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ARTS & LETTERS PRIZE FOR FICTION

THE CELLAR

Risa was recounting her tip money when the tornado sirens blasted. She dropped the bills on her nubby bedspread and pressed the pads of her clammy palms to her ears. The sirens, shrill and deafening, felt as if they were splitting her in half. Wincing, she glanced at the money—the dollars had fanned out across the bedspread while the twenties clung to each other—and felt her heart race. She’d planned it all. Hidden her duffle in the cellar. Given notice at work. Changed her address at the post office. But she hadn’t planned on a tornado. Not today. Not on the day Brittany was coming for her.

“Risa! We gotta go!” Walker called from the other side of her bedroom door.

She dropped her hands, picked up the bills, two hundred and eighty dollars, and stacked them neatly into the hole she’d made in the middle of *Bridgman’s Complete Guide to Drawing from Life*. She hated damaging the book but it was the one place Walker wouldn’t look. She slipped the book into her backpack next to her tampons, wallet, toothbrush, miniature watercolor set and sunglasses. Finally, she turned to the open window. The leaves on the lilac tree were still, the sky beyond milky gray. It wasn’t until she looked to the left of the lilac tree, to the faded red barn in the distance, that she stiffened. Everything was an odd shade of green, as if she were looking through a subtle, colored filter. Just like in the stories she’d heard.

The siren, blaring its warning again, startled her. She turned from the window, pushed her backpack under her bed and unlocked the door. Walker

and Mama were no longer in the living room. She hurried into the kitchen, swung open the back door and glanced at the sky again. On this side of the house, purple and black clouds billowed across the sky, pushing and pulling, colliding and reforming, yet the still air remained a greenish tint. How would she paint this, with watercolors? How would Brittany do it?

“*Risa!*” Walker, from the cellar, was angry.

She started down the basestairs, closing the door behind her, the sirens finally muffled. The smells were familiar—dust, mildew, dampness, tobacco spit. In the old days, the cellar stored canned tomatoes, green beans, and peppers from the garden. Years later, Walker had turned it into a den where he played his stupid video games. Now it was just a repository of broken toys and electronics, tools, and discarded furniture. How ironic, she thought, that this piece of shit room was the safest in the house.

“Bout time,” Walker said before she’d reached the last step. His baggy Levis hung low on his hipbones and his sleeveless undershirt, stained with tractor oil and grease and frayed at the arm pits, fit snug against his lean torso. Was this undershirt five, ten years old? Lately, she’d caught him wearing it as he flexed in front of his mirror. Who did he think he could impress out here in the middle of nowhere?

She turned to Mama who was sprawled on the flowered couch, her pale green house dress hitched halfway up her beefy thighs. Something about her face today—maybe how the light bulb highlighted her freckles and long eyelashes—reminded Risa of the pictures of Mama from back in the day when she was happier and in the world. Risa pulled the dress so it covered her knees and then gently reached behind Mama’s back and smoothed out the kink in the oxygen line that ran to Mama’s nose. What did it mean that Walker had missed the kink? But she didn’t want to start anything with him. Not today.

“You okay, Mama?” Risa checked the portable oxygen unit next to the couch.

“Did you see the *atmosphere*?” Mama asked. “It was green. Just like in eighty-seven.”

That was the year, long before Risa and Walker were born, when a tornado took the smokehouse. It was part of their childhood lore, like the story of Dad leaving. Papi, her grandpa, selling all those acres. The sheep who died in childbirth. The day they had to sell the animals.

“The atmosphere ain’t a color,” Walker said.

“I remember that day like it was yesterday,” Mama said. “I was fourteen and Papi put me in charge of getting the horses into the barn. The atmosphere was green. I saw it.”

Walker snorted and Risa frowned at him. He shrugged and looked down at his phone. When the siren stopped, they instinctively turned to the stairs, as if it held the answer as to what would happen next. But surely this was good news. Soon they could go upstairs. Soon Brittany would come for her and she’d be out of here, once and for all.

“What were you doing with your door locked?” Walker didn’t look up from his phone.

She felt her cheeks redden. Damn it, how did he know? The TV in the living room was on extra loud and she’d been so quiet when she’d turned the lock. It had to be a lucky guess. But his ability to know these things, and then fling them back at her at random moments, had always unnerved her. She shrugged and looked away but her heart began to race again, sweat beading in the small of her back and on her upper lip. Today was not the day to let him inside and fester. Which is where he liked to be and what he liked to do.

What time was it? She felt her back pocket for her phone but it wasn’t there. Had she left it on her bed upstairs? What if Brittany texted? She wiped the sweat from her lip. It had to be just after one. Brittany was coming at two. She specifically said two o’clock. Because she wanted to miss the rush hour traffic coming out of Grand Rapids.

“You have your own car?” Risa had asked on that first night after work when they walked to the country club parking lot together. They were still in their waitressing uniforms, matching blue shirts and black skirts that made Risa feel as if there really wasn’t that much difference between them, after all.

“Sure. And my own apartment. And my own life.” Brittany had laughed and shrugged, as if the cost of these things wasn’t an issue, as if everyone had them.

Risa felt Walker staring at her. He didn’t know what she’d planned. Did he?

She resisted the urge to look across the room at her duffle bag, among the suitcases and boxes, on the shelf against the wall. For the last week, she’d been filling it with what she’d need—jeans, sweaters, a winter coat, shorts, T-shirts, a few dresses. One night, she’d rushed because she’d heard him upstairs. Had she not zipped the duffle? Or pushed it far enough back on the shelf? He’d ignored her when she’d come up the stairs. But maybe after she’d gone to her room, he came down here to snoop. Of course. He knew how much she hated the cellar.

“That day in eighty-seven we were down here for three straight hours.” Mama took the back of her hand across her forehead and began tugging on her oxygen line.

“What’s wrong?” Walker asked as he stepped closer and bent over her.

She pushed his arm away. “Risa, come here and fix this thing.”

Risa untangled the line along Mama’s hip, avoiding Walker, who she knew was still staring at her. She was tired of this crap between them. Walker wanted Mama’s money. Mama wanted everything to be like it used to be. Risa wanted something. Once she was gone, Mama would have no choice but to accept his help. But that didn’t mean she had to give him what he wanted.

When Walker’s phone dinged, he said, staring at the screen, “Tornado just touched down in Gunner Beach.”

“Dear God,” Mama said. “On the side of Gunner Beach closest to us? Or more north?”

“Doesn’t say.” Walker squinted into his phone.

Upstairs, something slammed against the house—a tree branch? The winds began to howl and the walls seemed to vibrate. Walker looked at her but she turned away.

Brittany lived in Gunner Beach. What if a downed powerline or an uprooted tree blocked her driveway and she couldn’t get out? Risa bit her lower lip and tried not to look at her duffle. The urge was so strong. It was like the time Walker hit the telephone pole in that new truck of his and Risa couldn’t take her eyes from the colossal damage to the front bumper. Walker was so upset—he’d spent every dime of the money Papi had willed to him on that truck and now he had nothing for repairs—and staring at the bumper made him more enraged but she couldn’t help it.

If she had her phone, she’d be less tempted. She could also follow the storm and track Brittany. She started for the stairs.

“Can’t go up.” Walker took a giant step toward her, grabbed her arm and whirled her back. She fell into him, her shoulder digging into his side, her elbow into his taut stomach. When his hand brushed her right breast, she dug the heel of her sneaker into the top of his bare foot.

He howled in her ear, “Jesus *Christ*, Risa.” And then he let go.

“Don’t be such a perv,” she hissed, recoiling from his tinny breath.

“Don’t *call* me that.” He frowned.

Mama folded her hands in her lap and closed her eyes. But when something slammed into the house again, she shuddered and opened them. The house shook. The winds whistled. Hail, like a rapid-fire machine gun, pinged against the bulkhead door on the far side of the cellar. Then the light bulb hanging from the ceiling flickered and turned off, plunging them into a shadowy darkness lit only by the small window above the shelf.

Oh God, maybe she hadn’t zipped the duffle. She remembered stuffing her socks in the side pocket and then startling when she’d heard Walker’s voice above her. But no. She wouldn’t have made that mistake. She felt the

sweat on her back again and knew she needed to calm herself. This God-damn cellar. It had always made her on edge.

“There’s candles in the cabinet behind you, Risa,” Mama said. “Papi was always prepared. You’ll find a flashlight, too.”

Risa frowned. Papi this. Papi that. He’d become a saint on the day the lawyers came to the house last year to give Mama the news from the will. The farm, although much diminished, was all hers as was \$60,000 in cash. Risa and Walker each got \$15,000. Mama was so happy that you’d have thought not a bad word had ever been said between Papi and her. That he hadn’t been so mean and stingy. That he’d never called her a piece of fat white shit-trash. *I don’t know what you’re talking about*, Mama had said when Risa asked about all this. You forgive and you forget, Risa concluded. Except that some things you couldn’t forgive and forget.

She turned, opened the cabinet door and pulled out a candle in a holder. She lit it, walked to Mama and handed it to her. Walker was still on his phone. When Risa straightened, she turned her head—slightly and for only a second—to the duffle. It was snug on the shelf, the zipper zipped, and she sighed, relieved. She lit several candles, blew dust off the counter and set them down. Not once had Walker looked at her.

Outside, the storm raged. If she had her phone, she could text Brittany. *Are we still on?*

She’d been surprised to see her that first day of work, just after graduation. She’d assumed rich people joined the country club, not worked there. She was even more surprised when Brittany, who was a year older, recognized her. *Weren’t we in art together? Didn’t you do that kick-ass cubist collage everyone was crazy about?* Yes, Risa had beamed. That was me. They stuck together during orientation as the club manager showed them around and spat out the rules. Serve from the left side. Refill water glasses without being asked. Always look guests in the eyes and memorize their names and drinks of choice.

After the first week, they were part of a group that met behind the tennis court shed after work. This included Juan, the cute bartender. Michelle, the

anorexic pastry chef. And Tommy, a waiter who went to high school with Risa and Brittany. At first, Risa felt shy and tentative. Neither she, nor her friends, had ever been to the club, and Tommy and Brittany were part of the popular kids who'd never acknowledged her, never even said hello all those years. But soon, she relaxed. No one seemed to care where you were from. She began to imagine, as they passed the vape and flask, the warm summer air full of mosquitos and light flirtations and possibilities, that this was what high school could have been like if people hadn't been so hung up on what everyone else thought.

"What time is it?" Risa asked. Surely, if the tornado was going to touch down near them, it had already done so.

"Why do you care?" Walker asked. "Got somewhere to go?"

She felt a shiver start up her back. "No."

"Going somewhere with your fancy friend?" He handed Mama his phone, showed her how to follow the storm and kissed the top of her head. Then he straightened, his thin lips curled into a grin that seemed distorted, almost demonic in the shadows made by the candle. He took his finger along the table next to the couch, raised it to his lips and blew.

He was playing her. Because she *had* been careful. No talk of Brittany. No mention that she'd given notice at the club. Even if he'd opened her duffle while snooping down here, she could say she was simply storing clothes she no longer used. God, just look at this basement. That pathetic little hanging light bulb. The mildewed rug. That broken spring in the couch that always felt like a hot poker in her back. How could Mama stand sitting on it?

"No offense, but your brother is kind of a creep," Brittany had said one night as she brought Risa home and Walker was sitting in the dark, on the side of the driveway, waiting for them. When the headlights suddenly illuminated him, Brittany had jumped. Risa had wanted to lash out. *You fucking creep*. He'd complained so much about taking her and picking her up from work that she thought he'd be happy when Brittany offered to do it.

But no. He had to keep it up. This harassment. Well, he wasn't getting her money. Or anything else, either.

But she hadn't wanted Brittany to think something was wrong with him, or her, or the family. Besides, there was a time, before, when Walker wasn't so bad. "He's protective of me."

"Yeah, but doesn't he have better things to do?" She'd asked. "Friends? A job? *College?*"

Only people with money and expectations went to college. Everyone Risa knew would know this. But Brittany could be a little oblivious sometimes. She assumed that everyone had chances and possibilities. People with money were like that, she'd noticed. And yet, how could she fault her? If it weren't for her encouragement, Risa wouldn't have packed her duffle in the first place.

You can have Maya's bedroom because she'll be in Spain for the year! The rent is cheap and our house is on campus and so you won't need a car! You can audit classes in the art department and apply for spring semester! You can waitress to earn money! You won't need anything except clothes! It's no problem at all! You'll love college!

Another round of hail—ping, ping—on the bulkhead door. Then a faint sound, like the trains she listened to at night. But the tracks were a long way off and this sound was growing louder. She and Walker exchanged glances and walked to the bottom of the stairs. Then they climbed, wordless, halfway up and stopped. The basement door rattled and they could feel the wind pulling and tugging on the house.

Then the train was upon them, so sudden and loud that she felt it in her bones and mouth and groin. She imagined a huge engine—the kind she saw pulling the gigantic grain bins along the highway—with their hot, greasy wheels and thick, heavy shells pumping and groaning, inching the bins forward, gaining steam and then barreling down the tracks. For the first time today, she realized how much danger they were in. How stupid and naïve could she be? The tornado was here. Now. Above them. On top of them.

"Oh, Lord almighty, we're gonna die!" Mama screamed.

“Everything is tied up outside!” Walker yelled. “We’re safe down here.”

Yes, safe down here, Risa thought as she reached for Walker’s hand and squeezed, burying her forehead in the sinewy muscles of his upper arm. His hand felt soft and warm, his smell fresh like the wind and this made her think good, sweet thoughts of him. Swinging from the rope in the barn and swimming at the pond and catching fire flies in Papi’s old Mason jars. She felt herself drifting and imagined, as she used to, that she was lying on a cloud and slowly traversing the sky as that one little light—the sun? A star?—shone down on her. If they lost the house, if it was swept off the cellar and scattered throughout the county, they’d be okay. Because Mama had insurance and extra money. And Risa had her savings—she grown Papi’s \$15,000 into \$25,532—that she’d tucked safely away in the bank downtown. She’d give to them. She would.

And then suddenly, the train was gone. Risa lifted her head but all she heard was the steady sound of rain.

“I think it went over us,” Walker said, a growing confidence in his voice. “I don’t think it touched down. Otherwise, we’d have heard it and felt it.”

Risa dropped his hand, walked down the stairs and stood over Mama. “You okay?”

“I thought it was going to be like eighty-seven,” she said. “When we nearly died.”

Something about this snapped Risa to attention. No one nearly died in eighty-seven, not even the animals in the barn because the only thing that went up with the tornado was the empty smokehouse. *Which was on its last leg*, Papi always said when recounting the storm. It annoyed her how often Mama misremembered the past. She looked down at her fat arms, the house dress that had inched above her knees again and cringed. Then she turned to Walker who was still on the stairs, grinning as if he’d just won the tractor pull at the county fair. They deserved each other. These two. Good riddance.

The rain had slowed and now a sharp ray of sunlight burst through the cellar window. This crazy world. A tornado one moment. Now the sun. Brittany was probably on her way because it would be her luck that the tornado spared her and her car and her big house and everyone she loved. But no, that wasn't right. Rich people were just like everyone else. They drank too much and ate too much and gossiped about each other and complained about their kids. She heard it all when she served those extra-large vodka martinis and heaping glasses of chardonnay and dishes like roasted organic chicken in a raspberry reduction sauce.

"You're working at the *country club*?" Her friend Dina had gasped, eyes wide, when Risa told her. What Risa hadn't said was that she'd been terrified when she'd answered the ad and gone in for her interview. People like her didn't work at places like that. But she'd made herself do it and got the job. And it was worth the risk because now her life was about to change. She asked again, "What time is it?"

"She's not your friend, you know. She'll dump you as soon as she gets tired of you. *Brittany Frank*." He turned to Mama. "Do you know her daddy? Doctor Frank?"

Mama closed her eyes and rested her head on the back of the couch. Risa felt her cheeks sting, a swirling uneasiness settling in her chest.

"What are you gonna do when your money runs out?" He asked.

How did he know? How the *hell* did he know?

He climbed down the stairs and walked around the couch. Ever since Papi died, he was different. Restless. Maybe desperate. Risa had started watching him more closely, taking note when he was in the house. When he was in the barn. He ran his finger along the shelf under the duffle and held it up to her. He said, "All along here, there ain't no marks in the dust. And then suddenly, there are all these marks. In front of the bag. It was so obvious."

He checked the marks in the dust? The uneasiness dropped into her stomach. "You're pathetic, Walker."

“What do you have that she’d want?”

Plenty, Risa knew. She was the better artist. The better waitress. The better money saver. And when it came to street smarts, she was better at that, too. Risa had listened patiently that day in the coat room, weeks ago, when Brittany, sobbing, confided, “For weeks that bastard has been brushing against me and stopping me in the bar and talking. He’s always staring, pervert! Then he grabbed me in the hall, kissed me and tried to stick his fucking tongue down my throat. He’s like sixty-five! What was I supposed to do? He’s a *judge!*”

“Here’s what you do.” Risa had never felt so steady, so sure. “Let him think he’s having his way and then reach under his arm, grab his balls and squeeze and twist as hard as you can. Be quick, be sure of yourself. Use all your strength. If you don’t, or if you hesitate, you lose. After that, he won’t bother you again.”

Walker snickered. “So, you a lesbo? That has to be it.”

Now that he knew about her plan, she felt reckless. She shook her head. “I like men. Real men. You know that.”

His cheeks reddened. The sun’s rays were narrow—the window was small—but they were strong enough that she could see him clearly. That and the dust that seemed to hang in the air, dancing, suspended, floating. No matter how much she cleaned down here, and this was always her chore back when Walker played his games, she could never get rid of the dust. Or the mildew. Or the mouse turds. Or the feeling that if she stayed in this house any longer she’d lose that small part of her that knew she was different. Special. That told her she could do something if she just had a chance.

“So, she’s got an apartment or house or something?” He asked. “And you’re going to stay there, too? And do what?”

“Get a job. Sit in on classes. Apply.” Risa glanced at the duffel. It had to be after two. Down here the walls were thin and she’d hear the doorbell or car horn (Brittany tooted three times when she picked her up for work).

But what if Brittany didn't toot and was sitting outside and texting her right now? Would she leave if Risa didn't respond? She felt her hands begin to shake and this taste—something new, something metallic—in the back of her throat.

“Did you hear that Mama?” Walker asked. Mama looked at him but didn't seem to see him. He turned to Risa. “What you gonna do when her college friends want to know why you're there? They'll think you're white trash, you know.”

“No, they won't,” she said.

But would they? Risa felt that sweat on her lower back again as she wiped her palm across her damp forehead. Brittany was fun and spontaneous but impatient, too. Risa thought about the time earlier in the summer when Tommy had asked for a ride home and they'd taken off without him. Oh, he can call a friend, she'd said so flippantly. And another time on their lunch break behind the tennis shed when Brittany whined about her high school girlfriends who were away for the summer. *My dad made me stay here and work*, she'd pouted.

Would she and Brittany have been friends if those girls had been around?

“You're smart and all.” Walker chuckled. “But we ain't no college family, Risa.”

It had seemed so easy, and possible, when Brittany suggested it. Come with me. Get a job. Sit in on classes. Then apply! But now Risa wondered how, exactly, would this work. She'd need teacher recommendations and yet she'd never talked to a teacher outside of class in all her years of high school. And her \$25,532 wouldn't pay for four years of college. She'd have to get loans. But she had no idea how to do that.

“I know you,” he said.

And he did, every little bit, inside and out, and something about this admission, this resignation, made her shoulders relax and her jaw and stomach muscles loosen. Who did she think she was? Three generations

had lived on this farm. They'd been through droughts and storms and foreclosures and bankruptcies. They'd been through death and birth, harvests and disease. If she went to the country club, could she get her job back? Maybe, if she continued to do good work, she'd earn a shift manager's position. That wasn't so awful, was it?

She started to cry, the hot tears burning her eyes.

"Aw, it ain't so bad." Walker sat on the couch and crossed his right leg over his left. Then he stretched his arm behind Mama and began massaging her neck. She moaned softly.

A car horn. Three toots. Risa felt her heart surge and gasped for a breath. Walker dropped his leg and sat forward, elbows on his knees as he glared at her.

Go. White trash. Hurry. You can't do this. Yes. We're no college family. Risa's knees buckled, her feet cemented to the floor as if rooted there. She was only six when Dad left. She remembered standing in the kitchen, sunlight and summer air pouring through the windows, and watching as he walked away from her, boots scuffing the dirt, his duffle tossed across his shoulder. Had he made the right decision? Did he ever regret not coming back? Had he felt, too, that his life would be over had he stayed?

Another toot. She imagined Brittany sighing loudly as she turned her car around, pissy because who would take that spare bedroom now?

Risa stared at her duffle, her heart hammering her chest. Inside she'd also packed that collage she'd turned in for her final art project junior year. She'd planned to submit a watercolor of the barn. It had been easy to paint and she knew she'd get an A. She always got As in art. But the night before the project was due, she'd been with Walker when he crashed his truck. As she sat in the passenger seat, Walker yelling and swearing and kicking the telephone pole, as if it had been the pole's fault, not his, she saw snippets of things in her mind that wouldn't stop and made no sense. Mama staring at the television. Dad's back as he walked away. The slab where the smokehouse had been. The sheep who died in childbirth. Walker's contorted face

before he released. When she got home, she tore through magazines she'd been saving, cutting out pictures of faces, bodies, houses, mountains, and pasting them over the watercolor, interlaced with colorful silk squares, until what she had was unlike anything she'd ever done but the only way to quiet those things she saw in her mind.

Why did some people stay while others needed to go?

Walker, relaxed now—maybe confident that she was staying—crossed his legs again and fiddled with the oxygen tank. Risa charged across the room, yanked her duffle off the shelf and took the stairs two at a time. It only took a few seconds.

“You’ll regret it!” Walker called after her. “You can’t just come back, you know!”

By then, she was at the top of the stairs and in her bedroom. Through the window, she saw storm clouds, miles away now, and the sky above the barn that was the most beautiful shade of blue she'd ever seen. She would remember this.