"The scientist has the habit of science; the artist, the habit of art."
–Flannery O'Connor

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"Ramone" by Judy Troy
"Who's Your Daddy?" by Bob Bledsoe
"Mouthful of Sorrow" by Dana Johnson
"The Penance Practicum" by Erin McGraw
"Three Parting Shots and a Forecast" by Christie Hodgen
"Casualidades" by Carolyn Alessio
"Scarlet" by Mandy Sayer
"Ways to Kill a Snapper" by Gregory Miller
"Selling the Apartment" by Danit Brown
"Relevant Girl" by Tenaya Darlington
"A Morning for Milk" by Seamus Boshell
"Pork Chops" by Eileen FitzGerald
"The Nine Ideas for a Happier Whole" by Amos A. Magliocco
"Stepping in Ms. Cent-Jean's Shoes" by Crystal S. Thomas
"Dream House" by Barbara Bean
"Home Course Advantage" by Clint McCown
"All Saints Day" by Angela Pneuman

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THE HABIT OF ART

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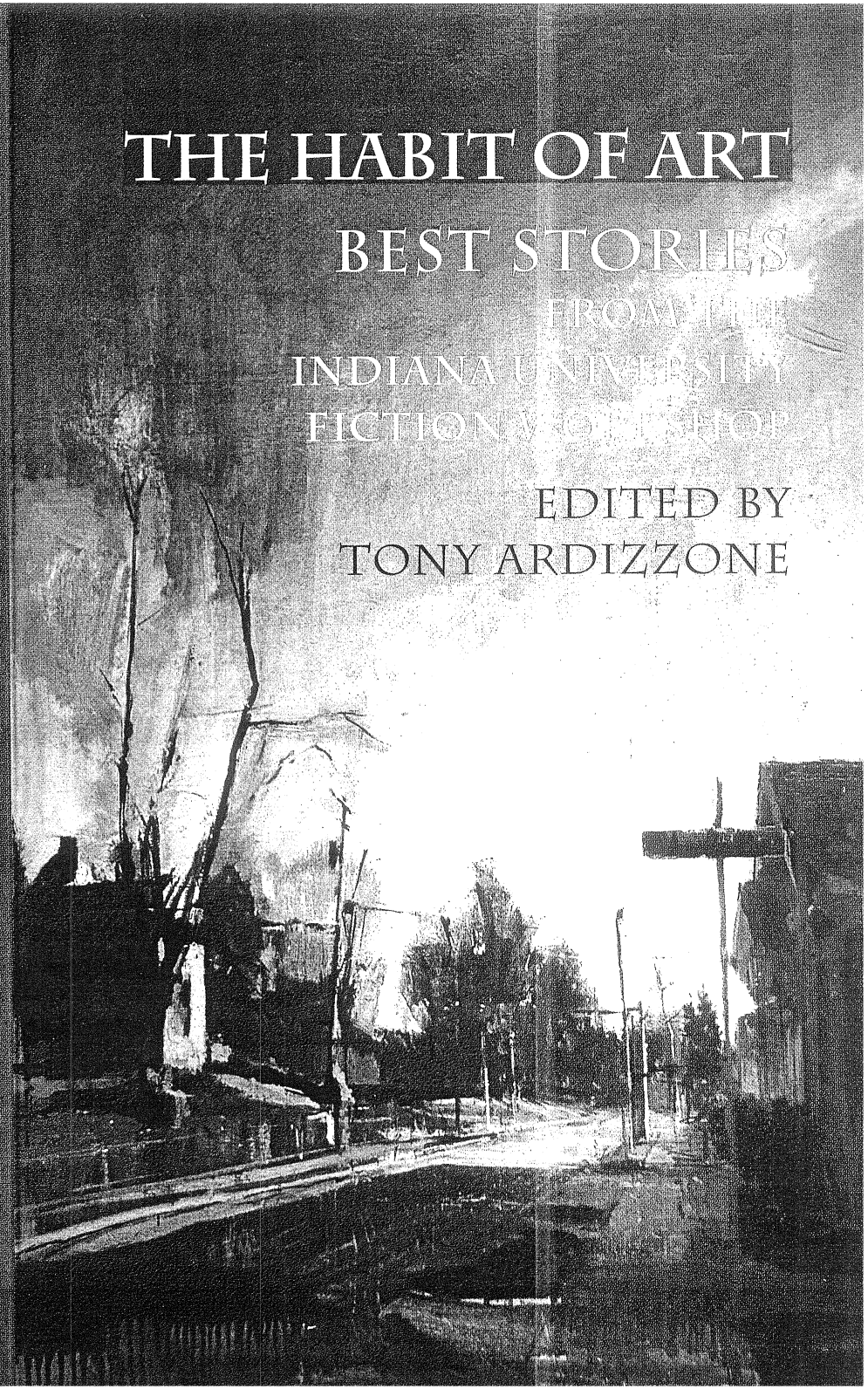

THE HABIT OF ART

BEST STORIES FROM THE INDIANA UNIVERSITY FICTION WORKSHOP

EDITED BY
TONY ARDIZZONE

THE NINE IDEAS FOR A HAPPIER WHOLE

AMOS A. MAGLIOCCO

I come on these trips because Patty hates needles. She cannot, she claims, pierce her own skin with a syringe filled with thick, clear insulin.

Apparently it's not as easy as shoplifting. At home, her mother drives from across Dallas twice daily to give her the shots. With the syringe in her hand she removes the cap and examines the skin of Patty's upper arm or her ass, choosing new areas to avoid bruising the skin. When Patty and I go to Oklahoma, we're out well past dinner, and she needs insulin after she eats. I ask her where she's been taking her shots lately.

We're in her car, going ninety miles per hour.

She used to give me a mock laugh. Now, she looks away and lifts her sleeve. "My arm is fine," she says. It's not funny to her anymore, I can tell. That's my fault.

I give her the shot and dab her arm with a thin alcohol swab. An orange safety cap locks over the needle and I store the used syringe and insulin vial in the plastic tacklebox Patty uses for this stuff. The safety cap is narrow, and replacing it over the needle is

tricky business in a moving car, a bad idea since I'm liable to jab myself. I pull my book out from the tan pouch under the door handle. I've just finished reading *The Nine Ideas for a Happier Whole* and I'm sitting in the passenger seat of Patty's '57 Chevy Bel Air, hoping nobody saw her swipe a six-pack at the Allsup's Pit Stop in Frederick.

On my agenda: making it through the year without being accused of sexual harassment at work. Patty doesn't set goals like that. She likes to steal Shiner Bock beer in Oklahoma and buy super-unleaded in Texas. Her wide brown eyes flutter back and forth between the windshield and the rearview mirror. She's careful, watching her speed, changing lanes with the clunky old turnlamps: click-clack, click-clack. Patty Mullins is an engineer, crazy as a moon-rock, and I wonder if I'll ever find a self-improvement program to let me keep her.

The Eighth Idea: Find Your Hiding Place. Everyone has a place where they can think, laugh, or cry most easily. Find it right now. Get out of your car, climb down from the SUV–no road sign will point the way. Never tell another soul.

"Want a beer?" she asks.

"No thanks. You pay for them?"

"Of course not." She laughs. "I don't have a cent on me."

"Beer throws off your blood sugar," I say. "You shouldn't drink beer." The road snakes around midget hills, and patches of green winter wheat interrupt faded pasture. We're a striking sight on the prairie, a bubbly old car, two-tone electric blue and white, defiant fins parading over the trunk. Then the stunning moon-faced driver with yellow curls. We're a cartoon against that drab, drought-dead background of cold yellows and flat orange, a tropical fish on wheels. The gas gauge, as always, reads well past "F," fuller than full.

The gauge is broken, but Patty never runs out of gas.

I think about the Nine Ideas, these simple suggestions to live by. I make a note to tell Samantha, my personal coach, to read the book and help me incorporate the lessons into my life. I've never actually seen Samantha. I only talk to her on the telephone.

"I have to pay more attention to what I consume," I say to Patty. "Not just what I eat, but everything: emotion, energy, even information." I raise my eyebrows at this last item. I want her to know that I'm watching the way she frames reality, Patty the myth-maker.

"Here," she says, holding a brown bottle in front of me. "Drink the evidence."

"You don't listen to me," I say.

She banks a curve at almost eighty. The tires whine. Her hair slides across her neck and shoulders. She has tiny ears—you have to brush back the curls to see them.

"I listen, Thomas." She checks the side mirrors. "Sometimes you say so much."

Know this about her: Patty is a brittle diabetic. When her blood sugar level drops from too much insulin, her brain starves for fuel. Sugar is brain food. Strange things happen then. Too much sugar and she can have a stroke. She makes it worse by eating and drinking whatever she likes, ignoring the prescribed diet, disregarding her own program. "It's hard to find a program that *doesn't* work," Samantha often tells me on the phone. "It's harder to find a person who does. You have to be a stickler." Samantha is a graduate of Coach U, an internet-based institution cranking out personal coaches by the bushel, energetic men and women to guide the lost and lonely for a nominal fee.

I feel good about the Nine Ideas. They're practical. They just might work.

Patty drives into a curtain of dark rain. Lightning flashes from the storm tower overhead and the wind sprays Patty's Bel Air head-on. If anyone saw Patty grab that beer and run out the door, they'd never forget this gorgeous blue and white car, the silver side mirrors

like flashy chrome earrings. I can see Patty wearing them, taming them with her willful style. People might snicker, make space for her embarrassment, but she'd lean into them with that slapstick smile: "What, you don't like them?" Yeah, this thing is an *automobile.*

Patty said planning my financial and professional future with a stranger on the telephone was ridiculous. And it was my third session with Samantha when she said *Patty* had to go. I listen for a hitch in Samantha's voice after I detail what Patty and I are up to. The intolerance on the other end of the line is brittle and distorted like static.

It's all very thin, what Samantha tells me, reciting her generic advice from prepared scripts. She sits in a call center like the one I manage for a living, with hundreds of people around her wearing headsets and watching the clock. Rows and rows of cubicles with blue cloth sides. Like I say, it's all very tinny, but even crass commercialism can't blunt old-fashioned, objective wisdom. The species has gathered so much of it; all you have to do is call. Operators are standing by.

Samantha insists Patty is my "Failure Point." It's a psychological trick knee. A habit or substance or person can fill that space. Getting rid of the incarnation doesn't necessarily dismiss the flaw. The way Samantha explains it, Patty and I might have an entirely different and healthy relationship under a new and distant set of circumstances. Dismissing Patty will uncover the problem. I tell Samantha that I'll always want to get Patty in bed. She's a knockout. Samantha acts as if I'm not co-operating. I tell her she's not dealing with reality.

The Second Idea: Dietary Discretion. Garbage in; garbage out. Lift your face from the trough, friend. If you're not ready to make this change, put the book back, please.

"I wish you'd slow down." I drink the beer. "The roads are wet." Patty fixes her eyes on the windshield.

"You're right," she says with a smile. My knees draw as if to buckle.

"Let's stay in the rain as long as we can," I say, "or until the sun goes down." Patty leans over and looks up to the ragged gray base of the storm. Red needles wobble inside the silver-rimmed gauges of the instrument panel. Her eyes are quick, the calculating engineer, the sexiest damn thing I've ever seen.

"The storm may not follow the road," she says. "It doesn't have to, you know."

"This is farm country," I tell her. "There's all kinds of little roads." I reach in the back for *The Roads of Oklahoma,* a detailed map with an entire county on each two-page spread, and every U.S. interstate, state highway, county road, farm-to-market, gravel trail, and dirt path clearly marked. It's invaluable when we leave Texas in some unorthodox manner, which is nearly every time we come. We'll roll down the windows and howl like wolves when we cross back over the state line. The Red River is stone-shallow like a creek these days, as though the distant heart of the thing beats softer and softer. The rain will do us good.

The day I met Patty I saw her car first, then the pretty girl inside. She didn't smile, but she and the car glowed together, the combination more radiant than either element apart. Samantha, my coach, wasn't interested when I told her how Patty looked as if she'd been born in there, as though the car had grown around her like some neon metallic hairdo.

"Gotta watch the time," Samantha said. I was always surprised when we reached our limit of one hour per call—we always seemed just about to reach the heart of things and then it was over.

My friends told me it was just that old car, but I disagreed. Patty *likes* people, and you can tell. She's a good lover, strong but soft and obliging, and the first time she said she loved me she gave a bitter look, as if I'd forced it from her. Now I'm in that car with her and we're driving fast.

"How's work?" she asks. Patty thinks managing a room full of people is exciting. She's a mechanical engineer, and draws blueprints for gas pump parts. The debit card revolutionized the gas pump industry: every station needs new ones. People won't stop at the old ones anymore, Patty says. They want to use their debit cards. Patty designed a pump with little TV screens playing CNN while you fill the tank. Times are good, I tell her, when people can afford enough gas to watch the news while they pump.

I've got a smaller office than any department head in the building. Because the managers make do with offices the size of large closets, we have space for vending machines in a large break room, with fried apple pies and steaming coffee. On Sunday mornings, a few employees come early and cook bacon and scrambled eggs in the microwave, fill clear plastic cups with orange juice and make other breakfast sounds: warm, tired voices and small laughter. Hell, it sounds like someone's kitchen. Of course they say nasty things about me behind my back—that's human nature—but I know where they'd line up in a fistfight. You have those in big companies. No blood, just words and emails, poison memos and trips to the Human Resources Department. None of ours transfer out. I see a new request to transfer *in* every day from some brave soul in another area. Their bosses see it, too.

We have our own entrance and exit, and we lock the glass door to the rest of the building to keep them out. When my boss visits from the executive suite, security calls and I buzz him in. The rest of them stop at the door and stare through the glass. My people wave and smile.

"It's *good,*" I tell Patty. "We're making it a good place for people to work."

Wind blows rain back and forth across the road. Clouds to our west glow green with hail, but I don't mention it since she's going plenty fast already. Still, it would be a shame to drive this old bird under the rocks.

The Seventh Idea: Write Glowing Reviews of Yourself. Write about your goals, and what you did today to draw nearer to them.

"A good place to work? Meaning the boss doesn't try to talk girls into storage closets with him?" Patty says things like that, like I'm some predator. The girl in question had felt comfortable enough to roll her eyes and say, "In your dreams." She quit a month later and sued the company for sexual harassment. It's hard to help myself. The women in our building are feisty.

"You should come work for us," I say. "You'd see for yourself."

"I'd cut your dick off and microwave it. You should read self-castration books to improve yourself." She laughs. She hadn't laughed when the lawsuit was filed though, mainly because there'd been a similar problem the year before, another case of poor judgement: the wrong quip to the wrong person. She did everything but laugh. She packed her clothes, rolling them tightly and lining her suitcase, removing photographs from frames I'd bought and sliding them carefully into a manila envelope, labeling each with a black felt marker. I joked about cataloging relics while she sorted pens from the desk, dropping a handful into the front pocket of her bookbag. You don't find me funny anymore, I said. It was the end for Patty and me, that second time. Now we were friends, co-conspirators, monitors sent to inspect the rebuilding process of one another's lives.

Patty called me a criminal, a sex fiend.

"My God, Patty," I say now, wondering how far she might be from considering some violent act. If we were married? One never knows another person completely.

A white pickup appears behind us, a red strobe light over the driver's side.

"What's the next east road?" Patty says.

"I don't know, let's ask this cop."

"Find the next east road. Please."

"East is a bad idea, Patty. There's hail moving this way."

I learned about Patty's diabetes while we were dating in college. Someone approached me in a topless bar and said I had an emergency phone call. A naïve stripper named Diamond was sitting with me. I'd seen Diamond come in wearing too-high heels, and watched her stumble around: her first day, and I was talking her out of the career choice when they said Patty was unconscious in the drunk tank. An hour later she was comatose, white as linen, like the blood had drained from every cell. I couldn't believe she wasn't dead.

The First Idea: Exercise. Tap the natural spring. You don't require Siberian, Korean or any other communist ginseng. Your body has all the energy you need.

We're out of Oklahoma's Arbuckle Mountains now, emerging onto the flatland like a circus tent in the desert. The storm swallows the reddening western sky, closing on us.

"The next east road is a gravel trail," I say. "We'll get stuck." Patty doesn't need me to explain traction. "Then we'll get hailed on. We need to get south of the storm or turn around and stay north of the hail. We're running out of options." The sheriff's truck follows at a distance, light flashing dimly in the rain, waiting for us to decide.

"I'm all for not stopping," she says. "Not until they send the helicopters." When her sugar drops, Patty's brain closes systems one by one, the gas-guzzlers first: higher functions like reason and delicate motor skills. Most diabetics grow tired and lie down until they can eat. Patty runs from the law, riding a 455-horsepower Chevy engine through the Red River Valley like a last, wild Apache before the clatter of infantry.

The best thing Patty could do now is drink a beer.

Because I know Patty's disease, I'm not surprised that she keeps driving and talks about helicopters. Stress chews up glucose fast, and we haven't eaten since breakfast. Her eyes are blank, the brain-

drain unfolding like a play, and I imagine her floating out of the car, through the window maybe, head-first, snaking through the opening and up, up, up into the storm, leaving a serene pet Patty down here with me, the one she thinks I want, the one she thinks I'm looking for in books. Her perfume smells like the first fall day wet leaves clump together on the grass.

The sheriff's truck closes in, a few yards from our bumper. I lift the *Nine Ideas* from the door pouch. The cover is that slick, soft paper, cool to the touch.

I read aloud: *"The Sixth Idea: Eradicate all negative agents in your world. Celebrate their exile. Then never give them second thought."* Thunder rolls like we're in the crawl space beneath a bowling alley.

"Wow," she says. "I'm so glad you reminded me." She smiles and shakes her head. She's entertaining herself. "Thomas, Thomas. So much time learning how to live. Call me when you figure it out."

"I'm improving myself. It's possible, you know. You can roll up your sleeves and do it."

"Accept circumstances or waste time," Patty says. "Like you." She'll only talk to me about this when she's having an insulin reaction. It's how I know it's in there. "You waste time."

If I go to jail in Oklahoma, I probably miss work on Monday or arrive embarrassingly late. Sunlight approaches the storm's edge. Then we're out from under the cloud, and the brightness makes us squint. I turn to Patty. "Now they've got us."

"Optimist," she snarls, rolls her head around, goes downhill fast. The engine sputters once, and again, and Patty floors the accelerator and pounds the big brown steering wheel with both hands. When she exhausts herself and we're barely moving, I pull the wheel towards me to guide the car to the shoulder where we roll to a stop.

I'm amazed. She looks from the instruments to me to my book.

I turn in my seat as the deputy approaches. Patty rolls down the window before he gets to there.

"The gauge is broke!" she shouts. The deputy stops.

"How's that?" he says.

"The gauge is broke. You didn't catch me—I ran out of gas." He walks to the window now, peels off his silver sunglasses. "Shit," she says to him. Like he's cheated.

"People tell me everyday about broken *speedometers*," he says, looking at me. I nod to agree. Black letters on his silver nametag spell "Godwin." He's lamppost thin and acne-scarred, with a struggling red mustache and small eyes. He reminds me of the applicants we turn away out of some instinctual sense of malfeasance, though their resumes are filled with swaths of unaccounted time between jobs and provide us comfortable justification. Here was one with a gun, nearly larger than his hand. "You'd think not one of them came out of the factory working," he says, "so many broken out here." Now he looks at Patty. "Right here on this highway." He tugs his red moustache. "But nobody ever said they pulled over because they ran out of gas." He looks in the back seat. "Heard you forgot to pay for some beer."

"Yeah," Patty says. She taps the speedometer glass with a clear fingernail. "It's never worked right." She tries to start the car again.

"Whoa now," Godwin says and steps back. He lifts the leather strap on his holster. I pull the keys out of the ignition. Patty glares at me. I go into the routine.

"She's a diabetic, officer. She's having an insulin reaction right now."

"Is that right?" The outlines of hills press through the rain to our north. We're in the sunlight, and a broad, bright rainbow parades overhead. I feel like we should be drinking champagne. Godwin moves closer to the window. He's chewing gum.

"She needs a candy bar or some orange juice," I say.

"And a new gas gauge," Godwin adds.

"Right."

"Feeling faint there, little lady?" he asks. I clench my jaw.

"I'm not your lady," Patty says sweetly, as though he's mistaken

her for his mother. She turns to face him. "I'm a real bitch." Deputy Godwin laughs from the belly and tells her to get out of the car. While he adjusts the silver handcuffs around her wrists, Patty says that he stinks like a milk cow, and that her uncle could use someone like him out at the Dairy. They count breedings every day, she explains, plenty of action for him. Godwin pours a gallon of gas into the empty tank and tells me to follow him back to Frederick. Patty is going to jail and we won't know bail until he finds the judge.

The Ninth Idea: Occupy all the Universe. Bring the Ideas together, and honor the potential of every action. The power of all creation becomes yours.

The Western Union office is closed, but the clerk arrives ten minutes after I pull in the parking lot. She's gray from head to toe and thin as a rail. She knows the whole story, no doubt.

"Got some trouble?" she asks. She walks to the door and fumbles through her keys.

"It's always something," I say.

"Don't I know it."

I write out the wire order and wait with her. We sit on stools and talk across the scratched wooden counter. A ceiling fan turns above us. I tell her about the Nine Ideas, and she shakes her head and waits patiently for me to finish. She tells me about the Bible, and the story of the Baby Jesus, who had so many ideas that guys wrote four versions of his story, each with different ideas than the others. A self-improvement extravaganza, I tell her. She nods and says she never thought of it that way, but she supposes that's exactly what it is. I tell her I'm a person who has to work on a few ideas at a time. Like Gerald Ford, I say, and she laughs a sweet, quiet laugh as we wait for Patty's bail money.

We'd run into the wrong cop. Back at the sheriff's office, Godwin fishes a few coins from his pocket and drops them into a

vending machine. The bottles are stacked vertically and the glass door swings open like a refrigerator. Even the "Enjoy Coca-Cola" in flaking red paint is a classic design.

Patty's Chevy ran out of magic on us, as though there were a gauge for that sort of thing and it broke too. Godwin tosses a bottle to me with the key to her cell. Patty presses her face to the bars, singing badly.

"Make her drink that and don't let her take so much insulin," Godwin says. "Cook your brain that way, or crack up that shiny car. Wouldn't that be a crime?" I nod my head. There's no doubt that it would be.

"I don't think she'll drink it," I say. "She's belligerent." I'm off the script. Cops had always let us go, happy to do without the coma in their jail.

Deputy Godwin smiles. "Thomas, you let me know, and I'll call the medics to bring some glucagon. We'll give her a shot if she can't drink the pop. Fix her up good as new." Glucagon was the instant cure: pure glucose. Patty stops singing.

I bail her out and drive us back to Corsicana, Texas, in her Chevy. I tell her we shouldn't see each other for a while. I leave my book wedged in Patty's sun visor over the driver's side.

"I'm sick of your New Age crap anyway," she says. "I'm sure Samantha can find you somebody with the right number of ideas." Patty's not the type to cry. A week later, she won't return my calls, and I phone the County Attorney in Frederick for the trial date. I drive to Oklahoma alone.

The Third Idea: Direct your Energy. Focus on one or two primary goals. Feel the power move through your hands; sculpt a new life for yourself.

My silver Chrysler blows chilled air and has a first-class sound system. Stock ponds near the road are still and dark. Children fish

from the knobby docks. I cross the Red River knowing Patty needs confrontation, someone to stand up in court and tell the truth. She needs me to show how much I love her that way.

She's somewhere on this same road, checking her rearview mirror for me, suspicious of that broken gauge now.

I'll sing like a canary. That's the right way to do it, the cleanest break. She'll know my intentions, but fold and go home anyway, I'm convinced. I imagine her dabbing cherry lipstick on her lips, the scent like ice cream.

I call Samantha on the cell phone and tell her my plan. She's quiet, and I hear the lightest clack of keys as she types a word into her database. Probably "confrontation."

"No, no," I say. "This is not about that at all. Not like confronting an alcoholic. This is revelation, public confession."

"Now let me think this over, Thomas." More typing, louder this time.

"Listen. Stop typing. I'll show her I love her and leave. My going away present." Samantha sighs. "I want to know what you think!" I say. I've never told Samantha about my problems at work. It didn't seem important, the past. Misunderstandings.

"I just think I think you need to do your own thing, Thomas. Stop following Patty around."

The Fourth Idea: Love Yourself Most. You're the most important person in the world.

I sit in the back row with my hands wrapped around a black umbrella. The place is packed with repeat traffic offenders and those accused of alcohol-inspired misdemeanors. One old gentleman in a green and yellow John Deere cap challenges the constitutionality of the seat belt law. Three rows of ceiling fans stretch across the high ceiling. All the chairs and benches are dark cedar. The benches are like pews, with wooden pockets on the back of each seat. A selection of magazines faces everyone through the long wait. There are no windows.

When Patty's trial begins, the county attorney introduces the owner of Allsup's Pit Stop. On the stand, he recounts how Patty took the beer and beat it out the door. He describes her car like a connoisseur, enjoying himself, as if the jury needs to know about the silver body striping and how you can't help but notice something gleaming like that in a gravel parking lot. The judge yawns, exposing her enormous teeth.

Against the advice of the bench, Patty represents herself. She's elegant in the courtroom, striding to the jury box like a powerful swimmer. Their faces are rapt at her approach, as if the document in her hand tells how all this will end. It's the doctor's letter describing her condition and erratic behavior. The medical explanation. Disgusting, Samantha had said when I told her that Patty kept the letter in the glove box for emergencies. Patty reads it to us. She slides it back into the envelope and faces the jury.

"I'm a mechanical engineer and I've worked hard to get where I am. There are not many women doing what I do," she says. "I make more than enough to pay for my beer. Normally I don't drink beer. Normally I don't take things without paying for them. I'm no shoplifter. I'm a good person." Her voice thins. She hates to cry. Hates it.

The Fifth Idea: Love your Family and Friends. Don't expect love in return and see what happens.

I stand fast and straighten my tie, ready to tell all. I'd known her for years, and I knew her diabetes better than anyone. I'd seen her insulin reactions from their first moment, a tilt of her head, the slowing smile as her thinking distorted like the pebble's first ripple on a still pond. The discomfort in losing control. Patty spins to face me, her eyes round as the bottom of a beer glass.

Before I can speak, the county attorney stands and expresses his sincere regret for the circumstances. "The State of Oklahoma drops all charges," he says with a broad smile, as if looking down a long table at his entire family.

The judge cracks the gavel on her desk. "You're free to go, Miss Mullins. But let me say something to you. Deputy Godwin is a diabetic himself. He tells me he doesn't believe you were suffering from, what is it?" She reads the word from a document: "Hypoglycemia . . . at the time of your arrest. The deputy is no doctor, certainly." She takes off her glasses. Patty folds her arms in front of her.

The court reporter taps his keys to catch up.

"We don't have engineers here," the judge says. "This is a farm town. The town supports farmers, Miss Mullins." I hang the curved handle of the umbrella from my front pocket. I hold my arms down by my side, palms outward, trying to embrace the weight of the words. "I don't want to see you here again," the judge says. "You're just a thief, and you're dismissed."

Patty walks alone down the aisle. She's wearing a handsome suit, and her white shoes tap a charming rhythm on the wooden floor. Deputy Godwin sits two rows ahead of me and turns to watch her leave, disappointment on his face like he'd have enjoyed her company a little longer, her grace a rarity. I step out of the row and follow her through the front door and down a flight of concrete steps. She crosses the street. The wind blows her hair back and I can see her small ears. Then she climbs in the old Chevy and starts the engine. The electric blue bleeds through the sunlight and we're a cartoon again. I want animated lips so I can stretch them fifty feet and kiss her on the forehead. I jog across the road.

She rolls down the window. "What a loser," she says. "Not you." She jabs her index finger toward the courthouse. "Him. The fat-ass *prosecutor.* He didn't even *try* to fight it out, that chickenshit."

"Jesus, Patty. He cut you a break." She leans back to see past me, watching people coming down the steps.

"Coach Samantha should have kept you away from here," she says. "You should fire her ass." Her eyes are on the courthouse. I smell potato soup and fresh bread from the diner behind us. There's a line forming at the door. "But then you haven't seen *her* ass yet, have you? Maybe you should ask her office hours." She looks up when I don't reply. "You were going to tell them it was a lie, that I wasn't having a reaction when you *knew* that I was. You knew I really was this time. That's why you stood up. I would have *never* spoken to you again."

She spots the county attorney. "Hey!" she yells.

"That," I say, "might be the best thing for both of us." She glances up to me, shakes her head and looks back at him.

She cups her hands around her mouth, a makeshift megaphone. "Fatboy chickenshit!" I back away from the car. "You fat ass!" she says.

The county attorney puts his briefcase down and points to us. "Now you look here," he shouts. He looks at Godwin and points to us again. Godwin jogs down the steps, his arms bent at his side like a sneaking ghost.

Her tires spin, whitewalls clean enough to disguise rotation until they conjure white smoke—the scent burns my nostrils. A streak of electric blue and white, with a dash of red in back, those tall taillights pointed like a church steeple. The yellow curls are in there, too, and I imagine the front half of the car leaping forward like a Slinky, nearly across the state line while the back tires still spin in place, dusting my black shoes like the Road Runner revving up until the last second and screeching away when Wile E. Coyote appears. Godwin stops in the road and watches her leave.

"What is the matter with that woman?" he says to me. He wipes his hands on his trousers.

"She's a diabetic," I say. "She's sick."

The Chevy stops with a screech. A book flies out her window, the white pages flapping like the wings of a doomed bird.

"Son of a bitch," Godwin says and runs for his truck. He'll arrest her for littering. He has no choice after such a flagrant violation in front of everyone crossing the square for lunch.

She'll laugh about it later, how my book slid out from above the visor when she floored it and smacked her somewhere, in the head probably, scaring the shit out of her. She'll yell and scream and laugh until those tiny ears are bright red. If I'm there, that is. I want to be there for that. These days, that's a thing I want to see.

I run for my Chrysler. I wait for Godwin to pull away and I fall in behind him, heading north towards Lawton, all of us driving *away* from Texas and the river. Patty doesn't even know she's going the wrong direction.

STEPPING IN MS. CENT-JEAN'S SHOES*

CRYSTAL S. THOMAS

My aunt always says ain't nothing new under the sun, but when we found out Ms. Cynthia Jean's husband was cheating on her for another woman at the salon, it was *news;* not like you couldn't imagine it, but surprising, you know, like if Michael Jackson were to go back to the afro. The night two and two came together was a Wednesday, and the shop was kind of slow, but everyone had a customer so the air was filled with all the smells I had come to tell apart: peppermint from the shampoo Aunt Bennie ordered each month, the raw egg smell of neutralizer, fried hair, oil sheen, and the stink of nail polish remover.

I was leaning on the counter of Aunt Bennie's station, flicking through the latest *Ebony* and trying to keep a watch over the pickle in my hand as it steadily soaked through its wrapper. Duke, the barber that rented a booth from my aunt, was doing his laugh-because-I'm-cute routine, and telling some joke we'd heard a thousand times. It was the one about a head being so ugly the razor ran, which was not even the funniest joke, but for some reason whenever Duke said anything and those dimples jumped out like flashers everybody wound up laughing, even my aunt who tried hard not to.