

BEST NEW  
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image of a small redbrick house. A man standing inside in a blue checked *lungi* and *ganji*, very much at home. Behind him stood a young woman carrying a small infant. He did not recognize her and her begging bowl. But she recognized *him*. Salma's husband. And she made sure he knew who she was. She gave a loud and long "Salaam Sahib." She then blessed his child.

What would be the use of telling Salma? It was done. It was written on Salma's forehead. A four-fingered width of space. And knowing would not change things. And what would she, Kanta, get out of it? How much more would Salma give once she knew the truth? Her husband, on the other hand, would be generous. He had already shown that. She was old and on her own. She was getting tired of walking the streets of Dhaka. It would be nice to have a fixed source of income every month. She was not going to be greedy. Just enough to survive, and maybe a little extra for her *pan* and betel nut.

"I'll be on my way," she said rising wearily. Without waiting for the money that Salma had promised her, she let herself out into the damp and grimy street.

ELIZABETH KADETSKY

*Wesleyan Writers Conference*



## MEN MORE THAN MORTAL

I.

We are pulsing, we bicycle messengers, inhaling with a single breath. We play the surface tension above the pavement like mosquitoes on water. We are expectant, scofflaw. It is only the hundred taxis soaring through the intersection that hold us, tantalized, behind the crosswalk. The red light reflects demonic in our hundred gleaming eyes.

A black guy with an Ace Messenger bag and a Kryptonite chain around his waist nods at me. "You go, girl." His voice is low and gravelly. A Mexican guy scans us both with sleepy eyes. He wears his chain slung over his shoulder. The light flickers to green and Ace pulls ahead, his bicycle swaying from side to side, dipping close to the pavement on the right and then the left as he sails through one red and then another down to Union Square.

This is how it is in the week since I split from Smith. When you want the warmth of a man this bad he makes sure to put distance between you.

For my first run of the day I cruise downtown. I am fleet, skimming over the pavement, airborne. I have lost ten pounds. I was never a good candidate for the heartbreak diet. I was doing fifty miles a day on the bicycle before the diet and now I look wan and thin and probably even Smith, especially Smith, thinks I'm no longer beautiful. *If only I could grow back my breasts*, I think as I coast someplace high above St. Mark's.

A hangover buzzes my head. I was up drinking Jameson till two with the friend who's putting me up, Gus. Then I lay on the futon in his living room, thinking, *After five years of marriage, you break up. Two days later he fucks someone else. New life. Bang. Change now.* Sleep would have been a gift. Insomnia was not the anxiety kind, worrying about a good night's rest. Don't even wish for a moment's sleep, just for time to transport you forward.

In the morning I strapped my lock around my waist and took off on my bicycle for Manhattan. I was halfway across the Williamsburg Bridge before I realized I'd forgotten my helmet. Without the helmet I am even lighter. Some combination of streets got me to Godspeed Messengers in Midtown. Biking, thinking, *There is nothing left of Smith's desire*. I couldn't have traced back the route.

At Godspeed there was an e-mail message from Milo. *Come to India*, it said. *I'll book the ticket.*

*For Milo I will grow back my ass*, I thought as I glided away from the office on my bicycle and across the Atlantic, the Arabian Sea, racing to India, to Milo. This time I would let him make me pregnant. Or we'd miss but I'd go back for Christmas and try again. We'd have a back and forth, New York and India, a transnational child. Five years ago my life took a wrong turn. There was Milo.

There was Smith. I turned at the wrong intersection. Now I'd like to leap back over.

The only thing keeping my bicycle fixed to the pavement is the weight of the lock around my waist. My chain is 11.4 pounds. With the chain I weigh more or less what I used to without it. The chain, if nothing else, will keep me planted on the ground, ready to bear new life.

I turn and see a van behind me. I swerve left, out of its way, and lose balance as the van speeds alongside me. My front wheel angles sharply to the left and jackknifes. The bike skids. Everything stops but me. I fly for real now, over the handlebars. In the air I think, *I have no helmet*. I think, *I weigh so little*. I land in a racing dive on the pavement, riding forward shallow and long, belly down, traveling several yards eastward. The van screeches. My cheek scrapes. I wait for the van. I am ready. Take me away. I open my eyes and see pavement, see that I am still of the earth.

I sit up, wrap my arms around me, cry into my knees. Feeling alive has never brought me so close to death. The contents of my messenger bag are strewn along the gutter—pens, a large manila envelope for delivery, lipstick. My feet look frail and tentative resting on the pavement.

The driver gets out of the delivery van. "Are you all right?"

"I'm okay." I'm not okay. I want to jump into his arms. "Thanks for stopping."

He puts an arm around my shoulder, tries to lift me. "You okay?"

"Thanks. I'm so sorry. It was my fault. I didn't sleep. I forgot my helmet."

It's too much information. He looks at me quizzically. I was midway across the Arabian Sea, but that doesn't matter to him. There's a taxi honking behind him. "You see this bullshit?" he asks, fuck-you gesturing to the taxi.

"It's okay. I'm really sorry."

The driver shrugs. He looks from me to the taxi and back to me again before he goes back to his driver's seat. The van shrinks in the distance, moving low and cautious, steady and deliberate.

After a while I pick up my belongings and move along myself. I'm scraped up, a little bloody, but nothing's broken really.

## 2.

I arrive at my delivery a half mile farther and rest the bike on a street sign. I ride with three locks: the chain around my waist, a U-lock, and a thin wire combination cable. The chain attaches the front wheel to the frame to a street sign; the U-lock secures the back wheel; the cable stays the seat.

My chain is a Kryptonite New York lock, the single most effective deterrent against our city's ubiquitous bicycle poachers. They travel in delivery vans, the bicycle syndicates, nitrogen-freezing U-locks, collecting bicycle frames that they overhaul and sell right back to you. They pilfer seats, pedals, wing nuts; they would steal your grandmother.

The New York lock is the last line of defense. According to the manufacturer, it is a triple-heat-treated boron manganese steel chain with a plastic-encased disk-keyhole padlock, seventy centimeters of four-sided steel chain links resistant to saws, hammers, files, and bolt cutters. It is an unseverable, no-trick shackle, like Houdini's last handcuffs, solid like Superman.

I look over my creation. It will be sturdy as jail. I feel in my pocket for my keys. Nothing.

This week when I moved out from Smith, I put most of my belongings in plastic garbage bags and left them out on the street. I spent

that night on the futon in Gus's living room thinking and barely sleeping, and then got on my bicycle at five A.M. and rode by our place. The bags had been lifted from the pavement. Smith's bicycle was gone, too.

The next day I asked him where he'd been.

"I went to sleep early." In fact he was with some woman.

"Last night I dreamed you were curled up and sleeping in the doorway," I told him.

"You can find someone better, baby. You don't want a man who's sleeping in the doorway."

"You were like a dog."

"I just want to move forward. I want us both to move on. It's not me or you. It was the space between us. There was no future there."

And this is how it is now. Breaking up is not gradual. One day he rolls on top of you in bed and nuzzles your neck. Two days later he's with Miss Whoever.

In one of those garbage bags left on the street beside the ghost of Smith's bicycle were my extra keys. I never registered those keys with the Kryptonite Corporation, so I have lost the only key to the padlock to the chain that is around my waist.

The chain weighs heavy as I wander into the office building for my drop-off. It clanks as I near the security guard. "Nice belt," he comments. "That the fashion?"

"Sure is," I say. I give him glimmer eyes. "Will you watch my bike?"

Upstairs, a Kryptonite representative informs me over the telephone that I am daft for having thrown out my extra keys and never having registered the key number. That said, there's nothing she can do for me.

"It's around my waist," I whisper. I imagine my plea as Kryptonite, a chunk of sizzling ore.

"Your what?"

"My waist."

"Why?"

"That's how we ride."

"We?"

"Messengers."

"New York City?"

"Yes."

Her voice goes cold. She knows our kind. We are the poster-child patrons of the New York lock, sure—but mostly, for them, an insurance risk.

"So, can I break it?"

"Nooo," she says, drawing out the word. "If you wanted to break it why would you buy the New York lock? It's triple-heat-treated boron manganese steel."

"Yes. Can I talk to the chemist, please?"

"The who?"

"Chemist?" I try. "Or the welder?"

"The what?"

I change the subject. "Why would you name a lock after a piece of odor-emitting metal that disempowers Superman?"

"Excuse me?"

I am disgusted. "The lock should evoke the charisma of the superhero, not the magically imbued lump that makes him wither. These rings are petty crooks, don't you see?"

"What rings?"

"The bicycle-theft syndicates. They just have tools. Superman always prevails. Even Kryptonite can't thwart him, ultimately. If you call your lock Kryptonite you invite the gangs to imagine they're Superman. You should call the lock Superman."

"Thank you for calling Kryptonite Corporation."

"Don't you get it?" I am shouting into the phone. "Superman *always* wins. The lock has to be the superhero, not the gangs. Otherwise the gangs will win."

She rings off. Me, with my lock around my waist—I am the superhero. Kryptonite holds me in its snakelike strangle. I survive.

I ride back to St. Mark's. The street is empty and clean, with the particular midmorning desolation of a late-night district at the wrong hour. It's a cyclist's dream, well paved and empty and neat.

My keys are nowhere to be seen. I peer down into a sewage grate and think of the Hitchcock movie *Strangers on a Train*, in which a man uses a magnet to collect a silver watch from a New York City gutter. I think of magnets with extraplanetary pull; magnum wire cutters; superhuman, iron-bar bending musclemen.

3.

I am cruising up Sixth when I alight on a plan. I call Smith from a pay phone. I get nothing. He was my husband. *Husband*. The word once reassured me. Smith was strong. He once told me to be more like him, "more solid."

"You have to rely on yourself better, baby. I feel burdened sometimes, by your needs. You talk about wanting a child. It doesn't seem real. You're a child yourself. I don't want to take care of you. I don't want to take care of anyone."

I felt blank when he said it. Smith was a man who stood firmly on the ground. He is a sculptor, he works in heavy materials. "You don't have to," I lied. But I was thinking of a painting I saw once, of a man standing on the ground with his arm in the air framed by vertiginous

swirls of clouds. Attached to him at the hand was a woman in a flowing dress, floating up above him in the clouds. It was true, I'd imagined myself that woman. I never told him.

"I can stand on the ground," I said instead.

"If you'd figure out how to take care of yourself you wouldn't be so confused about what you want in life. A baby is not what you want. You have to find yourself first." Smith wanted me to discover my art. In Smith's eyes, I was a bicycle messenger for only as long as it took me to discover my art form. "Find your bliss." He was quoting Joseph Campbell.

"I hate that line. Bliss is sex, or heroin."

"Bliss is creating something."

"I thought bliss was passion."

"Bliss is making your life work for you so you can get what you want."

"I prefer to think it's flying along the length of Manhattan Island collecting small parcels from random locations and depositing them minutes later elsewhere. Maybe messengering is my bliss, Smith. Messengering and loving life."

"You're not talking about bliss," he said then. "You're talking about passion."

On this street in New York City summer, I see no passion, only survival. I rest my head against the Plexiglas of the phone booth and peer into the urban landscape. There are taxis—fortified metal caskets that look like creatures from the apocalypse.

But then I make out, huddled among the taxis like small bursts of fresh growth in a decrepit wasteland of concrete, a strange and lively procession. The taxis have edged it into the narrow margins of the avenue: a Vespa carting two women in matching wedding dresses, each with long, unbrushed, hay-colored hair that lifts behind her in tangled strands. The wedding dresses are billowy and soft-looking, cut down

low, all the way to the small of the slender back of the girl at the rear. Each wears white pumps, the one in back balancing hers on either side above the wheel cage so her knees are bent in close. Her stance is animal-like, erotic. White balloons ride the air currents behind them.

This might be a double wedding, but the motorcade that follows gives me the distinct impression that the brides are each other's. A woman on a three-speed with a basket and no helmet pumps her bicycle hard, like it's a rickshaw. A beat-up Toyota pickup emblazoned with shaving cream and glitter follows. Then a guy in a tux snakes by on a scooter; he holds his handlebar with one hand while grasping a large bouquet of lilies in the other. The pageant floats along as if on wisps of cloud. They move into the distance, through the next intersection and then off into the greenery of Central Park.

I love weddings, but Smith and I never had one. Smith preferred to do it at City Hall. Shortly before, I'd met Milo at just the kind of wedding I'd always wanted, but Smith and I were engaged by then.

The wedding where I met Milo was at a ranch in the Pasadena hills. Guests got dressed up in costumes, with boas and stocking caps and rusted hubcaps dangling from their bodies, items gathered from thrift stores and scrap heaps. Milo was the minister. He was a Catholic, direct from Italy via India, but a year in California had cured him of religion so quick he mailed away for a minister's credential from the Universal Life Church.

I stood next to an artist who worked in urban debris collected from the sides of freeways and homeless encampments and concrete tunnels that give on to the L.A. Riverbed. That artist turned out to be Gus. He'd made a float out of found objects, and the couple rode in on it to the huppah, really a wrought-iron contraption constructed by Gus to look like an arbor made of metal daisies.

Then Milo delivered the service. "Do you believe in the love?" Milo shouted to the crowd, his words round and generous in his thick accent.

"We believe in the love!" Gus and I and everyone called back. Gus squeezed my hand and I felt something hot shoot through my body, but it was Milo I was feeling. The image of Milo under the wrought-iron huppah lodged someplace deep inside me. The guests jumped and yelled and I watched him. Someone exploded firecrackers. Sparks flew wildly, in random paths. One raced toward me. I didn't flinch as I watched the growing red ember approach me. If it went off in my face it would take me someplace thrilling. That was all that mattered.

Before that wedding I'd believed marriage marked an entry into something stable and knowable. It closed out options. But at this wedding there was the feeling things could turn violent. This day could change all our lives in unspeakable, unthinkable ways. We leaped to danger together.

Hands gripped me from behind, Milo's. He kissed me roughly up and down my neck. I wanted to make love, to embrace him and flee off into an unknowable darkness. In the parking area, balloons and ribbons rose from all the vehicles. We got on Milo's motorcycle and sped off with balloons trailing out behind us. I held on tight as Milo raced through curves down out of Pasadena's craggy hills. We had no helmets, and I held him knowing he could kill us both.

That night Milo and I made love. I never told Smith. I held on to Milo tight, and a floaty euphoria overtook me. I imagined I was wafting above him like diaphanous cloud matter, my hair flowing behind me. I would peel away from him unless I held on tighter, so I clutched him until we both drifted up into the clouds and turned to swirl patterns.

I traveled with Milo on his motorcycle for two weeks afterward. Then I went back to Smith.

4.

Milo was returning to a job assignment in India, where he had a girlfriend. She was pregnant. He loved me. But there was the baby.

When I saw Smith again, we made love, but I didn't feel it and we both knew it. After, I cried. "Smith, I can't do it. I met someone. He wanted to marry me."

Smith turned white. "So?"

I gave Smith the *I love you but...* line.

He came to dinner with me and ate nothing. Finally he told me, "Don't leave me. I want you. I feel it in my body."

"I don't feel passion."

"I want to feel passion."

"We're too calculated. We try too hard."

"I know."

Something happened to me over the *arrabbiata*. The oil turned gelatinous over the sauce, and the noodles seemed oozing and thick, overripe with juices. My life would take a very wrong course with Milo. We would move from motorcycle accident to motorcycle accident. Eventually, we'd flame out. "I want you to stay," I told Smith.

We never brought up Milo again. I spent the next two months curing myself of loving Milo as if it were a disease. I charted my progress daily, aching with secrecy.

I was a little bit less in love each day. At first I thought of him every five seconds, thought of his skin, of lying in bed pressed up against his back. The next day the thoughts came only every ten seconds. After a

week I had pared down the thoughts to four or five an hour. Within a month I was remembering Milo only at night, when I crawled into bed and loosely held Smith in his T-shirt and tried to train myself back into loving him.

Now Smith says we never had passion. I told him that when I met Milo. What was I hanging on to?

Smith and I'd been living in a loft that shares space with his sculpture studio. He's still living there; I am on Gus's couch until I find a place of my own. Our loft is off Delancey Street, in the shadow of the Williamsburg Bridge. This block is immortalized in the noir film *The Naked City*, where after giving heinous car-, bicycle-, and subway-chase through the Lower East Side, our villain, Willie the Harmonica, races past the Bowery Savings Bank and onto the ascent to the Williamsburg Bridge only to elude his pursuers by catapulting through three stories of metal grating and stairwell onto the sidewalk before Smith's and my very entryway. Then the voice-over coins the now famous saying, *There are eight million stories in the naked city. This has been one of them.*

I chose Smith because he was solid. He could use welder's tools. He could break down your door if he had to. He is still my husband, still that word that's as firm as pavement.

I rest my bicycle against a street post that rises from the very stretch of sidewalk where Willie the Harmonica met his ugly fate. Through the window into Smith's studio I see him nod somberly into his welding saw, which he's holding before the delicate-looking calf of his current nine-foot-tall socialist-realist android in progress. He wears goggles and earphones. A flash of fire erupts from his welding torch, illuminating his face and creating lightninglike reflections in his goggles. I slide my fist through the metal window grates and rap. He releases the flame from the welding gun so the reflections in

the goggles slowly ebb, lowering across the lenses like two setting suns on movie screens.

When the reflection goes black he recognizes me. He smiles in reflex, but then fixes his face in a frown.

He lets me in. "What's up?" Cold. I try to remember that we are "moving forward." His eyes settle on the scrapes on my elbow and shins. "What happened to you?"

I sit on the couch fingering the padlock at my waist. Outside, there has been a thick expectant humidity all day, but now the air begins to cool as pressure breaks. Through the window grates I see black bulbous clouds. "I'm locked inside my chain."

He looks at me long. "Allison. What did you do?" This is a new name for me, not *Sweetie* or *Honey* or *Love* or *Baby*. The whole time I've known him he's never used my name. The word wraps itself inside my skin like a layer of ice.

"I lost the key."

"Where are the backups?"

"Kryptonite can't help me."

"What do you want me to do?" He's looking at me blankly, so all I can read in his face is what I imagine there—disgust, apathy, not a trace of desire.

"The torch?"

"You'd have to take off your clothes." He looks me over again.

*I was once beautiful to you!* I scream inside. "I think you've seen me naked."

I go into the bathroom, look at my body. The scrapes along my legs and forearm still have raw blood streaks, and bruises are beginning to blossom beneath them. My face looks tired and ugly to me, though on the street just yesterday men turned to me with expectant momentary hellos. Looking back at them, searching their faces for desire, I saw the men swallow their hellos back inside them. I pull my

hair back into a tight knot and take off all my clothes. This way, I look like either a pubescent ballerina or a girl in a face-soap ad.

Smith holds me by the tops of my shoulders and presses down, his arms locked at the elbows to maintain maximum distance. Smith's android sculptures dominate the studio—larger than life, bulky and strong, weighty in a way humans could never be.

Naked like this, except for an 11.4-pound chain around my waist, I feel like an angel who dropped into the wrong universe and got stuck there, a nymph whose wings got traded for boron. I am trapped in the realm of Smith's nine-foot-tall androids. One of them peers at me. Under its gaze, I am particularly aware that I am naked. She or he or it is angular and machinelike. I wonder how superhuman beings ever muster the emotion to act.

Smith carries over a roll of heavy plastic Mylar and unscrolls four or five feet of it. It catches the light so the sheet turns iridescent, an effect I try to think about as he pushes one corner through the chain and then the whole sheet, then wraps me like a chicken on a spit. I feel hot sharp darts along my skin as the Mylar scrapes against my cuts and bruises. Then Smith takes an aluminum plate from the rear of his studio and slides this between the Mylar and the padlock.

"Okay?" he asks.

I will my feet to stay bolted to the ground. I hold my breath to make my waist smaller inside the chain.

Smith lowers his goggles and points the torch away from us. It lets out a mean orange flame. He makes the flame narrow. I can see the slits of his eyes through the goggles. "Don't move," he says.

I am getting smaller. The flame moves toward my middle. The plastic casing on the padlock melts in less than a second. In another second I feel a heat like a sharp knife. I cry out.

Smith stops, tries the lock. Nothing.

We do this ten times before he gives up. The chain hasn't registered a nick.

Smith shrugs. "This really isn't my job anymore, Allison."

Once more the ice sheath forms like lacy snowflakes beneath my skin. "I know."

"I don't know what to do. Can't someone else help you?"

5.

Gus is also a metalworker. He is a master welder, metal shaper, arranger of iron flowers. Gus has tools, not to mention heavy magnets with which, if all else fails, to excavate the crevices of Lower Manhattan's sewage canals like the character in *Strangers on a Train*. Gus came to New York shortly after I met him at the wedding in Pasadena and found studio space and an apartment just down Delancey and over the bridge in Williamsburg. Smith never liked him.

I bike there now, thinking that my bike makes my body whole again. I push through wet, expectant air.

"Hey," Gus says, looking me over.

I try to erase my grief face. I want to play a role. I laugh. "I'm screwed, Gus." I point at the padlock. I am a normal healthy happy human being who has a world opening up in front of her, a place of possibility and limitless options. I just happen to have a chain permanently affixed to my middle.

Gus touches the lock at my abdomen. "Come here." He tugs on the chain, lifting me slightly. "Sit down." He slides his palm in the tight space between the Kryptonite and my belly, then eases his wrist through.

I would like a man to make love to, any man.

Gus unlooses my shorts with one hand and tugs them down from behind with his other. "Come here." He pulls me by the Kryptonite to his bed. *Triple-heat-treated*, I think. "I have some tools," he says. He rushes to his studio and comes back holding another cable, this one from his own bike.

"What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?" He laces the cable through the Kryptonite, attaches it, and me, to the bedpost.

"You locked me up."

"What do you mean?" He's pulling off my underwear.

I've never been into S/M, never made love with chains or whips. Now I am locked to the bed and Gus and I are having sex. I'm not thinking about the locks or the cables, the packages owed or the day at work tomorrow that might never happen. The sky crashes; rain pummels Gus's courtyard.

Later, though, not a single tool in Gus's workshop can match the triple-heat-treated boron manganese New York lock. His magnets, on the other hand, look potent enough to rouse a city of rats. We take off on our bikes over the Williamsburg Bridge, move silently through endlessly intersecting patterns of metal railings and gratings and stairwells, overpasses and underpasses, shadow lines and spotlights. All the intersecting angles make me dizzy. Looking down, I have the distinct sense that I, alongside Willie the Harmonica, am crashing down toward the bottom in a great spiraling leap.

Once more the rain starts up. First it is just a few drops, pelletlike and stinging. The drops keep up their velocity and gather in density. They get thicker and heavier, until they feel like mercury beating down on us. Their force is the force of a lashing. The pellets seem to break up into small metal BBs as they crash onto the pavement and tumble down through the sewer grates. Soon the sewers will be stuffed with thousands of raindrops packed like mercury balls tran-

substantiated to solid. I imagine them congealing, and everything below the New York City pavement becoming frozen and stuck.

I sob as I ride. I peer into the street but can barely make out the potholes through the curtain of rain and my tears. Gus, riding at a clip in front of me in black T-shirt and jeans, has been swallowed by the darkness. Water pools in the gutters. I call to him—"You're invisible!"—but the rain devours my words. We are only blocks from the sewer that may have eaten my key, but the downpour has by now washed it to the East River. I imagine my key floating in a puddle of iridescent green water. The key is luminous, shining as it lifts to the sky. It blinks down at us.

## 6.

This is how I solve my problem: Two weeks later, I have found a place to live for now, and I have settled into a life that is in all regards normal, except that there is a chain around my waist. I am still eating less. The chain grows loose around my waist as I drop weight.

One morning, I stumble outdoors to make my way to Godspeed. My bicycle has not fared well either. Without the New York lock it has become instantly more vulnerable. Someone stole a pedal, and as the bicycle has settled into its decrepitude, the bicycle marauders have looked upon it less kindly. The brace for the U-lock has disappeared, as has the frame for the water bottle. The seat vinyl was slashed a week ago, and a few days later the chain links that secured the seat to the frame were sawed through, the seat pilfered. I replaced the seat, but by then my bicycle was marked as easy prey.

I walk outside and react with cool resignation when I see that the bike, finally, has been lifted. A wave of calm washes over me.

Suddenly, everything makes sense. There is an ecosystem composed of New York City bicycles and the syndicates that stalk them. It is in the bicycle shops where there are sage observers who chart the habits of this microclimate. They read the city, the bike-shop guys; they understand the order of its food chain. The manufacturers of the New York lock don't get this.

I walk to the bike shop. The guy who sold me my Kryptonite is not hard to find. He has long wavy bangs and dark circles under his eyes and speaks to me in grave tones.

I explain my predicament.

He reacts without a trace of surprise. "They'll get you out of there," he advises me. "No lock can deter the bicycle rings forever." He's directing his words straight into his chest, so it takes a second before I realize that he's nodded out. He stays blank for ten seconds before picking up again midthought. "It used to be Kryptonite insured the old-fashioned U-lock up to a thousand dollars and no one could break it. Then the gangs devised the nitrogen freeze. The Kryptonite Corporation reacted by reinforcing the metal bar of the U-lock, and so the theft gangs devised pincers that could break it open through force applied inside the middle." He looks at me long. "The company is always one step behind the gangs. The gangs are superhuman."

"Superhuman," I repeat. "Like Superman." I feel cold. "The gangs will win?"

He nods grimly. The cat and mouse between the corporation and the syndicates inspired Kryptonite's New York lock, the 11.4-pound, seventy-centimeter triple-heat-treated boron manganese four-sided steel-link and padlock chain. The stakes will rise indefinitely. He reaches a hand toward me and lifts up the padlock in his fingers, drops it down again against my abdomen. "It's only time before they crack it. They have the tools, tools with extraplanetary powers. Any bicycle is safe for only a grace period."

"You believe this?"

"I know this."

He tells me more things. The locks exist because there are people who can outsmart them. Without their antagonist, the locks have no purpose. Lurking somewhere in the shadows of New York City, there are a dozen or three dozen or five hundred men who know how to cut through Kryptonite boron. No one ever sees these men. No one knows who they are. But they are out there, clinging to the shadows at the corners of buildings at night, creeping across sewage gratings, skulking through the Financial District in windowless Econoline vans. They thrive in New York's underbelly. They live out their existences underground, perfecting their craft—their bliss—daily.

I, too, understand it perfectly. Eventually, mystical invisible packs of thieves pinch your bike. They lift all the bikes of New York, one after another, and then slowly reseed the streets with them. And soon enough, they pinch those, too. The bike-store guy has been telling me something that should have been clear all along, something crystalline and obvious that I have seen but overlooked.

That night I lie awake until three and finally crawl out of bed. I hold the boron chain and padlock in one hand as I dress, and then I step out to the subway. There are a good five inches of give in the chain now, and I have to hold it in both fists to keep it at my waist. Someday I will be so thin I can step right out of it. But not soon enough.

I ride the train to Wall Street and step out to the desolate sidewalk. In the morning it will bustle with the excitement of stock deals and bond trades, but at night it is a graveyard. I hold the chain tight and close my eyes, listen. There is a low rumble far off. It seems to come from all sides. It is the pulse of the city, the heartbeat of an underworld.

I scan the streets and see exactly what I expected. Chained to street posts and parking meters there is not a single intact bicycle. There are

sad and decaying specimens—a rusted frame bearing nothing but a flywheel; a U-lock attached to an inner tube; a flattened aluminum wheel rim. Not a single uncorrupted bicycle. The thieves have scammed them all.

I stride to a parking meter that has nothing dangling from it and place my front up close. Then I lift myself on tiptoes and, holding the lock as high as I can in front of me, so it digs into my back on the other side, I ease the lock over the head of the parking meter. It's tight going down, but sucking in my stomach I can just fit the meter head inside the circle of chain alongside my waist. Now I lower the chain so it circles the meter post at my abdomen, and then I swivel my body so the post is to my rear. Then I slide to the ground so I am sitting cross-legged with the post running along my spine.

I wait. I listen for the whisper of the men. I listen for Milo's motorcycle. The men will rip me from my chain. They will steal me. I will fly.

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## MEN AND BOYS

*Gideon, Paul, Thom, Nathan*—it's the fifth day of the trip and counting has become a tic, a way to feign control and seem valuable. Bugs thicken the already muggy air, and Jane gives them a vague swat as she counts heads. Annie trucks toward her across the campsite, pausing to help Margot and Lily with their tent. Gideon jabs at Paul with a pole and the two engage in a sword fight. Jenna and Grier, like responsible citizens, stake four corners into the ground.

Annie is scowling when she reaches Jane. "Where's Justin?" she asks. Annie has little tolerance for Justin: the disrupter, the problem child.

"I was just getting to him," Jane says. She hops her pointer finger through the air, exaggerating the motion so that Annie will see she has been taking note.

"Justin's the only one not here," Annie says. "Henry's his tent mate and look"—she points to delicate, spindly Henry who stands before