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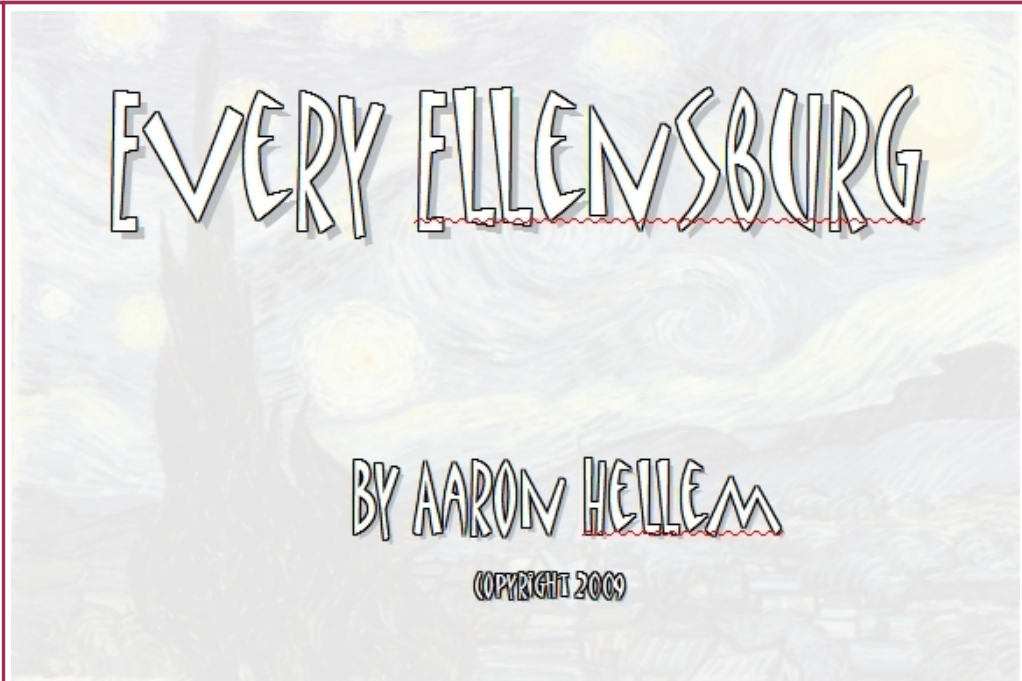
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She had a dream there was a baby inside the plastic bag she ran over with the car. In the middle of the street, she didn't even see it, in the dream, but heard it, felt it as the tire rolled over it. She didn't stop, in the dream, until, she remembers, she heard crying, saw crying in the rearview mirror. In the rearview mirror, in the dream, the bag rolled to the side of the curb, opened, spilled out onto the sidewalk. In the dream, she heard crying and that's why she stopped. She remembers that's why she stopped.

Why did you stop? Peter asked her. She stared at him across the table, so sure of himself in his twice-ironed over-starched shirt, the collar as stiff as cardboard, reliant upon right answers with his white shirt, blue tie, and black coffee. He would say it was only a dream, and expect that to solve everything. He waited for her to say something.

It was just a dream, she said. It pained her to have to put butter on the toast. The butter was still cold and hard to spread without tearing the toast to shreds. She wished everything in life was as murky and uncertain as the sludge color of her coffee. Did she drink hers black because Peter did? He slept better at nights when all his ducks were in a row and nothing unexpected had happened. Slept better at nights when she left the light on in the bathroom. Across the table, she noticed that his teeth were unrealistically white. How did all the black coffee he drank not stain his teeth as it had hers? His were the color of blinding cloud and hers were a wilted daisy. He wasn't ever bothered by dreams, was satisfied with the right answer and needed nothing more than that. His teeth too white and his face too pink. Like a baby born already thirty-six smelling of Old Spice. She wondered sometimes if he could actually bleed, or, if when he cut

himself, out poured sugar in thick granular streams.

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I feel today it's going to be a good day, he said, and usually when he said it felt like a good day, he would sell three or four cars. Or two fully loaded with all the options and extended warranties. He'd come home with flowers ready to make love to her to celebrate.

She knifed a pad of butter onto the toast, and tried to force it evenly across, but the butter was too cold, her strokes too forceful; the toast crumbled in her hands and all over her plate. This goddamn butter, she said.

He stood. Straightened his tie. You have to let it soften first, he said. He kissed her on top of her head. I've got to go, he said. Wish me luck.

Break your leg, she said. When she heard him pull out of the driveway, she threw the butter at the door. It hit the window in the cross frame, stuck, then slid slowly down the face of it. Sometimes I feel like butter, she thought.

In her dream, she sped up, aimed the right tires right for it. Anticipated the cantaloupe yield of fragile life met with unmovable rubber. Felt herself smile, though there was a knot in her chest she couldn't cry out completely. In the middle of the street, she saw it, but didn't slow down. Saw it stuck in the middle of her lane; the sides of it flapped with the breeze. She heard the crying as she approached, as she accelerated, as though the contents of the bag could sense the something wrong barreling down on it. The bag cried and she sped up, she remembers, aimed the car at it. Knew already how it would feel, how it would roll to the side of the curb, how it would look in the rearview mirror. Remembers the crying, remembers her crying and that was why she stopped. Felt them sting like bees down the side of her face. Remembers: This is why I stopped.

Peter undid his tie as he walked in with lilies. Had already unbuttoned his shirt as he told her about the fully loaded Ford 150 he sold to a rancher from Wenatchee. His belt off before he handed her the flowers. Pants down around his ankles before she could even get them in water. His movements excited and animated; his face flushed pink as a blistered sunburn. His hands already up her dress as she searched for a vase.

Peter, she said, but he didn't hear her. His white teeth must have made a humming noise in his head, she thought, that kept him from hearing her. From hearing the rest of the world around him. If it wasn't looking to buy a car, Peter always paid it half a mind. He whispered in her ear from behind, described the extra cab space, the spray-on bed liner, the bumper-to-bumper warranty. She held her breath because she knew it would not last long and he would gasp up on the sofa like a man saved from a sinking ship. She watched his closed eyes tremble behind their pink lids, wondered how the babies moved in his dreams. If there were babies at all amongst the rows of Ford 150s and the plaid blazers of potential buyers. No money down, he said, and shifted his naked body on the leather sofa. His pink hairless body made her think of something born too soon.

Everything arrived late. First the newspaper, staggered a day after so that

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the Sunday paper finally slapped against the door on Monday and Monday's slapped against the door on Tuesday. Then the mail, sometimes delivered long past four. Peter's promotion, the closing papers, and finally her period. After two weeks of waiting, she peed on the test stick. Set it on the sink. She sat back down on the toilet. Counted the squares in the tiles. Squares within squares and squares around those. Either pink as Peter's pecker, or blue as a faded bruise.

She considered how a baby always made her stop. The red lights of her life How strange it came down to colors, she thought. Pink and blue meant yes or no then, but in a few minutes would mean girl or boy. She tried to imagine an excited Peter upon hearing the news that the stork was on its way, the way his face would make its way along the spectrum from bright pink to deep struck match red. The way his hands would shake and he'd pace, unable to settle down or sit still. What would it mean for us? she thought. She checked the test stick to see the news: pink as the inside of exposed flesh. She felt like clarified butter. She wondered if there was a way to slip down the sink drain and away forever. If there was a way to find her way to the Columbia River basin, and then out to the Pacific Ocean. To float as a stain on top of the water, brightly lit as an oil slick. There was no telling what Peter would say.

She saved her morning sickness for late at night when he was sleeping and wouldn't hear her. Just in case, she ran the sink to drone out the sounds of her retching. Ran the bath to drone out the sounds of her sobbing. When she checked on him, he snored like a little baby. Slept as sound as a corpse. Probably dreamt of the end of the year clearance sales to make room the next year's models. All the Fords, Mazdas, Chevrolets. Even in his sleep, he smiled at the suckers willing to pay sticker price.

In the bathroom, she closed the door, and applied a foundation on to her pale face. She hid her eyes in black mascara, thick and heavy like a raccoon's. Lipstick red and wet as the inside of a jelly doughnut. She pinned back her hair. Stripped off her clothes. Submerged herself in the bathtub, under the water where the noise inside her head and ears was muffled, coming from behind the other side of a suffocating pillow. She sank and stayed sunk like a boat full of holes. She felt the hot water finding them in the various places on her body. Held her breath for as long as it took to turn the test stick blue.

There was a white light and she aimed for it, cried because she knew it wasn't heaven, wasn't her dying, but was only Peter's teeth, white as the light of death and dying. It's only Peter's teeth, she said. She remembered how the white light was a reason to stop, as good of a reason as anything else. Babies. Plastic bags. As good as confetti. It's not a dream anymore, she remembers, and doesn't stop.

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