

MISS NISKER'S HEALTH CLASS

BY JAMES TATE HILL

Until she was twenty-five, Des hitchhiked from city to city, sleeping in parks and abandoned houses, shoplifting food as well as occasional clothes. Urban camping one of her drifter friends called it, and Des was disappointed that what she was doing had a name. One night, in the woods behind a mall in southern West Virginia, her traveling companions held her down and untied her boots, removing the insoles to find the twenty she didn't think they knew about. They took her backpack, heavy coat, the boots themselves, and the cheap watch her father had given her for earning a bachelor's degree.

She turned her back to the road, sobbing, and hiked through the woods under the new moon. The sky had yellowed with morning when an airplane passed overhead, nearly skimming the tops of trees. Des traced its path to a twenty-foot fence, which led her to Whitetail Memorial Field. She placed her muddy socks in the trash can by the entrance.

There was a unisex bathroom, an empty lunch counter, Ted Danson with white hair on a television turned up loud. Beside a metal desk sat a cart with two pieces of luggage. No one around, Des unzipped one of the bags and found a pair of men's sneakers.

"Those aren't yours." An employee with slicked back hair had emerged from a door behind the desk. His name-tag read "Carter McJunkin."

Before today she would have run. Instead, she said, "Can I have them?"

The man's thick eyebrows knitted together. He smiled. Before he could answer, Des drew a ragged breath and asked Carter McJunkin where his planes flew.

He returned the shoes to the suitcase. Des stood up, holding her wrists together. Carter McJunkin pushed her hands down. "Where do you want to go?"

When she didn't answer, he asked her name.

She gazed into his patient eyes. "Des Nisker."

"Des," he said. "Short for Desiree?"

"I wish."

The first night, Carter slept on the sofa and Des in his bed. The next night they shared the bed. Des took a job teaching health at the high school where Carter's mother was Vice Principal. Health class was a joke and everyone knew it, so after fifteen minutes of notes, Miss Nisker, who had her students call her Des when the doors were closed, arranged the desks into a circle and let them ask whatever was on their minds. Topics ranged from acne to immigrants to the religious beliefs of Tom Cruise. A few giggles were unavoidable when discussing body hair or masturbation, but they trusted Des, and in the confines of her health class, they trusted each other.

One day in January of her second year, Kenneth Casdorff, the only student who insisted on raising his hand, chewed his fingernail until Des called on him. "Sorry. I was just wondering, like, how did you end up in Whitetail, Miss Nisker? Des, I mean."

"Oh my God. I've thought the same thing. Des should be an actress or something." This was Carla Bierbauer, who hadn't said a word since before Christmas when Des chided her for asking whether dikes are born that way or choose to like other dikes.

Katie Odell, seeing her teacher at a loss for words, said Des was the coolest teacher in the school, and if she hadn't come to Whitetail, she wouldn't be their teacher, would she? Someone called Kenneth Casdorff a douche bag. Nevertheless, the class waited for Des's response.

"Whitetail is a beautiful town. Be proud that you live here." Des held her smile a little too long, as she used to do when someone said pretty blonde girls shouldn't look so serious.

That night she asked Carter if they were happy. He looked up from his novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, which he had been reading since the fall, five pages a night. Meanwhile Des replaced the book on her night stand once a week, abandoning them somewhere in the middle. She preferred to imagine her own endings.

"I'm happy," he said. "Are you?"

Des kissed his forehead. "Of course."

Carter kissed her lips. "That's more like it."

He wasn't a bad kisser. He did all the cooking and did it well. He was twelve years older than her, but she didn't mind. Des was happy with him, but she wasn't happy. An hour later, still awake, she grabbed Carter's book and took it to the living room.

In the morning, Carter pulled out the coffee pot to find it was empty. "Did you come to bed?"

"Here. I'll make more. Did you know Jesus was married? And he had a kid?" She sat him down in front of her laptop. She had abandoned the novel halfway in to see how much of it was true. "Watch this. Half the stuff they told us about Jesus was a lie."

Carter followed her to the coffee maker. He held her face between his hands. "What's going on? You hate mornings."

Des winked. "It isn't morning if you never go to sleep."

In third period, Des handed back tests, pulling each of her students into a hug. It had nothing to do with their scores, none of which was lower than a B. Her eyes pooled with tears.

"You guys understand me, don't you?"

"Of course we do," said Katie Odell.

"Yeah, your tests are really easy," said Tate Holcomb.

"She doesn't mean the test, you idiot."

Kenneth Casdorff raised his hand. "Um, Miss Nisker? Des? Did somebody die?"

Des wiped her eyes, looking down at the DVD in her hand titled "Tobacco: Unsafe at Any Age." She had a better idea. "I'll be right back," she said and returned with the laptop faculty could check out from the library.

"Can we watch another episode of Grey's Anatomy?" said Stephanie Ledbetter.

Des found the website and plugged the laptop into the projector. "This is much better."

By week's end, she had given up her old bedtime of ten-thirty. Every Google search yielded questions she'd never even asked. Why were we paying four dollars a gallon for gas when an electric car could go 65 miles per hour in 1899? When was the last time scientists actually cured a disease? What proof did we have not released by the government that man ever landed on the moon? She forwarded all of it to Carter, who wouldn't watch or read anything unless she made him.

"Aren't you outraged?" They had come to the end of a story on a new scanner being used by airport screeners which at worst could cause cancer and at best provided an untrammled view of

a passenger's nude body. "Do you really want your friend Russell to see my private parts?" Des had thought this story, out of all the stories she had shown him, would pique his interest.

"Next week," Carter said through a yawn, "You'll tell me about a flying saucer above the football field."

"This is real, Carter. This story is on CNN."

"Fine. This one's real. But LBJ didn't kill JFK, and scientists didn't create AIDS in a laboratory." He was on his way to the bedroom. "Care to join me?"

"Why have you never asked about my past?"

That there was nothing to tell, really, wasn't the point. Carter's complete avoidance of the subject, whether fear or a lack of curiosity, was the real source of concern.

"If it was important," he said, "I figured you'd tell me."

Des clicked her tongue. "That's the attitude that lets the government do whatever they want. Oh, they'll tell us if it's important."

"Do you hate me?" Carter asked.

Des threw a pillow down the hall. "That's not what I'm saying."

The bedroom door clicked shut and she buried her face in the sofa. Hoboing her way across the country hadn't made her happy, but there was always another town, another horizon. Now there was ceiling where there once had been sky. Des dried her face and reached for her laptop.

She placed a handwritten apology in his lunch, as she often would in the coming weeks.

She learned from Carter's father how to make pesto and pancakes, giving Carter a break from the cooking. Two nights a week, Des took a sleeping pill and brushed her teeth at ten o'clock. For his part, Carter stayed up with her Wednesdays and Fridays to research conspiracies, firing up his desktop to maximize their resources. It was tolerance, not enthusiasm, but it was a start.

Knowing it was her turn to pick the movie for the next McJunkin movie night, Des dismissed Carter from his weekly viewing obligations. Earlier in the week, Des had burned a DVD of her selection, a feature-length opus about religion and war, the lies people use to control us and, ultimately, America's complicity in the attacks of 9/11.

"What is this, Des?" asked Deanna, Carter's younger sister five minutes in.

Des ignored her, seeing no point in telling the pharmaceutical sales rep not to swallow what she had been told all her life. It was Carter's parents whose reactions Des cared about. She saw in Mr. And Mrs. McJunkin, who eschewed church and once gave the finger to a truck with a "Dubya" bumper sticker, kindred spirits who could lend credence to what Carter had begun calling her obsession.

Carter crossed and uncrossed his legs. Every ten minutes, Deanna yawned as if on cue. Their parents sat upright on the sofa. Neither reached for the popcorn the entire movie. As soon as it ended, Mrs. McJunkin turned the lights on.

Deanna said, "I can't imagine why that wasn't in theaters, Des."

"More people can see it online," Des said, holding back comments about the Dennis Quaid thrill rides to which Deanna treated them all when it was her week.

On her way to the kitchen, Mrs. McJunkin, the still pretty former runner-up to Miss West

Virginia, the cultured mother Des spent her youth wishing for, said, “Honey, you don’t buy into that, do you?”

Des felt the air leave her chest. “You don’t?” Carter’s father was collecting plates and fondue forks. Des laid a hand on his shoulder. “Fred? You got it, didn’t you?”

His cheeks puffed out with a sigh. “I kind of liked what the guy said about religion.”

“What about the wars? And income tax? And 9/11?”

“I don’t know about all that,” he said, and with the briefest of laughs dismissed the last two hours of their lives.

“I could have told you Dad’s not big on conspiracy theories.” Carter put a hand on Des’s leg, which she promptly returned to his own lap.

Des looked each one of them in the eyes. “You’re all a bunch of idiots, aren’t you?”

At the edge of the driveway, she broke into a jog, Carter following in the car, begging her to please get in.

On the day her class was to discuss the film, which Des had shown them over three days, vice principal McJunkin called Des into her office. Before sitting down, Des handed her a laminated sheet of paper.

“What’s this?”

“They’re signatures. Of one hundred seventeen students, past and present, who don’t think I should be fired.”

“Des.” Carter’s mother cocked her head to one side. “No one wants you fired.”

“Carter told me there were complaints. About the movies I’ve been showing.”

“So the two of you are talking again.”

Des’s answer, that he had emailed her, vanquished the hopeful arch from Mrs. McJunkin’s brow. Des tried not to think about all their day trips to outlet malls, the two of them trading garments over the dressing room door. They were the same size.

“If you go back to your normal lesson plans, I’m sure no one will think twice about it.”

Des handed her another sheet of signatures, which she’d also had laminated, tempting as it was for administrators to alter a document. “These are the signatures of students in favor of my recent curriculum. I assume anyone not on the list will be fine transferring to Mrs. Whitbeck’s class.”

Of the three who transferred, only Katie Odell was a surprise. With red-rimmed eyes, she said she was sorry, but didn’t want to be persecuted for believing in God. Des didn’t hear from Jeremy Tarr, who had left the room yelling when Des wouldn’t back down about the 9/11 conspiracy. “You can’t say we knew they were going to attack and then say we brought down the towers with our own dynamite. Those are two different things.” But Kevin Coover, eternally silent in the far corner, showed up as scheduled on what should have been his first day with Mrs. Whitbeck. Loud enough for everyone in the class to hear, he announced that his parents’ convictions were not his own.

Des, beaming, pulled him into a hug. She whispered in his ear, “One of us.”

Carter continued to cook for her, though they ate in silence. Each time he spoke, Des pointed to the note she had written on the fridge: "I'm not talking until you apologize." On the fifth day, disgusted by Carter's scent embedded in the sofa, she carried a sleeping bag to the front porch. She brought Carter's binoculars, tracking the movement of stars, blinking lights too high to be planes, a dusty stripe unraveling slowly, furtively, above the moon. She believed in Roswell and Area 51, and if pressed, perhaps even God. She believed there was more than this.

On the ninth day, Carter's email contained only the words, "It's time, Des." She waited at the empty lunch counter while he finished paperwork for the last flight to Dulles. When he wasn't looking, she called Romeo's, their favorite restaurant, and reserved a table. She would forgive him, she decided. The rest she would figure out.

The Cessna 402 taxied onto the runway. From one conversation with the pilot, Des knew more about the eight-passenger aircraft than Carter had learned in his ten years selling tickets. To Carter, a plane was a plane, and maybe that was okay. As the Cessna picked up speed, a man in jeans and a gray T-shirt raced alongside it, pulling even with the fuselage. He reached the left wing and grabbed hold, at first tucking his legs, then letting them hang as the plane crawled into the sky. The landing gear had just crossed the fence-line when the man let go. He seemed to hang for seconds in the sky, splayed in the pale space between the plane and the tree-line, before he disappeared.

Des rapped the frosted glass of Carter's office door. She ran down the wide hallway to the waiting room. Russell, the bag screener and lone security guard looked up from his monitor. He hadn't spoken to Des in over a month, when Des told him his beloved Coca-cola planned the failure of New Coke, creating false demand for their so-called "classic" formula.

"Russell, did you call an ambulance? Do you think he's alive?"

Russell unscrewed the lid of his Coke. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Des peeked at his monitor and found an episode of *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Carter came around the corner. His brow furrowed when she told him what had happened. His brow furrowed, but he agreed to call the tower. They hadn't seen a thing.

"They're probably watching what he's watching."

Carter and Russell looked at each other. Des said fine, she would call the ambulance. Carter wrestled the phone from her hand.

"Des, stop it. Enough." He led her to the lunch counter. Des refused to sit down. "You're right, Des. I don't question things. I never asked what kind of girl steals shoes from a stranger's suitcase. Obviously a troubled one."

"Are you kidding? A man is probably dead. Give me my phone."

The dispatcher said they would send a squad car to the airport.

"No, an ambulance. Send an ambulance."

Carter, who had followed her into the parking lot, said she could pick up her things whenever it was convenient. Des took off her heels, hurled them in his direction, and ran through the parking lot to her car.

She parked on the shoulder, just off the exit to the airport. Twenty minutes went by. Thirty, thirty-five. The dispatcher said an officer had already been to the airport. No body had been found.

“I promise you no one has been here.”

“Ma’am, the report mentions a possible prank call. this number is listed.”

“Come and arrest me. I’ll be in the woods looking for the body.”

She found an access road not far from the airport. She had two hours of daylight, tops. Sharp rocks beneath her bare feet didn’t take her mind off Carter’s last words to her. She thought of her belongings piled by the front door. Of all the furniture, only a night stand, which she had bought for five dollars from a neighbor’s yard sale, was hers.

When she stopped crying, the moon was full above her head. Perhaps the man had survived and was wandering the forest, circling her as she circled him, a snake eating its own tail. Her faith wavered as her legs grew weak, but she reminded herself what faith is: the belief in what you cannot see—but she had seen him. She might have been the only one, but he was real. And she could feel herself getting closer. So convinced was Des that when she saw him, crumpled around a pair of thick branches, it wasn’t the sight of the body but the foreign sound of her own voice—a solemn “hello” as she knelt beside him—which made her shiver.

Des knew he was dead before checking his pulse. Scrapes on his wrist had not completely scabbed, but his arm was cold. A search of his pockets yielded nothing at all. He wore black tennis shoes with no socks, a brand of blue jeans she had never heard of. His shirt still held the scent of detergent. Lifting it, Des found no scars or tattoos.

In the distance, the 6:00 a.m. flight to Dulles turned on its engine. All planes from Whitetail flew to Dulles. Did he know that? Did he know someone on the plane? Spitting on her hand, she brushed his hair, sticking up where he had lain on it. For the first time, she moved his arm, revealing a handsome, dark-complected face that seemed in thought rather than pain.

“What did you know?”

She lifted his legs by the ankles, but didn’t want to drag him.

The copy of *All the President’s Men* she had planned to show her class, to support theories of government corruption and fallibility, was still at home—Carter’s home—in the heap of her life waiting to be retrieved. She spent the first five minutes of class jotting down a lesson plan, her students loudly speculating on her feet, too swollen to fit in her heels.

“What we’re going to do today, guys, is brainstorm.”

Groans preceded the opening of notebooks.

“It’s one thing to understand an argument,” she said. “It’s another to make one of your own.” Des willed her tired cheeks into a knowing smile. “Imagine a man falls from an airplane.” She painted the rest of the picture, panning the room of eighteen college-bound juniors and seniors. “What do you do?”

“Did he fall out of the plane, or did he jump?”

“Yeah, did he use a parachute?”

“Is he a terrorist?”

She clarified what she could. “Make a list of questions and where you might find the answers, keeping in mind the most important question: who can you trust, if not the police or airport officials?”

Collecting their papers, she asked Kenneth Casdorff and Carla Bierbauer to stay after. Kenneth chewed his cuticles. Carla, staring at Des’s feet, pinned her hair behind enormous ears.

“A few months ago, Kenneth, you asked why I ended up in Whitetail. And Carla, you told me I should have been an actress. That day I recognized I wasn’t where I wanted to be. There’s no one else whose help I’d rather have.” Des laid a hand on each of their shoulders. “I’d like both of you to meet me at my car after school.”

In the woods, Kenneth lifted him by the armpits while Des got his legs. Carla drove them to the storage unit while Des rode with the body in the backseat. Spreading a blanket on the concrete floor, Des assured them it was only until she found a new apartment, explaining she had broken up with her boyfriend.

“So, like, what’s he made of, Des?” said Carla.

“He’s the real deal, Carla. Snips and snails and puppy dog tails.”

Carla giggled. “I know, right? I hate boys. I’m glad you broke up with your boyfriend.”

“Um, Miss Nisker,” Kenneth said, “were you implying this is a human being?”

“What did you think he was, Kenneth?”

Kenneth ceased chewing his fingernail. He went around the corner. They heard him throwing up.

Des asked Carla to hold the ink pad while she recorded the man’s fingerprints on index cards. Reaching for his other hand, Des noticed Carla putting down the ink pad. A moment later, her arms were around her teacher. Des hugged her back. Carla kissed her shoulder and neck in a hard pecking motion.

“Carla, no What are you doing?” Des pushed her away three times.

“I thought that’s why you asked me to help you. Because you liked me.”

“It is not why I brought you here That was highly inappropriate.” Kenneth, wiping his mouth, rejoined them in the storage unit. Des grabbed him by the shoulders. “I do not want to sleep with you, Kenneth Is that clear?”

He stammered yes after a confused pause.

“Love is a petty, tiny thing. Love is chewing gum for dinner every night for the rest of your lives. You’d better find something else in the cupboard.”

By the third day, an odor had taken shape. It was not the insect bombs she had set off each morning and afternoon. His flesh had bloated enough to distort his features, as Wikipedia said it would. She took him back to her new duplex, putting him in a bath of ice until her new freezer arrived.

For homework, her students created “missing ” posters on the world wide web, started a blog dedicated to identifying the body, set up MySpace and Facebook accounts in Jake’s name. Des had shown them pictures on her cell phone, and several girls, noting a resemblance to Jake Gyllenhaal, named him accordingly. Despite all their efforts, and multiple *CSI* and *Cold Case* episodes, they were no closer to knowing his real name, or why he died.

Des split them into groups she called investigative teams, instructing her computer experts to gain access to a database of fingerprints. It was a longshot, but two of them, who had perfect SAT scores and planned to attend MIT in the fall, had previously hacked the web pages of the school board, removing the L from all occurrences of the word public.

“Even if we got in, Des, those databases mostly contain criminals’ fingerprints.”

“We need more information about the plane,” they said. “What was he running after?”

“Maybe he was just trying to kill himself,” a student suggested.

“That’s not the answer. Des wouldn’t do that to us.”

Kevin Coover, who had once sat so silently in the back, stood up and put it to a vote. “All who think Des should give us more clues, say aye.”

A tally of nos proved unnecessary. Des, who had opened her mouth to quash the vote, smiled instead. She had created a room of dissenters.

Carter was hammering on the front porch. He didn't hear her get out of the car. He looked younger with his shorter haircut.

She said, "I'm looking for a pair of purple heels."

His smile didn't stretch very wide. "I don't think it's here, Des, whatever it is you're looking for."

She sucked a deep breath through her nose. "It's been six weeks, Carter. Don't tell me you're still angry."

He went back to his hammering.

"I don't even know why I came here." Des took two steps toward her car and stopped. "Just tell me: did he look at all familiar? Had you ever seen him around the airport?"

"I didn't look at any of the pictures you sent me, if that's what you're talking about."

Des closed her eyes and counted to ten. "I did love you," she said, though she wasn't sure. She dabbed the corners of her dry eyes. Returning to the car, she made pitiful clucking sounds into her arm. Carter's shadow hastened toward her.

He said he knew it was tough. She would find someone, he said. She let him hug her.

"If you ever loved me," she said, "do me just one favor."

He had reasons not to help her. Even if he believed her, or believed in what she was doing, passenger names were confidential, and rather illegal to send, along with that of the pilot, in an email to your ex-girlfriend. Grateful as she was, Des nearly invited him to dinner, then realized his help was the result of pity. She thanked him and left it at that.

Her students found a phone number for the pilot, whom they described as cooperative. He let them send Jake's picture to his cell phone and showed it to his wife and daughter, who also

had never seen him. Class consensus was they could trust him, and despite her disapproval of the T word, Des had met the pilot before, and agreed their focus should be on the passengers.

Right away they found a Facebook page for Wendy Hannon, a thirty-five-year-old physician living in Silver Spring. She turned down all thirty-eight friend requests by Des and her students. Nor was Dr. Hannon pleased to receive phone calls, at home and the hospital, from teenagers identifying themselves as Miss Nisker's Health Class. Des herself pretended to be a patient and asked could she send pictures of a bug bite she'd recently received.

"How did you get my home number?"

"Do you know him?" Des asked.

"Who am I talking to?"

Des asked the doctor did she know a Benjamin Metz, the other passenger, also from the D.C. area.

"Of course I *know* him." There was a pause. "Stop calling me. Please."

At last they found a phone number for Benjamin Metz, in the records of a Catholic school in Bethesda. No matter what time they called, the phone went unanswered. His voicemail message was automated. They had been calling more than a week when a familiar female said hello.

“This is someone from that health class, isn’t it? How did you get this number? Leave my son alone or I’ll call the police ”

Their last names were different due to divorce, according to online records. He was eight years old, but several students deemed this their biggest lead. Perhaps Jake was a detective hired by the ex-husband, or a man sent to kidnap the boy.

“The ex-husband died in a car accident two years ago,” Des informed her class with a salty tone. She turned to her team of so-called computer experts. “I thought you guys would have made progress with those fingerprints by now.”

The three boys looked at each other, then sheepishly admitted they had given up. They said, “I’m pretty sure you can get arrested trying to hack into the FBI.”

Des shook her head, laughing through her nose. “Is anyone in here not a pussy?”

No hands went up.

“I mean, if this were some real guy, Des, but I don’t—”

“He is real. What do you all think, I’m just making this up as I go along? Kenneth knows. Tell them, Kenneth.”

Kenneth Casdorff cleared his throat. In his feckless, retiring voice, he said, “Yeah.”

Tate Holcomb called him an ass kiss. When the laughter subsided, Stephanie Ledbetter asked if they could do what they used to do, “You know, when we asked you questions?”

“Yeah, Des. The Jake thing is too much work. Most of us are taking our college exams.”

“Fine. Go to college. I did. You won’t find anything there. Does anyone want to be a high school health teacher?”

Carla Bierbauer raised her hand.

Des went home early, skipping faculty senate. The slammed door echoed in her ceiling, leaving behind an unnerving calm. She rushed to the bookshelf, for the keys inside a hollowed out copy of *The 9/11 Report*, her hand trembling as she unlocked the second bedroom, then the freezer and the two padlocks.

With a sigh, she reached for his cold hand, then quickly threw it back in the freezer. “You’re never going to tell me anything, are you?”

Jake said nothing.

Des pushed open his eyelids, the flesh hard as bone. “Who are you, asshole? I can’t do this by myself. Do you hear me?”

Des pushed open his mouth. Jake stared open-mouthed at the wall. Putting his arms on her shoulders, Des leaned down to hug him and apologized.

“It’s not your fault,” she said, repeating the words until they broke into sobs.

Des unplugged the freezer and pushed it onto its side. She lifted Jake into the wheelchair she had used to get him out of the car. “I’m not giving up on you,” she said.

At the edge of her driveway, the neighbor’s nephew unhooked the skateboard from his belt. “Hey Charlie, do you want to see a dead body?”

Des wheeled him onto the porch.

Charlie put his skateboard on the bannister and petted Jake’s head. “Hey there, fella.”

“He fell out of an airplane,” Des said.

Charlie inserted a finger in Jake’s mouth. “His tongue’s all dry.” Grinning, he put a finger in Jake’s nostril.

“Okay, that’s enough.” Des swatted his hand away. “Go tell your friends now. Have them tell their parents, okay?”

Des wheeled him back inside and turned on the stereo. Feeling better by the minute, she pulled him by the wrists across the living room, waltzing to *The Very Best of Carly Simon*. Let them arrest her. And if it wasn’t a crime to have a dead body, it ought to be unsettling enough for the mainstream media.

“Des, where did your certainty come from?” Matt Lauer would ask, unable to hide his admiration.

She would pause for a moment, though by then Des would have all the answers. “Mine is the certainty we’re all born with, Matt. It’s the doubts of others we allow to become our own.”

And she would have her share of doubters, at first. The local news anchor, a family friend of the McJunkins, would linger on her name, accusing every syllable, until the full story emerged. Unable to identify the body, they would show Jake’s picture on the news, and all the pieces would come together. To Oprah and Larry King, Des would tell her story from the very beginning, from the myth of creation to the lies of every war.

The knock came at six-thirty. Charlie’s mother extended her hand. “I’m sorry, but Charlie wouldn’t let me start dinner until I promised to bring him and his friends over to see some sort of body.”

Des gestured to the wheelchair, which Charlie and the other kids his age, eight of them in all, had already surrounded. Charlie's mother waited just in the door. Des insisted she come inside.

One after another, they touched his eyes and mouth. The two girls curled up their noses, but went back for more. Charlie put the smallest boy on Jake's lap.

"Where on Earth did you find it?" Charlie's mother asked.

"In the woods. He fell from an airplane."

Charlie's mother asked what color white these walls were.

Des reached for her hand and placed it on Jake's arm. "Touch him. It's a real person."

Charlie's mother poked his neck and smiled. "How about that?"

Des sat down on her sofa. She didn't feel well. The children touched their tongues to his cheek. They pulled on his arms, trying unsuccessfully to stand him up. One of the girls lifted his shirt. Charlie's mother told her to stop it.

"What's wrong with you? This is a human being " Des carried the smallest boy to the porch and chased the others around the living room. "Get out All of you "

Charlie's mother clapped her hands by the door. "Single file, single file."

Des pulled the wheelchair down the porch steps. The minivan was backing out of the driveway. She helped Jake into her car and fastened his seatbelt, throwing the chair in the

backseat. In town, pedestrians giggled at the man slumped over the dashboard. The last corner of sun sank behind the mountain, and Des sped up a few miles per hour. She rolled down the windows; Jake was beginning to thaw.

She used the wheelchair until the brush between trees blocked her path. For the next hour, she dragged him by his feet not quite to where she had found him, but as far as she could take him by herself. With shoes on, it didn't seem as far.

“They'll find you when they want to find you.”

She knelt beside him and said a prayer.

She slept for nine hours, made coffee, and got to work half an hour early. In the hallway outside the office, Vice Principal McJunkin said, “Hey stranger. How are you this morning?”

Des wished it felt better to ignore her.

Students began whispering when, for the first time in months, Miss Nisker turned on the overhead projector. She told them to open their textbooks to chapter twenty-two.

“Um, we don't have our books with us,” said Kenneth Casdorff.

Des surveyed the room. “Bring them next time.”

Notebooks remained closed as she defined the anatomy of the tooth, from enamel to pulp. They turned around in their desks to look at each other. The din of voices continued to rise until she slammed her book on the table. She made a loud shushing sound like a tornado and held it between her teeth.