

## Leslie Johnson

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### Next Half Century

Nan reaches under the seat where she's stowed her purse, lifts it to the lap of her new micro-fiber pants, guaranteed by Travelsmith catalogue not to crease even worn for hours on a cramped plane. Although she rarely travels, she ordered three over-priced, wrinkle-free outfits for her weekend trip to Arizona, where soon she and Cindy O'Sullivan will be toasting their fiftieth birthdays on the patio of Miguel's Mexican restaurant.

She unzips the interior pocket of her handbag and wraps her fingers around the bracelet within, feeling the heft of its sterling silver links, the variegated edges of its dangling charms. She releases her plastic tray from the seat-back and spreads the bracelet across its center, adjusting the charms to face upwards, touching them lightly with her pinky. The miniature Christmas tree; the silver dolphin from Sea World; the heart with its chip of amethyst, Cindy's birthstone...

"Guess how long I've had this!" Nan says, rather loudly.

The businessman beside Nan grunts, his meaty fingers pausing briefly above his laptop, but he doesn't make eye contact. Apparently her slippery new travel garments have granted Nan the power of invisibility. He is, what—five years younger than she is? Maybe ten, at the most?

"Thirty-five years! Can you believe that?" Nan raps her fingernails on the tray next to the bracelet, smiling. "It's not even mine," she continues brightly. "It belongs to my friend. My best friend from when I was a girl, Cindy O'Sullivan, the one I'm going to visit in Phoenix. I was cleaning out a closet, and I found her bracelet in this little white beaded clutch I used to carry to the proms in high school. After all these years! Maybe I was holding it for her at one of the dances. I can't quite remember now."

Nan has been practicing this little speech in her head, and she's glad to have the chance to practice it out loud. It sounds perfectly natural, as far as Nan can tell. She shouldn't worry.

The man nods his head, just barely; his eyes remain riveted on his screen.

Nan places one fingertip on the waving tail of the stallion charm. She was fifteen years old when she stole Cindy's bracelet from the bedroom that Cindy shared with her two sisters, Maureen and Bethy, the youngest, who was born with Down syndrome. Nan leans back, closes her eyes, and sees Cindy's cluttered room, the old ballerina wallpaper tacked over with Cat Stevens posters and macramé tapestries, the aroma of Yardley cologne mingling with the scent of stale urine from Bethy's oversized crib.

They had the bedroom to themselves—Maureen rehearsing *Godspell* with the church drama club and Bethy riding along on Mrs. O'Sullivan's "Meals on Wheels" deliveries. Nan and Cindy had changed out of their school clothes into short white shorts and tight midriff tops. Soon they would walk back to the high school to watch the varsity baseball game, and

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Nan loved the way they both looked in those shirts. Cindy's breasts were bigger, but Nan's stomach was flatter and had the better tan. Cindy was rummaging through Maureen's side of the closet for the sandals she wasn't supposed to borrow while Nan leaned across the bureau to study her skin in the streaky mirror, and amid the mess of cosmetics and candy wrappers and troll dolls with their knotted neon hair,

Nan noticed the charm bracelet in one of several open jewelry boxes.

Nan didn't plan it. But suddenly she plucked it out; she held it, concealed, in her palm. She walked over to her backpack, next to Cindy's by the bedroom door, and dropped the bracelet inside. Cindy didn't notice. Nan had absolutely no idea why she did it.

She didn't then, and she doesn't now.

It was so unlike her. Completely out of character.

Nan looks down at her tray, shaping the bracelet into an oval as if encircling a wrist. Her favorite charm is the one in the middle, a tear-shaped piece of pale

blue glass with a tiny brown seed trapped inside. It was Cindy's first charm, a gift from her parents for her first communion at St. Mary's. "It's a mustard seed," Nan remembers Cindy telling her at the party afterwards. Cindy puckered her lips, making a face. "I guess there's something in the bible about it."

"I like it," Nan told her.

Cindy said, "I'd rather have a cross like yours," pointing to Nan's necklace, a real gold crucifix with a small diamond at its intersection. The gifts Nan's parents gave her were usually much better than anything Cindy ever got. Nan's parents were not wealthy—her father was a history professor at Arizona State University, relocated from Michigan because of his asthma, and her mother didn't work at all—but Nan was an only child, while Cindy was one of seven siblings.

But Nan said, "No, you're luckier to have a charm bracelet," and she meant it. She liked the idea of adding more and more charms to it. And she liked the way the tan kernel

of the mustard seed seemed to float within the milky blue oval, the way the silver links rested loosely against Cindy's wrist as Nan read the inscription on the charm's back:

Mark 4: 31-32. Later at home,

Nan even looked the verse up in her bible. She memorized it. *What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable should we use to describe it? It is like the mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that birds can perch in its shade.*

After Nan stole the bracelet, she never once wore it. She's kept it all these years in her little beaded clutch. Except, contrary to what she told the businessman, she didn't come across it by mistake; she's always known its exact whereabouts in her well-organized bedroom closet, first at home with her parents, then at college, then in her Boston apartment, and then in the two homes, the smaller and the larger, where she's raised her own family in Connecticut.

The pilot is announcing take-off, and Nan returns her tray to its seat-back position, as directed, and re-zips the bracelet in her purse's pocket. The man beside her briskly snaps shut his laptop, cases it, replaces it with

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a *Money* magazine. Nan asserts her elbow onto the armrest between them.

"This part always makes me nervous," Nan says as the roar of the engines begins. He glances at her, lifting one side of his neatly trimmed mustache. She says, "I don't fly often. I used to. I used to fly to Arizona every year to visit my parents, but after my dad passed away my mom moved to Iowa to live with her sister, so it's been seven years now. I don't know why I've let seven years go by. I have very good friends, still, in Arizona."

He flips the page of his magazine. *Well screw you, bud*, Nan thinks, with undo annoyance. She closes her eyes. She thinks about Mark, how he told her when he dropped her off at the airport this morning to have a really fun time with Cindy. "Really treat yourself," he said. "Live it up!" Why did the hopeful tone in his voice irritate her so? "It's just a simple visit," she snapped. "It's not like we're taking a Caribbean cruise."

Actually, Nan had wanted a more extravagant weekend. She and Cindy had originally planned to meet at a resort in Florida, but when Cindy began to waffle (things were so busy at the firm right now...), Nan offered to come to Phoenix instead, where Cindy still lived, not far from the suburb of Mesa where they'd grown up. *I can get a room at The Pointe and we can hang out by the pool and you won't miss work for the travel days*. Nan could hear the pushiness in her own voice, but she couldn't stop herself. They were fifty years old, and they'd pledged to celebrate all of their big birthdays together, no matter what. For their fortieth, they went to Manhattan—shopping, restaurants, a show on Broadway, and a few clubs at night, still young enough then, but just barely, to get asked to dance once or twice. That was before Cindy's second divorce and rehab; before Nan's mastectomy.

The beverage cart is making its way down the aisle. Nan releases her tray again. She waits until they are both served their sodas and nuts.

"Can I ask you something?" Nan says to the man beside her.

She sees his chest rise and fall under his lightly starched shirt. He turns his face toward her, his expression completely neutral. His face looks very clean, as if he uses facial scrub for men, but under his eyes the flesh bulges. This is a man, Nan understands, who travels all the time for his livelihood. He has sat next to too many people, talked to too many of them.

She says, "Have you ever seen a mustard plant? Planted in a garden?"

His mustache moves slightly, side to side.

"I'm trying to picture what one would look like, but I don't think

I've ever seen one. Do people actually grow that? In their gardens?"

He picks up his cup and jiggles it; Coke fizzes around the ice cubes. Miffed, Nan leans back in her chair, presses the recline button. But then he clears his throat and says, "It looks like kale."

"Kale?"

"Lettucey. But bigger leaves."

"Hmmm."

He pulls at both sides of his foil peanut package, gripping it with his big fingers, and Nan watches, holding her breath for some reason, till the top seal opens with a small *poof*. He says, "I never grew mustard. But I've seen it."

"What did you grow?" Nan presses the button on the outside armrest, and her seat springs back to meet his.

He looks at her briefly, then into the peanut bag, shaking it. "Oh, the usual. Tomatoes. Carrots, zucchini, cucumbers, sugar snap peas. Nothing unusual. But my tomatoes were very nice. Very nice."

Nan would like to put her hand on his to stop that peanut bag from shaking. She says, "A lot of people in Connecticut are very into gardens. I'd like to get into it. Or maybe bird watching. I've been meaning to, ever since my kids left for college. Either birding or gardening."

The man says, "My girlfriend wouldn't water my garden. You know what? We broke up over it!"

He smiles, and unfortunately, his teeth are much too small for his large face, especially underneath that thick mustache. He finally shakes some peanuts into his palm and shoves them in his mouth, and Nan waits while he chews.

"My trips are usually short," he says, "and I usually don't need much help with watering because I do it right before I leave and right when I get back, but sometimes, you know, well, if you do get into gardening you'll see what I mean, when the weather is extremely hot and dry, you just can't wait. She wanted me to pay the lawn guy to water it, but that defeats the whole point of a garden. That's the thing she didn't get or didn't *want to* get. The whole point of a garden is that it's something you do for yourself. If not, then why not just buy the vegetables at the store?"

Nan says, "Some people don't understand what the point is."

"That's right." He looks at her and then tips his head back and pours the rest of the peanuts down his throat, barely chewing this time, as if swallowing medicine.

Nan says, "What about branches?"



She slides her packet of peanuts onto his tray, and he grips the foil sides, pulling.

"On the mustard plant," she says. "Are there big branches? That birds could perch on?"

He opens his mouth, morsels of chewed peanuts on his tongue. "Branches? I don't think there are any branches."

They both settle back in their seats. Relaxing to the vibrations of the airplane moving through the sky, Nan feels a sudden gust of optimism, lightness in her lungs. She and Cindy will probably laugh about the charm bracelet. It's really such a small thing.

At Miguel's, when they order drinks before lunch, Nan goes first and without even thinking says, "Peach Mango Daiquiri," and when Cindy says, "Sprite," Nan feels her cheeks flush.

"Me, too," Nan says quickly. "Actually, I'll have a Sprite, too." Cindy twists her face in a joking scowl, shaking her finger at Nan. "Absolutely not. Not an option. You're getting the daiquiri. You love the peach daiquiris!" The teenage waitress has a smooth brunette ponytail, khaki shorts, and acne spackled with concealing cream. "Bring my friend the peach daiquiri that she really wants!" Cindy insists.

The waitress writes it down. Underneath the table, Nan unzips the pocket of her purse and slips out the charm bracelet.

"It really means something, doesn't it?" Nan says when the girl leaves. "All these years, and here we are. Still together." She takes a breath, clenching the bracelet in her fist.

"Fucking *fifty*!" Cindy's eyes widen in pretend horror and her mouth drops open, giving her a double chin.

When she first saw Cindy waving to her across the luggage carrouseles at the airport this morning, Nan was glad she had several minutes while they both walked toward each other to negate any expression of sur-

prise that might have shown on her face. Cindy has put on at least thirty pounds, maybe more. When they embraced, Nan registered the solid bulk of Cindy's stomach, while Cindy pulled Nan closely against her. When they released, Cindy stepped back and openly admired Nan's chest. "Seriously, you can't tell at all," she told Nan. "I would have never known."

Now the chandelier above their booth illuminates the highlights in Cindy's thick blond hair, which she's grown long again, like when they were girls. She looks attractive, Nan thinks, despite the extra pounds. Nan herself has been going to the gym for years now, and her body has become muscular, hard-edged, but her hair is terrible: thin, cropped short, nondescript. They are still even, Nan thinks, in terms of appearance. Nan with her trim physique; Cindy with her lush blond hair.

Beneath the table in Nan's hand, the bracelet feels like a fistful of mismatched paperclips. She prods at it, trying to find the waxy surface of the mustard seed charm in the lumpy mass. She's ready to return it to Cindy, with her practiced story and a lighthearted apology.

The bartender arrives, his thick bicep flexed from the weight of the drink tray—Cindy's Sprite and Nan's immense daiquiri in a glass the size of a salad bowl, its stem thick as a flashlight, filled to the brim with frothy pink-orange liquid. Chunks of oversized salt glisten like rhinestones on the rim of her glass. She says, "I feel funny."

"Stop it. It's been three years. I hate it when people *don't* order a drink because of me. Really. I go out with the office people all the time and they drink like fish. Believe me. It doesn't bother me."

Cindy tears the paper from both straws and plops them into their glasses. Nan leans forward and sips, the sugary peach flavor filling her mouth.

"I mean," Cindy says, "at first I could tell they were kind of testing me. I could tell they were watching me while they were knocking back their martinis and scotches. Like they wanted to see if I could take it."

"Well, you showed them."

Cindy nods, narrowing her eyes. "That's right. And I think, in an odd way, that it's going to win me some votes for partner, you know? I've been humiliated and everyone knows it and now I'm working my way back up. If that's good for sympathy votes, I say, bring it on! And these kids I'm up against—my main rival is only twenty-seven, did I tell you that? So perfect, too—high achieving, spotless record—"





"Tell me about it," Nan cuts in. "My new director at the museum is only thirty-six. She has one of those digital photo frames on her desk that changes from one picture to the next of her two-year-old twins all day long."

Cindy tosses her head, her blond curls bouncing. "I think people secretly want people to stumble a little, and I've already stumbled. I splatted. And we joke about it, and the senior partners like that, at least most of them. At the last partner review, I was saying, 'I will gladly continue to pee in cup for you for the rest of my career,' and we were all laughing about it."

It's part of Cindy's agreement with the firm, Nan knows. Cindy told her all about it in a tear-filled phone call before she left for Betty Ford three years ago. One of the firm's clients was an orthopedic surgeon, and Cindy used his signature on a phony prescription for Vicodin. She filled it three times before she got caught. The doctor agreed not to report it to the police for a huge discount on his divorce fees, and the firm said Cindy could keep her job if she spent three months at rehab and submitted to random drug and alcohol screens for at least five years.

"Well," Nan says, making spirals with her straw on the slushy surface of her daiquiri, "your hair looks fantastic."

Cindy smiles, one cheek dimpling. "I only kept it short all those years to look professional. Especially since I was sleeping with Kevin and at least half the firm knew about it. But I'm too old now to have to worry about not being taken seriously. What I'm going for now is feminine warmth. Oh, God, Nan!" Suddenly Cindy presses both hands to her cheeks, breathing in and out with exaggeration. "I really need to be careful with myself now. I know that. There's nothing wrong with being an associate. But now that I'm up for partner, I'm practically *salivating* over it. I've always been that way, haven't I? *You* know. I just *want* things too much."

Nan feels a sharp pang in her chest, and she recognizes it as her own longing, but for what, she isn't quite sure. The waitress approaches, setting steamy platters of chimichangas and refried beans before them.

Cindy is raising her glass in a toast. "Here's to our next half century!"

Nan has to slip the charm bracelet into her pocket to free up her hands, needing both of them to lift her giant daiquiri in the air to clink glasses with Cindy.

They take a few bites in silence before Cindy sets down her fork. "Something's bugging you," she says.

Cindy's pale blue, slightly slanted eyes look intently into Nan's own. They could be fourteen again, Cindy's gaze spiraling them backwards, and

Nan feels sequestered tears pushing beneath the rims of her lower eyelids.

"Nan, tell me. The cancer's back?" Cindy's voice wavers. "That's it, isn't it."

"No, I'm fine!" Nan waves one hand in the air, bringing her napkin to her face with the other, wiping briefly at her eyes. "My last MRI was totally clean."

"Thank God." Cindy lifts and drops her shoulders, heaving a sigh. Then squinting, she points a finger. "But there's *something*."

This is it, Nan thinks; this is why she's flown all the way to Phoenix: to have her oldest friend look at her in exactly this manner of keen recognition, sizing her up and seeing her distress. Taking note of it.

"Oh, I'm ridiculous!" Nan attempts a weepy chuckle, the pitch much too

high. "Everything's fine. Really. It's nothing interesting. It's such a cliché! The mid-life thing. The empty nest thing. The fading marriage. Blah, blah!"

"Getting old sucks!" Cindy declares, but she is smiling, rolling her eyes.

Nan slurps through her straw in three long, icy pulls; a painful tingle takes hold in the front of her skull. "Do you know what Mark bought me for my birthday? A butterfly book. This huge book of butterflies. *Audubon Field Guide to North American Butterflies*."

Cindy puckers her lips. They both laugh a little.

"With a pair of binoculars!" Nan continues. "He goes, '*You're always talking about it*,' and I probably looked at him funny because he got all defensive. *You know, how you wish we could start a hobby together*.' But I never said *butterfly* watching. Bird watching, maybe. Or maybe organic gardening."

Cindy scrapes the remains of sour cream from the sides of the bowl, using her finger to get every bit off the spoon. "Maybe you just have to try it. You might really like it!"

Nan shrugs. "That butterfly book has been sitting on our coffee table for, what, more than a month now, and every time I open the cover my hands feel heavy. I end up lying down on the couch and taking a nap."

Cindy is looking across the restaurant for the waitress, who's at the bar flirting with the muscular bartender.

Nan says, "Remember that time we drove all night to San Diego to see the sunrise over the ocean?"

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"What time?"

"Senior year. We spent the whole weekend drinking and bodysurfing at the beach. We slept in my car. Remember that?"

Cindy tilts her head. "I think so." Her phone buzzes in her pocketbook; she slips it out and checks her texts, alternately glowering and grinning at the screen in her palm.

"We even skipped a day of school. You lied to my mother that we were taking Bethy to the Special Olympics."

Cindy shakes her head. "Bethy," she sighs, and then her cheeks flush and within moments tears well up in her eyes, trickle down her cheeks. Unlike Nan, Cindy has never been one to hold back tears. Quick to laugh, quick to cry. When Bethy's heart finally gave out as the doctors had predicted, eight years ago now, the funeral at St. Mary's was standing room only, and afterwards at the open house, Nan had watched, feeling shocked and oddly jealous, as Cindy and her whole extended family proceeded to drink themselves into a long, raucous chaos of bellowing laughter and sobs, shouting curses and praises up to God, pushing and pummeling and clutching at each other, until most of them eventually passed out in a primal heap on the living room floor.

The waitress has finally approached, jutting out one hip as she poses with her order pad, well aware, Nan is sure, of the bartender's eyes watching her from behind. Nan remembers finding her daughter's diaphragm hidden inside a sock in her bureau drawer when Sara was about the same age as this waitress. Nan routinely cleaned and straightened everyone's closets and drawers, so Sara must have wanted Nan to find it. She wanted Nan to know—to know *her*, Nan used to think, but maybe Sara had just been careless. Since her children moved out, Nan misses keeping track of their belongings, their comings and goings.

Cindy orders the flan, and Nan orders a decaf. Nan thinks of the charm bracelet, weighing down the light fabric of her jacket's pocket, but now the time isn't right anymore to hand it over and confess. Instead, she reaches across the table and gives Cindy's forearm a consoling pat and squeeze, and the gesture feels so right and familiar to Nan. Second nature.

"I want to tell you something," Cindy murmurs, close to Nan's ear. "But you're not going to like it."

"Just say it."

They are both whispering to abide by the rules of the Butterfly Pavilion, of which they were apprised by a teenage brunette in khaki shorts—oddly similar, Nan noticed, to their waitress from last night—before they were allowed to enter the netted structure, about twice the size of Nan's living room, within the grounds of the Desert Botanical Gardens. Soft voices only, she told them. And no touching the butterflies unless they touch you first. If you're standing quietly, the girl said sternly, and a butterfly lands on you by its own free will, that's okay, but don't grab at them. You can damage their wings, like permanently, she warned. She paused, letting them heed her words, before reluctantly lifting the mesh curtain of the entryway.

Nan would rather be lounging by the pool back at The Pointe. When Cindy had arrived at her hotel this morning, Nan was waiting in the lobby

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in her new swimsuit and coral-print cover-up, but Cindy said that it was better for her to have an activity now that she wasn't drinking. Nan felt a deep twist of desire for the old days when she and Cindy would sip poolside Bloody Marys all day long, gossiping and laughing, loosened by liquor and sun. Now, apparently, they had to *do something*. Cindy picked up an Arizona Republic from one of the lobby tables and flipped through the entertainment section, where she noticed an ad for the butterfly exhibit.

"Like I told you!" she told Nan. "You probably don't know what you're missing."

Now, inside the shaded Butterfly Pavilion, the misted air gives Cindy's face a dewy glow, and a huge orange butterfly has landed on her blond hair just above the curl of her bangs like a perfectly placed ribbon. She's lightly biting her lower lip, holding back a smile. "I'm sleeping with Kevin again," she whispers, then scrunches her eyes, wincing. "I know! I know what you're going to say."

The butterfly tent is filled with steam and succulents with wet petals drooping like pink tongues. Ceramic pedestals are placed every few yards,





where butterflies languidly lift and lower their gaudy wings as they suck up liquid the color of cherry Kool-Aid.

"I should have known," Nan whispers, shaking her head, then stops and draws in her chin. She stares at Cindy's eyes, glittery with the excitement of her confession. "That's what you were doing last night, isn't it? Hooking up with Kevin?"

Cindy lifts her palms in a gesture of helpless surrender. "I'm an idiot, right?"

"I suppose he's still married."

Cindy tilts her head; the orange butterfly flaps its wings. "His daughter's getting married this spring, too. He's under a lot of pressure. At home. At the firm."

Three blue butterflies flit between them, back and forth, and one of them alights on Cindy's wrist. "Oh! Look!"

"Hold still," Nan says. "Let's identify it."

She turns her back and steps towards one of the informational placards nearby. It doesn't take long to find it on the illustrated identifier: fuzzy blue thorax, pale blue wings spotted with black. Spring Azure. Of the *Lycaenidae* family. Nan moves her index finger in the air above the chart, as if still searching.

Yesterday after their Mexican lunch, they'd stopped by Cindy's condo, which was, just as she warned, a total mess. Her twenty-year-old daughter had moved back in along with her boyfriend and one of the boyfriend's friends. Their soda cans, used towels, and fast-food wrappers covered the dinette table and kitchen island. Cindy and Nan moved on to The Pointe, where they sat on the terrace while Cindy brought Nan up to date on the ever evolving saga of the O'Sullivan family: the divorces and court appearances and bankruptcies; the marriages and new babies and a lucky lottery ticket. At about six-thirty, Cindy said she needed to go by her office and finish some paperwork, then get to bed early. "I'm beat," she told Nan. "You must be, too."

Nan was taken aback. She'd assumed they'd have a late dinner together. Make a night of it. Maybe drive through the old neighborhood for laughs or nostalgia. When Cindy left, Nan went up to her room, which was lovely and spacious, the conditioned air dry and chilly. For a few minutes she sat still on the end of the bed, thinking. Even though it was three hours later on Connecticut time, she felt wide awake. After a shower, she sifted through her small suitcase, but didn't see the point in putting on the pretty sleeveless shift she'd planned on wearing out tonight. She looked at herself for a few moments, naked, in the mirrored

closet wall. Briefly, she rested her palms against her reconstructed breasts.

She threw on a baggy t-shirt and her yoga pants and headed out of the hotel. She felt alert and on edge as she drove toward Mesa, as if she was a foreigner in a precarious nation instead of a native Arizonan in home terrain. The freeways had been widened and of course the stores and buildings had changed, but once she took the exit to Mesa, everything seemed the same. She cruised slowly by Mesa High and then along the streets of her neighborhood in the dusk.

She rolled to a stop, engine idling, in front of her old house. The last time she'd been here it had still been her house. Her parents' house. It looked about the same, except the carport had been enclosed with stucco walls and a garage door. And the mailbox was new. Inside the lights were off except for in the front left bedroom, which used to be Nan's room. Its drawn white shade glowed like a blank screen, and Nan stared at it with impatience, as if waiting for a slide show to begin.

She drove down the block to Cindy's parents' house, where a silver RV was parked in the driveway and the cactuses by the front walk bloomed with shocking fuchsia flowers and children's bikes and Super-soakers and Nerf balls covered the gravel lawn like a Toys R Us close-out sale. The lights were on; Jimmy Buffet music played from the backyard; through the double-wide front window, Nan could see old Mr. O'Sullivan sitting in his recliner watching television while grandchildren of various ages chased each other in and out of the room.

Nan could have gone to the door to say hello, but she felt funny wearing her yoga pants and no bra.

She drove back to the hotel, crawled under the stiff comforter. Of course it didn't matter—it didn't matter at all, after all these years!—yet she felt a sudden cold wave of shame at the thought of how she'd always preferred the O'Sullivan house to her own. At Christmas time, for instance, she loved the O'Sullivans' flocked foil tree surrounded by towering piles of presents in cheap drugstore Santa paper. At Nan's house beneath their own small but perfectly shaped pine would sit five packages wrapped in heavy forest-green paper, real sprigs of holly stuck in red velvet ribbons. Cindy would get an array of cheap polyester sweaters, big bottles of bubble bath, plastic bracelets and matching love beads, giant Nestle Crunch bars and Lifesaver rolls; Nan would open one cashmere pullover from Saks,





a tiny bottle of Channel, and a tin of pink marzipan pigs handmade by her mother. Her parents always gave each other one hardcover book.

Nan envied the O'Sullivans' gaudy Christmases, yet the envy was balanced with a sense of ...would *superiority* be the word? Nan wondered. Was she drawn to the O'Sullivans because she was jealous or because she felt smug in comparison?

Nan kicked at the tightly tucked bed linens, trying to loosen the pressure around her ankles. While Cindy was supposedly working late on legal research, Nan tossed and turned, waking with a start sometime after midnight, unsure for several moments what strange room she was in, shaking off the remnants of a nightmare that featured her oncologist whose features transformed into a sunken-eyed Mr. O'Sullivan.

Now she steps back to Cindy; the blue butterfly has flown away. "Don't judge me!" Cindy pleads, but she's giggling. Happy to confess and be judged by Nan, just like in the old days when she'd copy Nan's homework, or smuggle vodka from her parents' liquor cabinet, or fool around with someone on her brother's football team when she promised she wouldn't.

Nan sighs. "Spring Azure. That's what the blue butterfly was." "I know I said *never again* but it's different now. Now that I'm sober. The sex is more intense, surprisingly, and I know how to process my emotions now. I'm not projecting any long-range fantasies."

Nan looks overhead where butterflies cluster in small groups on the netted ceiling. She says, "Look what I have." She unzips her purse, then unzips the pocket inside, and takes out Cindy's charm bracelet.

She holds the end of one silver clasp between her thumb and third fingertip, the links dangling in a six-inch line between their faces. Charms overlapping. The chip of purple amethyst twinkles in a shaft of sunlight that cuts through the misted air like a passageway, and Nan remembers buying that birthstone charm for Cindy's fourteenth birthday. She'd gone with her mother to the Valley Park Mall and picked it out from the glass counter. If she'd wanted a charm bracelet of her own, wouldn't she have asked her mother for one? But she hadn't. She'd asked for baby-doll pajamas with mod polka dots for the sleep-over party.

Nan takes hold of the other clasp and lifts the bracelet into a horizontal line. With one small shake, the charms fall into

place: the galloping white stallion, the lucky emerald-green clover, the translucent blue oval enshrining its single seed of mustard.

Cindy lifts and lowers her eyebrows, annoyed, Nan can tell, to be diverted from her Kevin story. Her blue eyes squint at the bracelet.

Nan jiggles the links, making the charms jingle. "It's yours. Don't you recognize it?"

Cindy twists her mouth to one side, staring.

"It's your charm bracelet! You got it for confirmation."

Cindy leans closer, lifting her hand, and Nan lets the bracelet drop into the well of Cindy's palm.

"Oh, geez, I forgot I ever had this." Cindy holds out her left wrist and loops the bracelet around it with her right fingers, fastening the clasp. She asks, "Where did you find it?"

"I've been meaning to give it back to you for so long. And before this trip, I thought of it. So I brought it with me."

"Huh." Cindy rotates her forearm, the charms flopping left and right. "How did you find it?"

"I took it from your jewelry box. It was after school one day. We were changing in your room. It's seems so silly now, so stupid! Honestly, I don't even know what I was thinking. Then I think I was embarrassed to give it back to you."

"Huh." Cindy tilts her head and smiles slightly, with one eyebrow raised.

"Are you surprised?"

"My dad gave me this bracelet," Cindy says.

"I think both your parents gave it to you. I remember. I was at the party."

"But my dad picked it out himself. He told me."

"Anyway. It was a long time ago."

Cindy breathes in slowly, her cleavage lifting. She says, "I remember asking you about it. When my grandmother gave me a sweet sixteen charm, and I couldn't find the bracelet. I didn't want to tell anybody I lost it. And I asked you if I'd left it at your house, and you said you'd look, and when I asked you again you said you didn't find it."





"I don't remember that. I don't remember you asking."

"I always thought Bethy was the one. Bethy was always taking things and squirreling them away in weird places."

The teenage girl in the khaki shorts is striding toward them with an exaggerated smile and when she's close to them she taps her index finger on her lips like a kindergarten teacher and says, "*Soft voices, ladies!*" in a stage whisper.

Nan spots a wrought-iron bench on the other side of the butterfly house being vacated by two old ladies in sunhats. She and Cindy wind their way toward it and sit down. On a leafy plant nearby, the wings of a huge brown moth with black-ringed circles seem to stare at Nan like owl eyes. For a few minutes they wait.

Cindy says, her voice low, "You're mad because I didn't come to Connecticut when you had your surgery."

"What?"

"You've been mad all this time, right? You should have just told me."

Nan hears wind, like wings flapping, but it's inside her eardrums. She realizes she's holding her breath, and when she exhales, she knows the *whoosh* sounds like exasperation. "I told you not to come. The mastectomy was routine. They do them all the time. That's what my doctor told me, and that's what I told you."

Cindy nods knowingly, narrowing her eyes. "I should have come anyway. I should have insisted."

She holds up her arm to a patch of sunlight penetrating the netted wall, twisting her wrist to make the silver links gleam. "You mocked me when I was in Betty Ford." Cindy's voice is suddenly hard and accusing.

"No I didn't!"

"When we were on the phone and you asked what I was doing next and I said small group therapy and then massage therapy and you said *oh, rough*."

"I was kidding."

"As if it was fun for me."

"I didn't think it was fun for you."

Cindy lets her arms drop back to her stomach. "I mean, I'm not saying it was as hard as what you went through. That's not what I'm saying."

"Maybe it was," says Nan. "Maybe it was harder." She can hear that her voice sounds peevish. "Anyway! It's all in the past!" She tries to lighten her voice. "Should we get some lunch? Should we try the café here? Or go back to The Pointe?"

Cindy doesn't answer. The extra flesh under her chin—Nan still isn't used to it—quivers slightly, and Nan is afraid that Cindy's going to have

another one of her crying jags. But instead Cindy straightens up her spine, as if something's been decided; she says, "I should check in at the office."

"Remember when," Nan says. "When..." But her voice dissipates dumbly. She is waiting for one memory to rise in her mind, crystallized, to emblemize their friendship, either its sustenance or deprivation, but no single gem emerges. Her memory bank is clogged, chock-full, like a garden of tomatoes over-ripening on their vines, being watered to saturation by some resentful companion.

The tomato is really a berry, that man on the plane had told her. A berry eaten as a vegetable. He had said this with such conviction, and Nan had nodded solemnly in reply. She imagines now the weeds in his garden multiplying in his absence, out of his control.

"After the surgery," Nan says, "they want you to go to a support group. The hospital gives you a list of groups in your area. They strongly advise it. So I went for a while. And it's embarrassing to say it, but really, I think it made me feel worse. At every meeting it would always come around to someone saying how facing cancer put their whole life in perspective, made them so grateful for everything so far and so thankful for every day left in front of them. And—god, I don't think I'd admit this to anyone but you—I'd leave those meetings feeling pissed off. Empty. I wanted what *they* had. Those other women in the group. I wanted to feel *blessed* or *wise*."

Cindy puts her arm around Nan's back. "You'd be a real kill-joy at Betty Ford," Cindy says, squeezing Nan's muscled shoulder, holding on. They laugh a little. Nan touches her fingertip to Cindy's bracelet, tapping on the mustard seed.

"Do you still have the sweet sixteen charm?" Nan asks. "The one your grandmother gave you? You could add it on."

"Oh, I doubt it. I've lost so much stuff. I don't know where anything is." She jingles her wrist. "Not unless it's on me."

Probably, Nan thinks, they will never see each other again.

At the exit door a different teenager makes them stand still as she passes a wand like a feather duster first around Nan's body, head to toe, checking for stow-away butterflies, and then around Cindy's. "They like you!" the homely red-head whispers to Cindy; the girl uses the tip of the wand to coax away two yellow butterflies clinging to the back of Cindy's tank top.

*Leslie Johnson's fiction has been published in a variety of literary journals, such as Glimmer Train, Colorado Review, Cimarron Review, Threepenny Review, Third Coast, and others. Her work has been broadcast on NPR and selected for the 2017 Pushcart Prize. She lives in Connecticut, where she teaches at the University of Hartford.*

