter it's impossible. Sometimes I would think, what right do I have, when I know what it will be like? So I cried." She put a hand on Tess's knee. "I was crying when I picked your name. Strongest one I knew. Your father hated it, but I'd let him name your brother after himself, so it was my turn."

Tess's name meant "victory." Her mother's meant "dark-haired beauty," though her hair had gone mostly white. The name had fit her when she was young. And the laugh lines cracking her face suited now. She'd been born with an acid jocularity that finally showed on the surface.

"Judy's not like you think," Tess said, blinking her eyes dry against a tissue. "And our daughter wouldn't need the world to stand aside. She'd knock it out of the way."

"Maybe. And if you have a son?"

"It shouldn't make any difference," Tess said. But she thought of her brother.

Emilio had anxiety issues that far exceeded her own. As a child he reacted so poorly to conflict that in grade school he got permission to stay inside during recess. He always preferred solitude to company; the two of them spent the summer Tess was seven communicating entirely through long letters slipped under bedroom doors, the start of her writing career. These days he worked for the national forestry service, living in a park, checking in with the family a few times a year.

If men really were an endangered species destined for a future in zoos and on preserves, then her brother was ahead of the curve.

"Have you heard from Emilio?" Tess asked.

"He called me. A few weeks ago," Layla said.

"Did you tell him he's going to be an uncle?"

"I thought the news should come from you."

The car was beginning to get stuffy. Tess gave the keys back to her mother, and she started the engine running. Tess said, "Sometimes I think about going to visit him. Maybe when the kid's old enough we can all go on vacation."

"It's a lovely notion," Layla said. "I can't honestly say I think he would enjoy it, though. It's funny. I spent so much time when you were young worried about things that might hurt you. It never occurred to me to worry about how you'd hurt yourselves."

"You don't think Emilio's happy where he is?"

"I think you can be happy and still hurt yourself."

They sat a while longer watching cyclists and joggers pass on either side. When the thunder of their fight had died away it left a stillness, where cordiality was a comfort rather than a bore. Layla took them to her favorite shops of antiques and vintage knickknacks, where she looked at but didn't buy a set of wrought iron drawer pulls. She insisted, though, that Tess buy herself some bookends that caught her eye.

After that they went home, back to Layla's two story townhouse, pink brick with bars over the windows. They folded out and dressed the sofa bed in the living room, and then Layla said good night and disappeared up the stairs. She'd always been an early to bed, early to rise type, and it had only gotten more severe with age. She said she'd try not to wake Tess up when she rose with the sun, but wouldn't make any promises.

Tess sat on the bed and looked around. Her mother's living room was a confetti contrast of artifacts and styles, like an anthropologist's fever dream. Floral pattern couch. Calligraphy prints on the walls. Lurid santo from New Mexico. Decorative hookah from Morocco. A painted earthenware pot that Tess had given her, and a hand-carved gourd covered in Arabic script from Emilio. Layla had reasonable taste, but she never got rid of anything, and she cared more about individual objects than she did about combinations. Anything colorful, intricate, or recognizably ethnic was sure to catch her eye. The only things that really looked out of place were the plain white sheets on the mattress.

Tess felt a buzzing alertness that meant the caffeine had hit her bloodstream. And there was a bar running across the middle of the bed frame that pressed up under her weight. Tonight, for once, her trouble sleeping would be due purely to externalities. She got out her computer and read the email from Candace's attorney again. It was ridiculous, she decided, that everything should hinge on this one woman. There were so many. They were everywhere. And except for Candace, Tess knew them all.

She started a new typing.

\* \* \*

*Lynette,  
Candace's attorney says she is categorically uninterested in talking to the media. Since everything about her life is either locked up in court records or behind the fence at Kamp Kendall, I'm changing*

*the plan for the final section. We can keep the rest the same, though; open with Montross family, then general principles, and return to case studies. Just different case studies. Houston is home to plenty of Hock's grand narcissists. Here are a few I know I could get:*

*Sophie Bryant—landscaper, caught GDS from her husband who caught it from another sexual partner. (They're swingers.) Raising their three GDS daughters together, with the son and daughter they already had. She has topiaries of all the kids in the front yard, and lets them do seasonal decorations of themselves.*

*Kelli Fernandez—lawyer, caught GDS during a kidney transplant. Single, no children (she had a hormonal IUD), but does family law. A lot of custody work. Focuses on GDS cases now, and can speak very knowledgeably about them.*

*Christina Rickards—teenager who caught GDS from her boyfriend. Her dad beat her up and threw her out of the house after her second pregnancy. She's on number three now, says she plans to have them all. Moved in with an aunt and graduated high school a year early, now in a pharmacy tech program.*

*Dorothea Velazquez—comatose after a scooter accident in San Antonio, now in long-term care in Houston. She got GDS from a blood transfusion, has had two babies that she's never seen. Her family considers them miracles, a way for Dorothea to return to them. Devout Catholics. They are committed to raising the children as long as she keeps having them. Her older brother is a very caring, enthusiastic, and quotable kind of slightly insane.*

*Chloe Pitt—piano teacher at a conservatory and keyboard player in a succession of post-rock bands. She and her partner Steph, a CPA, decided to contract GDS intentionally. First couple I know who did that. They each had one kid, then opted for surgical birth control.*

*Intessar Mendoza—Me. I don't have it probably. But I'm pregnant from an unknown sperm donor. I'll be having a baby in about five months, and I don't know if it's a boy or a girl. But I do know that the whole generations-long history of social baggage, the whole framework for how we understand what having a boy means or having a girl means—that's all irrelevant now. Everyone thought it was settled, but GDS has put what having a kid means up for renegotiation. There've always been precious few constants for the world to offer a new person, and now there are even fewer. The non-GDS perspective on parenthood in a GDS world has got to be of general interest. I'm willing to talk about it.*

*I could go on. That's just in Houston. You want a humanizing face for GDS, take your pick. It's the new human condition. We're spoiled for choice.*

—Tess

\* \* \*

Tess sent her ideas for the new closing section the next day, emailing Lynette over expense-accounted wifi in the D.C. airport. On the plane she found that someone had pushed chewing gum into the powerpoint by her seat, and her old laptop's battery gave out before she touched down in Dallas. She searched out a plug in the airport to recharge it during her short layover, then checked her phone. Lynette had already responded.

\* \* \*

*This isn't supposed to be an op-ed. The feature standards of American Moment do not admit the kind of authorial self-insertion you suggest. We publish investigative journalism, not meandering autobiographical rumination. Besides, when was the last time you saw a Pulitzer Prize winner that used the personal pronoun?*

*You got this contract and this deadline because you claimed to be able to write me a feature to capitalize on the attention of the Montross case. I could have gotten any of my normal writers to do general overview. I do not want an alternate case study from you, I want an article that follows your original outline. For that you need access to Ms. Montross. If you can't get it, then your piece is irreparably broken.*

*Let me know when you have it.*

—LR

\* \* \*

She wanted to scream. She wanted to throw her phone against a tall airport window and watch one or both of them shatter to rubble. She filtered down the jet bridge and onto her next plane, people in the aisle deferring to her belly. She was in the seat at the back, next to the engine, where the noise and vibration swamped everything save her own futile thoughts.

By the time she landed in Houston, she was disconsolate. She stood puffy-eyed and travel sick on the curb until Judy pulled up.

"How was your trip?" Judy asked as she climbed into the car.

"Apparently a complete waste of time!" She told Judy what had happened, then got out her phone and read Lynette's response aloud, shouting the words *meandering* and *normal* and *irreparably*.

Judy asked, "Is that line about the Pulitzer supposed to be funny?"

"I don't know what the fuck she expects me to do," said Tess. "The court records are sealed, and her lawyer's stonewalling. There's no access. I've been tearing my heart out on this."

"I think you should calm down," said Judy, easing them out of the airport. "It's going to be okay."

"No it isn't. Okay is meeting my deadline. Okay is not having the bottom drop out of everything right at the very end. This is not how we get to okay."

But Judy was right. When they got home, she said to Tess, "I got you a present." She went to the tall table by the door that they used for mail and keys, and removed from its small drawer a scrap of green construction paper, which she handed to Tess.

The paper had an address written on it, and above that, *Florence Montross*.

While Tess was out of town, Judy had continued her hunt for Houston's greatest early childhood educators. Eventually her search took her to the kindergarten where Candace's oldest daughter had been placed. Judy had recognized her from Tess's pictures.

"I asked for some parent references, and the assistant principal just led me into the office and let me watch over her shoulder as she looked through the address book. I could have taken cell phone pictures of the whole thing if I'd wanted," Judy said. "I wasn't impressed by the professionalism there overall, frankly. I doubt I'll hire any of them."

Tess gaped. "And you were holding out on telling me all this why?"

"I was driving," said Judy. "I couldn't look at your face."

The next day Tess made her way out to a sprawling complex of stucco apartments, some of the buildings five stories high. There were retirees and college students. There were towels hung from balcony railings, incensed dogs barking from behind front doors, and shrieking children jostling for space in a minuscule pool. Heat mirages shimmered off the cars in the vast parking lots.

Candace's unit was on the third floor of building 22. For all the difficulty she had learning where to look, Candace's place wasn't hard to find. The numbers were screwed to the door over a dozen glossy coats of paint, bright and obvious. But there was no answer when Tess knocked.

She sat down next to the door, and felt a small relief that she could stall the meeting for a little while longer.

Ever since Kenny Kendall had said from across a pane of plexiglass, "I know who you are," Tess had known she would have to confront Candace someday about their connection. But she felt no more ready to do so now than she had in the prison. And her first goal couldn't be to apologize, anyway. She needed Candace to agree to the profile first. She needed Candace's story. The other could come later.

Tess's plan for what she would say when Candace showed up was only two layers deep. The first layer began and ended with "please." "Please talk to me, even though you've been telling me for weeks with your silence that you don't want to." "Please let me do a thing that will help me immensely and you perhaps not at all."

The second layer was basically a guilt trip. "If you tell your story, you'll be protecting others. Even your own daughters." Tess wasn't sure she really believed in layer two, and though it might be effective, she didn't want to use it.

After that, there was what. Begging? Tess feared that she would be just as easy to dismiss in person as she had been from afar. In that way, too, sitting and waiting was better than forcing the encounter. When she was rebuffed, it would be like falling from a lesser height.

People's footsteps sounded on the concrete stairs with reverberating thumps. They passed by in both directions, but paid Tess very little mind. It seemed to be the sort of place where people didn't concern themselves with their neighbors' business. Maybe that's why Candace was here. Tess wondered how many people in this complex read *American Moment*. Would her story upend Candace's world again? Make her feel more singled out than she already did? What right did Tess have to do that, really? Only, she supposed, as much right as Candace was willing to give her. Tess continued to wait.

Candace arrived eventually, of course. Up the steps thumped a young woman with wispy blonde hair and doughy cheeks. She was in a loose-fitting dress and immensely pregnant. A plastic grocery sack dangled from the knuckles of one hand, and in the other she held the fingers of a small child. A little girl in pink overalls, with wispy blonde hair and tiny, doughy cheeks. When Candace saw Tess, she stopped.

"Who are you?" said Candace.

"My name is Tess Mendoza," said Tess. She struggled back onto her feet, knees grown recalcitrant during her wait. "I'm a reporter. I've been trying to get in touch with you for a while."

"You're the one who keeps emailing Randy," said Candace. "I told him I was done talking to reporters. I think all the others gave up already."

"Well, I guess before I gave up, I wanted to hear it from you. Directly."

Candace looked Tess over. Her daughter picked her nose bashfully and practiced standing on one foot. Candace asked, "Are you like me?"

"I'm pregnant," said Tess. "Probably not like you though. Except sometimes I'm certain that it is. It's scary. There's no way to know for sure."

Candace climbed the rest of the way up the stairs and fished in the grocery sack for her door key. "It's not that scary. There are lots of scary things, but not that."

"Maybe you can teach me."

Candace's daughter said in a small voice, "Momma, need to wee."

"Just a second, honey," Candace answered. She slid her key into the lock and turned back to Tess. "Do you have a car? I could use help picking up the other girls if you have a car."

"I have a car."

"Okay. I guess you should come in, then," said Candace, and opened the door.

\* \* \*

*For a time after she was rescued from Camp Kendall, Candace lived alone. Her children were initially placed in a shelter, awaiting foster care. It took weeks for the attorneys general to determine that she was in no way complicit in the mutilation of her four daughters. But now the family is back together, living in an apartment on court-supplied housing vouchers.*

*Her oldest child, Florence (Johnnie Montross's mother's name), has started kindergarten. The two middle children, Lauren and Emily, spend their days in nursery school. Amanda, currently the youngest, stays with her mother. Amanda likes lizards and Band-Aids, hates wearing socks, and expresses ambivalence about her younger sister, whom she doesn't yet know, but who will be showing up in less than a month. Candace plans to name her newest daughter Hope, and the explanation she gives for why she chose the name, and what it means to her, is unimpeachably sincere.*

*"I'll go on the pill after Hope is born," she says. "I don't know if for forever, but I've got a lot on my plate right now."*

*It's true. In the evening, as Florence fills a dinosaur coloring book and Lauren and Emily play an imagination game using dish towels and Amanda as props, Candace studies for her GED. She does this every night before she puts her daughters to bed. The family lives in a two-bedroom apartment, and all the children sleep together in one of the rooms, on a pair of bunk beds. Candace is going to put a crib in her bedroom when Hope arrives.*

*Candace doesn't agree with Representative Hock's assessment that her daughters are merely younger versions of her. When asked about it, she doesn't discuss epigenetics, or use the phrase "nature versus nurture." She says, "No one's gonna take them to church when they're eleven and never let them leave. That happened to me, and it's not gonna to them." She puts her hand on her pregnant belly. "And there's stuff happened to them that didn't happen to me. And they have each other, but I only had myself. So it's not the same at all."*

*Candace doesn't lose any of her day worrying that her children may fail to develop unique identities. She's too busy keeping Amanda's shoes tied, consoling Emily that not every night can be macaroni and cheese night, comforting Lauren when a pen leaks on her favorite shirt, and convincing Florence not to use the profanity she's learning at school. "They look a lot alike, but not that much, because they're different ages. I never confuse them. I bet it's worse with twins."*

*During the day, when three of her girls are at school, Candace does all of the same budgeting and cleaning and logistics that get done by single mothers everywhere in the country. And when she's not doing that, she's meeting with attorneys and preparing to testify in court. Candace is a witness in two ongoing criminal trials.*

*She is a witness for the prosecution in the trial against Kenny Kendall, who made the decision to have her previous pregnancy aborted and her children sterilized. Since the surgeon among Kendall's flock who actually performed the operations took his own life in the police raid on the compound, Kendall is the only one on trial for that crime. He is charged with five felony counts, and under Texas law he will face life in prison if convicted. "It's what he wanted for me," says Candace of Kendall's potential fate. "Life in prison. I'm just trying to return the favor."*

*The other trial Candace is involved in is that of her father. In her father's trial, however, she is a witness for the defense.*

*"It's not that I like him," she explains. "That's not the point."*

*The point is that, of all the horrors Candace has experienced—in many of which her father was, in fact, complicit—the one he is charged with never actually happened.*

*The police, as a matter of course in a child abuse raid, took DNA samples from the suspects and victims. Candace's children share her genetic code. As a result, a standard paternity test will identify Candace's father as her children's father as well. Remarkably, the district attorney has chosen, on the basis of this evidence, to charge Candace's father with incest.*

*The case is ludicrous. It is an attempt to punish the guilty not through accountability, but by using legal precedent to subvert reality. But why is Candace, specifically, coming by choice to her father's defense?*

*"It's part he didn't do it. There's enough things that actually happened, why go making up ones that didn't. But it's also," she pauses, looks for the words. "It's also that he has no claim on them. On my girls. He doesn't have a claim, and Johnnie doesn't have a claim, and no one does. No one but me."*

*So it is that Candace goes to court, defending a father she hates to protect the children she loves, as a statement to the world that she is their mother, she alone, and no one is ever again allowed to come between them.*

\* \* \*

"Have you forgotten there's somewhere we need to be? Let's go!" said Judy.

"I'm coming," Tess called down the stairs. "I was still getting ready."

Tess met Judy in the garage, resigned but bitter.

"What are you wearing?"

Tess had changed clothes a half-dozen times, stripping outfits off as soon as she finished putting them on. There was no pattern to it. When Judy's forbearance had stretched as far as it could, Tess finally found herself downstairs, wearing a beige cashmere sweater. No particular reason why. She said, "I was cold. This is comfortable."

"It's ninety degrees out."

"Why do you care what I'm wearing? Aren't you the one in a big hurry to get this done?"

They got in the car and headed toward BioPeek, an ultrasound imaging center in a nearby strip mall. Tess had delayed and delayed her sonogram, and finally canceled. She claimed she was too focused on writing the article. Then that she was too stressed waiting for the article to run. But it was up now, and Tess had no more excuses, and Judy no more patience. The obstetrician couldn't see her for another week, so BioPeek it was.

As they rode to the mall, Tess said, "It's a lie. People will be able to tell it's a lie."

"It's not a lie. Why this again?"

"There were things I left out. Similarities. Lots of them. Those girls finished each other's sentences, but I didn't write about that."

"Of course there were similarities. They're all twin sisters, sort of. You'd expect there to be similarities. You and your brother have similarities, don't you? Hell, my stepsister and I have similarities, and we're not even related." Judy pounded the horn and swerved lanes. "That part doesn't matter. What you wrote matters."

But ever since the article ran, Tess couldn't stop thinking about what she might have missed. She thought about the uncanny moments when the children would laugh in unison. About how Florence sneezed the same truncated squeak as her mother, just higher pitched. How did she know that was just normal twin stuff? Normal daughter stuff? She'd worked so hard to be authoritative, but what could you tell from a child? How would she even know normal if she saw it?

No one could say for sure how GDS kids were going to grow up. It had never happened before. There could be clear, obvious changes, ones that only manifested with age. Everything she'd written could end up looking quaint. Laughable. Catastrophically wrong.

Tess thought of Candace's reaction when she finally told her about Kendall. How Kendall had recognized her and why. They were sitting on Candace's narrow

balcony, eating pasta out of blue plastic bowls. Through the sliding glass door Tess could see the little blonde heads of the children, shrieking as they scurried across the thin carpet in their last ecstatic burst before bedtime.

"Just like a herd of puppies," Candace said. "Way they run over each other." She ate another forkful of noodles. "There were dogs all over at the camp. Always puppies around."

The interviews were over. Tess had all she needed to write the article. She put her bowl down and said, "There's something you need to know."

"What is it?"

"It's about Kenny. I've been writing about people like you, like the kids, for a long time. I have a lot of stories about it online. And Kenny, he used to get on the computer and go looking for things he didn't like." Tess paused, listened to the muffled giggles and declarations from inside the apartment. "He told me that he learned about it from my stories," Tess told Candace. "He figured out what was happening with you because of me. So, in a certain way . . . I mean. I had a role in what happened. So I'm sorry for that."

Candace hadn't thought much of the coincidence. She tucked her hair behind her ear, hugged her belly and said, "If not you, it would have been somebody else. I was different. Kenny didn't like things different. Something was bound to happen eventually."

The more Tess thought about it, the more true it was. Candace was the future because the world was full of people who didn't like things to be different. Tess had argued, as forcefully as she knew how to, as forcefully as Lynette would let her, that in every way that mattered they were the same. That there were no real differences.

But what if the truth was actually that there were just no *important* differences? And what if unimportant but visible was really all it took? How could you know it wasn't futile to counter novelty with humanity? How could you know that, for all your intentions, you weren't setting yourself up for a fall?

Under the chilly blast from the car's air conditioning, Tess was sweating.

When they got to BioPeek and signed in, Judy waved away the clipboard of forms. She produced from her bag a set she'd downloaded, printed, and already filled out. The nurses had Tess in the back and on the exam table in under five minutes.

"This is going to be a bit gooey," said the ultrasound technician as she squirted gel onto Tess's skin and spread it around with the end of the wand. Some of the gel got on her sweater, and Tess could feel Judy biting back commentary. Her grip tightened around Judy's hand. The wand could have been the flat of a blade and Tess didn't think she would feel any differently.

When Tess was sufficiently slimed, the technician started up the machine. Ghostly shadows resolved on the screen. It looked like nothing in particular, a confusion of internal architecture, until the technician pointed to a part of the haze and said, "There's the head." Then suddenly the image resolved into a moving cross-section of a fetus, and it was impossible to see it as anything else. The plane of the scan swept through the baby's body, forward and back, hands and feet coalescing into view and then dissolving again. The technician pushed some buttons, and a 3-D computer rendering appeared on the screen. It looked like a clay model put under running water. She panned the image to get a view between the legs.

"And there we have it. It's a girl."

"Look at that." Judy's voice was a rush of astonished delight. "Decaf's a girl. We have a lumpy little daughter."

Tess felt the startled-fish flutter of Decaf moving, and simultaneously watched her on the screen twist her hips out of view, as if shy. A motion, Tess realized, she knew. A gesture she'd felt so many times.

"We can burn a movie of this to DVD for you to buy, if you want," said the technician.

A noise escaped from Tess's chest. A wracked sound that convulsed her body and scrambled the image on the screen. It happened again, and then again.

“What is it?” said Judy. “Are you okay?”

Tess started to answer, but the words got caught and bubbled in her nose. She clapped her hands to her face in embarrassment. Her cheeks were wet.

“Leave us alone for a minute,” Judy told the technician, who put down the wand and started for the door.

“No,” Tess finally got out. “Come back. It’s fine.” She couldn’t tell if the technician listened or not. Her vision was too watery to see. Under Judy’s hand on her shoulder, her body still shook with sobs.

“It’s all right,” she gasped. “There’s nothing wrong. Nothing is wrong.”