

## Reclaimed Wood

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On Sunday morning Bethany's father called to tell her he was getting married. She saw his number on her cell, ringing on her bedside table, and assumed something must be terribly wrong; she sat up in bed, preparing herself. They rarely talked on the phone, Bethany and her father, except on special days: New Year's, Father's Day, and both of their birthdays. "We're tying the knot," he said. His voice sounded fine. Jovial, even. Bethany, pressing her phone to her head, let herself sink back into the pillows. She'd been sleeping in, sleeping off Ladies Night at Margaritaville, and it took her a minute to understand what he was saying. She thought what knot?

"It's this Saturday at Trish's church. Nothing fancy, believe me. We don't want any fuss. At our age, why make a fuss? Trish is handling everything. Just a simple ceremony at her church and I think some of her lady friends at church will have some cookies and punch for afterward. In the community room, Trish says."

There was a pause. Bethany burrowed beneath her bedspread, lying on her side, closing her eyes. She heard a voice – Trish's voice – in the background behind her father's

breath. She heard her own breath, trapped in front of her face by the blanket. Finally, her father continued: "Of course we would love you to be there. But only if you're free. If you already have plans for Saturday, no problem." Another pause. "Trish says if you do come, don't bring anything. Don't bring anything at all, no gifts or anything along those lines. As I said, we're keeping this very simple, so you won't be missing much if it's not a good day for you to come up."

"I want to come. If I can. Let me get back to you."

"That's fine. Just send me an email."

"I'll see what I can do. I'll try to open up Saturday for you. If I can."

"Well, either way. Come if you can, but don't worry either way."

"I'll definitely try."

"Don't worry about trying. Just come if you can. If it's convenient."

"Okay, dad, but it's less than a week's notice. Your wedding is still six days from now."

"That's why I said not to worry either way."

"I'm going to try, really hard." She heard Trish again in the background, and before her father could answer back, she said, "Bye bye and hung up, set her phone to vibrate, not that she was worried about him calling back. She was sure he wouldn't. He would wait for her email. He had always been someone who said exactly what he meant. It would be fine with him if she came, and fine if she didn't. She tried to fall back asleep. She should be glad for him. She'd only met Trish once, at Thanksgiving, but she seemed like a nice enough person. Anyway, it didn't matter if Bethany liked her. It was her father; his happiness, that mattered. She reached for her phone again and texted him aiming for cheery: BTW CONGRATS!!

On Monday at the office, she told Marcia, her office friend. "What should I wear?" Bethany asked. "What should I bring?"

"Oh, just a simple dress. A day dress. And a bottle of champagne, maybe, with a ribbon. They said they don't want any fuss, and they probably mean it. Older couples don't want knick knacks."

They were eating their lunch in the conference room of the Admissions Office, which they liked to do whenever it was free. It had comfortable swivel chairs and a clean microwave and a Keurig machine and a filtered water cooler. Bethany unsealed the foil wrapper of her Think Thin bar while Marcia waited for the microwave's beep and then took her place at the head of the table, removing the lid of her Tupperware container with a small pop, a moist cloud of white steam mushrooming above. She leaned back in the flexible chair, letting her dish cool down.

Bethany said, "What's a day dress?"

"What do you mean what's a day dress? A day dress is a day dress. Not something you'd wear out at night. Nothing low cut or strapless or shiny. Not a cocktail dress. No beading or gilded threading. You know. Something you would wear to work, but not a suit. Something you would wear to a nice lunch."

"Can I wear pants and a blouse? To a nice lunch, I usually wear pants and a decent blouse."

Marcia shook her head no. "Even though it's simple, it's still a wedding. Your father's wedding."

"Hmm. I don't think I have a day dress."

Marcia wrinkled her forehead. "It's a terrible time to go shopping for a spring day dress. Nothing will be on sale yet, before Easter. You could try Marshalls."

"Okay." Bethany liked getting Marcia's advice. Even if she didn't agree with it, she usually pretended to, so Marcia would keep on giving it. Marcia was forty-six to Bethany's thirty-seven, but it seemed

impossible to Bethany that less than a decade separated them. Marcia was already an "empty nester," as she'd called herself since her two daughters left for college. Marcia had short highlighted hair and wore skirts with matching sweater sets. Bethany wore boots and jeans, black or blue or gray, and chickened out whenever she thought about cutting her long blond hair, which had always been her most commented upon feature. Marcia was the treasurer of her town's garden club, while Bethany just this weekend had found herself performing drunk, giggling "Shake It Off" at singles' karaoke night.

Marcia forked a bite of her dish, puckered and blew on it. Bethany watched as Marcia slowly chewed, silently smiling and nodding approval until she'd swallowed and dabbed her lips with her paper napkin. "This reheats so well. I'm definitely sending you this one. Mexican lasagna. I left out the jalapeños for Bern, and you could leave out the chicken for Ed."

Since the twins left for college, recipes had become one of Marcia's favorite lunchtime topics, something she thought she and Bethany had in common: cooking for two. Mock Shepherd's Pie, Eggplant and Zucchini Bake, Apricot Chicken Pockets. Recipes that were economical and tasty and kept well in the fridge or freezer without getting soggy or limp in the microwave. Marcia always seemed so excited to pass them on to Bethany, texting her links to [tasteofhome.com](http://tasteofhome.com) and describing how she should best prepare and serve each dish to Edward. Bethany sort of enjoyed scrolling through the colorful close-ups of hearty main-course meals on her phone screen. She didn't want to be a wallflower and admit to Marcia that she rarely cooked and when she did it was almost always French toast. Edward had been the cook between the two of them, and Bethany had always been good-natured enough to pretend that she liked his vegetarian concoctions.

She hadn't yet broken the news to Marcia, either, that she and Edward were no longer a couple. He'd moved on. Bethany had been meaning to tell her and she would, someday soon, someday when she felt ready to return to another one of Marcia's favorite lunchtime topics in pre-Edward times: all the different people Marcia knew that



Bethany could possibly date.

Bethany got a plastic spoon from the coffee station and sampled a taste from the corner Marcia's dish. "Oh my god. Seriously. That is so good."

Marcia widened her eyes, touching her bangs with her pinky. "Isn't it? And Ed would like it. Without the chicken, that is. Wouldn't he?"

"Sure. Without the chicken."

Marcia leaned back on the padded headrest of the conference chair, regarding Bethany for several moments of silence. "Well. At least make sure he wears a nice jacket. That Edward of yours. Something normal, not like that shirt of his."

"What shirt?" Bethany knew what shirt. Black linen, with a front panel of complicated blue needlework. It was a Slavic folk shirt, according to Ed. Hand-embroidered. He'd worn it to the office holiday reception and to the twins' graduation party. If he and Bethany were still dating and he were going with her to her father's wedding, he would have worn it. Most likely.

"You know," Marcia said. "That shirt of his."

Bethany put a puzzled furrow on her brow.

"Anyway. It doesn't have to be a suit, but at least a sports jacket. And decent shoes."

Bethany pressed on her chair's lever, adjusting the seat: a little lower, a little higher. "Well, I think it's his weekend with his kids. So he probably won't go to the wedding."

Marcia held the tip of her pinky to the center of her forehead and breathed through her nose. Ed had already had his children, with his ex-wife, and even if he and Bethany ever got back together, he didn't want any more.

Marcia brought another forkful of casserole to her mouth, and

Bethany bit down on the yellow chalkiness of her lemon-flavored protein bar. Together they chewed, they swallowed.

"I would miss the chicken, though," said Marcia wistfully.

"Me too," Bethany sighed. "I would miss it."

After work on Thursday, on an impulse, instead of heading home toward her apartment, Bethany drove through rush hour traffic on I-84 to West Hartford to go shopping at Crate and Barrel. She'd been having second thoughts about bringing a bottle of champagne for wedding gift. It had occurred to her that maybe Trish didn't drink. At Thanksgiving, when the rest of them had toasted with Prosecco, hadn't Trish opted for Fresca instead? And Bethany knew she had a daughter of her own in court-ordered rehab. Alcohol with a fancy ribbon might hit the wrong note. Marcia was probably right about old people and knick-knacks, but Bethany, after all, was the groom's daughter. She shouldn't show up empty-handed, should she?

She felt a surge of optimism walking through the wide transparent doors into the brightly shiny space that seemed, at first, so perfect: neat shelves of kitchen gadgets and dishware, tiers of textured baskets, piles of monochrome throw pillows. She glided through the display, pausing by shiny margarita glasses and festive chips-and-dip platters, running her fingertips over table linens in shades called pear and vanilla and graphite; breathing in aromas of sage and mango from bulbous bathroom candles; gazing at arrays of brushed silver picture frames which always made a good gift for a wedding.

Why was it, then, that every object she picked up seemed to transform itself in the air above its place on the shelf into something awkward and wrong? Those copper-topped salt and pepper shakers, for instance, looked fun yet classic, but as soon as Bethany lifted them, she could see her father raising his eyebrow, wondering aloud why on earth a person would need more than one set of salt and pepper shakers.

ers, especially when the set he already had was perfectly functional. An amber-hued vase glowing in the light became a dull bottle, utterly unremarkable, once she was holding it in her palms. Her legs started to feel heavy, as if the bones of her shins were hollow molds being slowly but surely filled with cast iron. It had been a mistake, driving here straight from work. She was starving, she realized. Starving. But if she left the store to get something to eat, she knew she wouldn't return. She could feel her patience being sapped away. Across the walkway from Crate and Barrel was a Cheesecake Factory, where she could order a Sesame Thai Salad and a mini-chocolate cheesecake to go. She could eat half of it in her Camry in the parking garage, and the rest of it at home on the sofa watching Netflix.

"Can I help you?"

Bethany sighed at the salesgirl's high voice. She had a ponytail and a nostril-stud and looked much too young to be giving anyone advice about housewares. "What is that?" Bethany pointed to the coffee table sculpture she happened to be standing near.

"That's from our Reclaimed Wood series. So cool, right?"

Bethany looked at the girl, at her eyes, small and plain, no makeup.

"It all comes from India," said the girl. "From broken camel carts and things like that. And they gather it up and reuse it. It's sustainable. For the planet."

For a minute they both looked at the sculpture: It was a large metal hoop on a plain metal stand, and the metal circle was stuffed full of small wood pieces, shoved in tightly. Bethany wondered: Is it cool? Is it ugly? She said, "Camel carts?"

The girl nodded, her ponytail swishing. "And abandoned railway cars. Broken down bridges. Things like that."

"Also from India?"

"Oh yeah. It's all from India." And then the girl brought her hands together at her heart, like in yoga. Namaste.

Was she kidding around? Bethany lifted an eyebrow, and the girl smirked back.

"Do you like it?" Bethany asked, looking deeply again into the girl's eyes, which were no particular color: a dull grayish-brownish with almost invisible lashes and slightly puffy lids. Discerning eyes, Bethany suddenly decided. Young but wise.

"Oh yeah. I love it. If I had an apartment, I would want one."

"Do you live with your parents?"

"My step-father molested me. So I'm living right now in my grandmother's basement."

They kept their eyes locked, and Bethany considered: was the girl kidding again, like with the Namaste?

"Would it be a good gift?" said Bethany. "For someone that's hard to buy for?"

"Oh yeah, definitely. Because it's something most people don't already have. And it's green. People like that. Who wouldn't like something that's good for the planet?"

"Well, they should like it," said Bethany.

"That's right." The girl lifted her chin as if being challenged by imaginary people lurking outside the doors of Crate and Barrel, selfish people full of criticism. "They should."

Bethany didn't touch the sculpture, so it wouldn't transform itself into another stupid idea. She let the girl box it up, and at the cash register Bethany said, "Good luck. With everything."

"Thanks. I can use it." Again the girl smirked, and Bethany thought she was a regular high school girl, probably, working for gas and wardrobe money, messing with her customers to pass the time. Probably.

Bethany left the store lugging the gift-wrapped sculpture in a huge white bag with black handles, which she hoisted into the backseat of



her car. She strapped it in with a seat belt so it wouldn't slide, and driving home on the dark freeway, she glanced at it now and then in her rearview mirror.

She'd forgotten about being hungry, but she drove through Burger King on the last exit before home because she was afraid of being starving again later. She had no food in her apartment. "Don't do it," she said out loud before pulling up at the intercom. She ordered a BBQ bacon crispy chicken sandwich and two Whopper Juniors and a medium Minute Maid and parked and ate the food quickly in her car without taking off her seat belt, although she thought she should at least take off her seat belt, but she didn't, even though she felt it pressing down on her stomach as she slurped the last swallows of lemonade. She left it on. It was over quickly, the eating. She swiped away the crumbs and wiped her face and balled up the trash and tried to toss it into the wide mouth of the garbage receptacle by the exit lane as she drove away, but she couldn't quite reach. UGGGHHH, she said out loud, trying to reach. She had to put the car in park and undo her seat belt and open her car door a ways to finally shove her garbage into the ketchup-smear hole beneath the glare of the parking lot light as her engine idled and throbbed.

Late Friday night Bethany searched in her closet for something to wear to the wedding. During the week, she hadn't forgotten about going to Marshalls for a new dress, as Marcia had suggested, but she'd found herself not doing it. She didn't like shopping for clothes when she was between sizes.

In her closet were a few skirts but no dresses except for her black dress. It was a nice dress, sleeveless and somewhat elegant. A cocktail dress, the saleslady at Macy's had called it. She'd purchased it maybe five years ago for a Singles Soiree at the Water's Edge Resort, and

she'd looked decent, actually, with glittery high heels and her hair up in a French braid bun. It had been a dismal night, though, with hardly anyone on the dance floor and way fewer men – of course! – than women, and everyone, it seemed to Bethany, trying too hard, not to be sexy but to appear fully adult and successful and perfectly happy with themselves.

She'd worn the dress one other time, to a funeral, which had actually been fun. Bethany had decided at the last minute to drive home to New Jersey – her mother's home – when she saw on Facebook that several of her old high school acquaintances would be at the service for Mr. Ruby, a popular teacher and the advisor of the Spirit Boosters and the Thespian Club. She'd never been in any of the school plays herself, nor participated in the pep rallies, but Mr. Ruby used to write kind notes to her on her English papers. C, four days late, but could have been an A. Love your empathy for Hester. Bethany could still see his blue-ink scrawl. She wore the Macy's dress because it was black, adding a gray blazer to cover her bare arms. The hemline was high, but she wore black tights and low-heeled black pumps she found, like a miracle, in the back of her closet. After the ceremony, the overflow crowd mingled in the lobby of St. Mary's, hugging each other, people who hadn't seen each other in ages or hadn't even attended Somerset High the same years, weeping a little, laughing a little at themselves for being so sentimental. Hug after hug after hug, like a wave, and Bethany knew it was only the memory of a kind man's attention during their younger days that united them, but at the time it felt real and she lingered there, in the middle of it.

Now, on top of the dress on her bed, she placed a wide pink belt at the waist and pink platform sandals beneath the hemline. Around the shoulders she arranged her mother's floral silk shawl. The pink of the embroidered geraniums among yellow daisies and green leaves matched her sandals and the belt almost perfectly. Bethany fiddled with the shawl's loose folds, enjoying as she always had the feel of the silky material between her fingers. She couldn't remember the last time she'd worn it, but she'd had it forever, since she was a young girl and had appropriated it from her mother, who didn't like it.

It had been a Valentine's Day gift from Bethany's father to her mother. The three of them had gone to Green Gables for an early dinner, as a surprise. Bethany's father had made the reservation and put on a tie and blazer. Bethany remembered the way her mother had sighed before she went to change out of her warm-up suit, which was her favorite thing to wear, into something "more presentable," as her father suggested. Into the restaurant he carried a shopping bag from Neiman Marcus, and even as a child Bethany somehow knew not to inquire about it, to pretend it didn't exist while they were all seated and ate their entrees and were waiting for dessert, which is when he reached into the bag and handed across the tabletop a large rectangular box tied with a ribbon to Bethany's mother, who smiled a little, a smile that didn't change a bit when she took the top off. "What is it, Lyle?" She took a square of fabric out of the box, which unfolded dramatically as Bethany jumped up to help her, grabbing two ends of the slippery-soft material like she did when helping to fold sheets from the laundry. "Is it a tablecloth?" her mother asked.

It seemed as big as a tablecloth, with a pearly black background and flowers of bright pink and yellow swirling from one corner to the next, and frilly fringed edges, but the fabric was too delicate, almost translucent, to be a tablecloth.

Her father said, "It's an accessory. It's a Floral Wrap. There are many ways for ladies to wear it."

Bethany's mother blinked and gathered it into a clump on her lap.

"Many ways," her father repeated.

The two of them, Bethany's parents, looked across the table at each other, and Bethany, even though she was only about eight years old, maybe nine, understood exactly what they were thinking: here was her father, going out of his way to make an effort, to try to make things nice, only to be rebuffed, unappreciated; here was her mother, once again being given something that in no way suited her, being told without words, once again, that she wasn't enough like the kind of woman that her husband preferred.

The shawl, Bethany thought, the floral wrap, did just the trick for brightening up her black dress for a daytime affair. She turned off the lights and slid under the sheets and fell asleep on the very edge of her bed beside her outfit.

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During the two-hour drive to Waltham, Bethany listened to a true crime podcast about an abducted boy and the tangled web of suspicious relatives who were most likely involved. When her mind wandered, she sang "The Tide is High" with her iTunes five times in a row, practicing for next week's 80's karaoke night. The time zipped by. She parked in the gravel lot behind Calvary Presbyterian and walked around to the front of the building.

The church was traditional New England white with a steeple and narrow green-shuttered windows. Attached to one side was a more recent addition, a low rectangle covered with vinyl siding. Bethany walked up the three stone steps and through the heavy church door, which was painted dark rubbery green to match the shutters. In the lobby was a table with two women – one large and one small – seated behind it. On the table stood a small vase with just two daffodils, stems stiff as if freshly cut, the blossoms' orange centers looking upward at Bethany like startled eyes. Flowers, Bethany thought. Why didn't she think to bring nice flowers, instead of the reclaimed wood sculpture?

"Welcome!" said the large woman with a toothy grin. She shouted it with glee, which made Bethany's head snap back. Hanging close to the ceiling, a banner made of green felt with gold felt letters said REJOICE AND BE GLAD!

"Are you here for the wedding?" said the small woman, very quietly, her expression neutral, as if the two of them had planned to contrast each other in all measures.

Both of them were wearing dresses, though, Bethany noticed, in similar springtime prints. Bethany fingered the loose knot of her floral



shawl, which covered the cleavage at her neckline's V just fine. It was fine.

"I'm a guest." Bethany smiled back at the big one. "I'm the daughter."

The woman's lips slowly closed over her chunky teeth. The two Welcome ladies exchanged worried glances.

"Trish's daughter?" said the small one cautiously.

"Nooo," Bethany lifted an index finger, correcting them. "The groom's daughter. Bethany. Lyle's daughter."

"Oh, Lyle's daughter," exclaimed the large woman, her taffy-pink gums reappearing. Then they both stared at Bethany for a moment with their heads slightly tilted and Bethany realized that this was the first they'd heard of her. Her existence.

"Trish and Lyle...that is, Trish and your father," said the small one in her hushed voice, stepping out from the table, "are in the prayer room with Pastor Jim. Receiving blessings."

Blessings? What did that mean? What were they doing in a room called a prayer room? Her father didn't pray. Not that Bethany had ever seen. They'd never been a church-going family. Once when Bethany wanted them to all say grace at the dinner table like her best friend's family did, her father had sat silently in his chair and stared at the butter dish while her mother gave the "God is great, God is good" ditty her best shot. Were he and Trish kneeling on the floor now or on some kind of special cushions while Pastor Jim made signs of the Lord in the air above them? Or were they sitting on regular chairs in a triad, holding hands maybe? Was he closing his eyes? Her father, that is. Was he bowing his head?

The Welcome lady carefully gestured to the double door behind her. "You may be seated in the sanctuary. The ceremony will be starting before too long."

"Is there a gift table?" Bethany asked. "For wedding gifts?"

"Do you mean the donation table?" whispered the small lady.

"I don't know. Do you call the gift table the donation table?"

"We call the donation table the donation table. It's for donations for our special family."

"They're Guatemalan," interrupted the big one.

"That's what they requested," the small one continued. "Lyle and Trish. In lieu of gifts."

"In lieu of gifts?"

The welcome lady breathed from her throat, which meant yes. "We're their sponsors. Especially since Mr. Ramirez isn't eligible for disability, and Ramon, the little one, needs a new asthma machine. The table is in the community room if you care to leave a donation. There's a basket for checks."

"Or gift cards," the large one added loudly, still seated behind the table. "Like Stop and Shop cards. Or Staples. For the kids' school supplies."

The small woman nodded. "Ramon is starting kindergarten."

"Excuse me," Bethany said. "I'll be right back. I'm going to get my gift from my car. I'll leave it in the community room, and then I'll be seated."

In the parking lot, she looked through the backseat window at the gift, which was covered with an emergency blanket. When she'd gotten home from the mall on Thursday night, she didn't feel like lugging it into her apartment. She drove with it to work on Friday, but felt funny about leaving the big Crate and Barrel bag so visible to passing eyes. She noticed the Vertex Emergency Survival Blanket, still unopened in its plastic package, on the car floor. It had been one of her birthday presents from Edward. It wasn't a bad idea, she figured, if you ever found yourself stranded unexpectedly, cold and alone in the dark of night. It was a big sheet of crinkly aluminum, basically, dark silver,

and she'd wrapped it around the Crate and Barrel bag. Mysteriously shrouded, it could have been boxes of old books or a child with his knees hugged to his chest.

Bethany walked around to the driver's side and headed home.

She thought she could drive to Edward's house in Enfield on her way and ring his doorbell and wait on his front stoop, cradling the weight of the reclaimed wood sculpture in her bare arms. Before that she'd have to take it out of the Crate and Barrel bag and tear off its wrapping paper and bow. It's authentic folk art. From India. All hand-made. By an Indian family. When I saw it, I couldn't help thinking that maybe you'd love it. She thought she could call Marcia as if on a whim. Hey there! I have a fun errand I've gotta do! Wanna come with? She'd never called Marcia at home before and had only seen her outside of the office that one time, which was the twins' graduation party. But maybe she could call. They could go to Crate and Barrel together and Marcia would wrinkle her nose when she saw the coffee table sculpture and say "what were you thinking?" and they would both laugh and it would be a lark and Marcia would help her exchange it for accent pillows for Bethany's apartment in shades of Almond and Hummus and Bethany would take all of Marcia's advice, every bit, and afterward they would get an early dinner at Cheesecake Factory across the street and she would ask Marcia what she should order for the best leftovers. What would hold up the best in the fridge for the next day? Probably, she couldn't call Marcia because normally they never called each other, but still. She had been invited to the twins' graduation party. Her and Edward. That shirt of his. And she thought that she could drive to Crate and Barrel by herself and look for that clerk, that girl, the one who'd sold her the sculpture. Bethany would loiter till she saw her and then make her approach, lugging the huge bag with the receipt in her purse. Guess what? They didn't like it. "They didn't like it?" I know. Driving, Bethany gestured with one hand on the wheel and one circling by her temple. Crazy. Right? Some people. "Really, for sure. Some people. Some people don't really care about the world. What's good for it, you know?" And after they talked for a while, Bethany would know. She would look into the girl's eyes and know if she'd been telling her

the truth about that stepfather of hers. The one who molested her. Maybe the girl would start to cry a little. Listen, do you want to talk about it? Do you want to go to get some cheesecake?

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At home, Bethany placed the coffee table sculpture in the middle of her coffee table. First, she cleared the surface with one dramatic swipe of her arm, sending magazines and dirty napkins and Kashi wrappers and a remote control onto the floor.

She studied the sculpture, standing back several feet, her arms folded. It was fantastic, really. The metal hoop – about the size of a bicycle tire, supported by two oxidized metal legs attached to a rectangular base – was jam-packed with pieces of wood, forming a circular jigsaw of grainy tans and deep browns. The effect was mesmerizing. The more a person stared at it, thought Bethany, the more a person might see in the random designs created by so many small pieces crammed together – hidden shapes and messages. It could be a conversation starter if Bethany had people over to her apartment. If she invited her father and Trish, for instance, that could fill up a good chunk of time. She could ask them if they could see the shape of a giraffe stretching its spotted neck, and then they could all stare at the reclaimed wood, trying to see it. It was really interesting. Wasn't it? Or maybe it was ridiculous. Too big, probably, for such a small living room. If people were sitting on the chairs on the other side of the sofa, it would be hard to see their faces.

Bethany sat down on the sofa. She leaned forward and touched the sculpture, feeling the rough grain of one of the wooden scraps, which used to be a camel cart, maybe, in Bangladesh. With her index finger, she pressed on it. Hard, then harder. It didn't budge. Was it just the pressure of the metal hoop that was keeping it lodged so firmly in place? Or was there some kind of glue in there, too, holding it all together? She pressed with both of her thumbs and thought she felt the piece move a tiny bit, maybe just a little. Bethany wondered if a piece



came out of the middle, would the whole thing come tumbling apart, like a Jenga game, or would it just leave a hole?

She went to the kitchen and rummaged in the utensil drawer. It didn't take long because she wasn't much of a cook herself. Most of the gadgets in the drawer had been left by Edward, who liked to eat in. She picked up the silver mallet that he'd used to crack a fresh coconut for Thai curry. She liked the heft of its handle in her palm. She returned to the coffee table, bracing the sculpture with one hand on the top of its circular frame, tapping lightly with the mallet on the reclaimed wood, testing for the right spot, getting ready to strike with one swift blow to the center of the thing.

“Once upon a time you only smiled and joked and laughed and talked, those hands spread out and your heart open to everything I suggested.

— *Stephen Dineen*