

EMMA SYWYJ

Air Asia Airplane, Malaysia, 2006
Photography, 8 x 8 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

KATHERINE HEINY

Wheels Up

Fawn doesn't always bother to flirt with airport security guards these days. She's nearing forty and she worries that a time might come when the guards won't flirt back. But she's so happy and relieved to be leaving Hullbeck and there's only the one guy working security and he looks like sort of a fun job, so when he says, "That's a beautiful coat," she says, "Oh, thank you!" as though she'd been hoping he'd say just that.

(It is sort of possible that she was hoping he'd say that—she is dressed in a way that can only be described as aggressively stylish: black jeans, black cashmere sweater, black leather jacket topped with an ivory bouclé coat. Nobody likes to travel in denim—those seams and rivets, the red imprint of the button on your belly—so why is Fawn doing it? Because it's not something a Hullbeck person would do, that's why.)

The security guard is a compactly built man with a close-clipped mustache and a monk's tonsure of short brown hair. He looks like the kind of man who could be a security guard, or a bank teller, or a singer in a barbershop quartet, but not much else. He's wearing black pants and a cobalt-blue dress shirt with black epaulets and a gold badge. The silver nameplate pinned to his right shirt pocket reads Clyde Sanborn.

They have a little back-and-forth while Fawn puts her coat and bag and shoes on the conveyor belt and hippity-hops through the metal detector. What's she doing in Hullbeck? (Visiting her parents.) Where's home now, in that case? (New York City.) What does she do there? (Magazine editor.) What sort of magazine? (Fashion.) Is she blonde all over?

He doesn't really ask that last one—it's more sort of implied. Fawn is the master of detecting that sort of implication. (And the answer is yes.) But by the time she's put her shoes back on, she's forgotten all about Clyde.

Fawn is just as small-boned and delicate as her name suggests, although this was not always so. She used to be small-boned and big. Well, maybe not *big*, but certainly big enough that you couldn't tell what size her bones were. But her name wasn't Fawn then, either—it was Vangie. She wears her hair in a half-updo with thick bangs she has to look out from under and a little cat's-eye liner on her eyelids. It's a sort of poor man's Brigitte Bardot look, and it has served her well.

Some people say time is like a river, but it's really much more like an accordion, constantly squeezing you back to high school.

She is just walking toward her gate (there are only two gates at the Hullbeck airport) when the PA system squawks to life and a male voice with a Midwestern accent says, "May I have your attention please? We regret to announce that the departure of Flight 1010 to Detroit will be delayed until 5:32 P.M."

Fawn looks back toward the airport exit in confusion. She was so eager to leave that she hardly noticed the weather, but now she sees through the window that the sky is white and the horizon has taken on a blurred look. Individual snowflakes are dropping past the window like tiny paratroopers. But it's Michigan—they can deal with a little snow, right?

The PA crackles again. "We will inform you of the new departure time as soon as possible. Meanwhile, we have provided snacks and beverages at Gate Two."

The offer of snacks strikes Fawn as extremely ominous. Also condescending, as though the passengers were overgrown kindergartners: *Everyone's getting cranky, break out the graham crackers!* And what's worse is that when Fawn cruises past the snack table once and then twice, she sees they are all desperately *inferior* snacks—packages of dry, crumbly cookies and stale, varnished-looking pretzels. Nothing but calories in the form of sawdust. She opts for the bar, Wheels Up, instead and just as she claims the only vacant barstool, the PA man's voice speaks up again: "Flight 5186 to Chicago is delayed until 6:23 P.M."

The woman next to Fawn puts her glass down with a small thump and says, "That would have been good to know four beers ago."

Fawn looks at her, thinking that the woman is someone she could be friends with because (a) she's not from Hullbeck and (b) she's not like someone who *could* be from Hullbeck. And indeed, she's not either, as it turns out. Fawn introduces herself and finds out the woman is a commercial architect from Chicago. She has wild black hair like shoulder-length Slinkys and beatnik glasses and a beautiful retro cardigan as soft and red as a rose petal. Her name is Meredith.

They shake hands and then the bartender asks Fawn what she wants to drink.

The bartender must be over twenty-one, right? But she looks like a teenager, a fat and freckled one, with feathered hair and an embroidered sweater. Looking at her gives Fawn post-traumatic flashbacks to her own teen years. (Some people say time is like a river, but it's really much more like an accordion, constantly squeezing you back to high school.) Fawn is torn between the desire to offer to enroll the bartender in Sarah Lawrence for the next semester, and the equally strong desire to toss a drink in the bartender's face.

She orders a vodka with three olives and pulls her phone out. There's a text from Joel: *I had hoped to see you this trip.*

Fawn sighs. It's so hard to hide now, what with smartphones and all. Now, everything is imminently trackable and your ex-husband can find you with no trouble at all. But Fawn remembers how, when she was in her late twenties, she had had an affair with a married man who used to call his wife from Fawn's apartment and say he was on a business trip while Fawn rustled a sheet of cellophane in the background to mimic long-distance static. Those were the days!

It was a last-minute visit, she texts back. A lie. She had planned the trip for months to help her parents start packing up their house before they moved to a retirement community.

Immediately a little bubble with the three dots appears on the screen of her phone, meaning Joel is typing a response, so Fawn beats him to it by typing quickly, *I meant to call you but I was unbelievably busy.* Two lies this time:

she never meant to call him and she wasn't all that busy. Her parents had done most of the packing before she'd even gotten there.

The bubble with the three dots disappears, and it seems to Fawn that it vanishes sadly, reluctantly, like puppy faces when you pass a pet shop window. She sighs and drops her phone back into her bag.

Fawn's drink arrives, along with another beer for Meredith. Meredith reaches for her glass and knocks over a dish of peanuts, sending them skittering down the bar.

"Well, thank you," the man next to her says. "Don't mind if I do." He scoops up a few peanuts off the counter-top and pops them into his mouth. He smiles. "You girls doing okay?"

"We're fine," Fawn says coolly, because she senses that Meredith is about to say it warmly.

He holds out his hand to Meredith. "My name is Barry."

Barry looks like Fred Flintstone: big, fleshy face, bulbous nose, shaggy forelock of black hair, five o'clock shadow. His body is large and diamond shaped. He is as far from Fawn's type as it is possible to be.

"You sure I can't buy you a drink?" he asks.

"No, thank you," Fawn says, already turning back to her vodka.

Barry doesn't seem offended. He just shrugs and says, "I'd better be getting home, anyway."

Fawn looks back at him, startled. "Home? What do you mean? Aren't you waiting for a flight?"

"Oh, no," Barry says, pushing one arm into his coat sleeve. "I live right here in town. I just came out for happy hour."

"You came to the *Hullbeck airport* just to have a few drinks?" Fawn asks. She can't get over this. It's like someone settling down in front of the TV with a big bowl of popcorn and choosing to watch footage of malnourished Sudanese children. "Why don't you go to the Turtle? Or Swanson's?"

"I was banned from those places," Barry says.

"But—but—what about Lefty's?" Fawn is not a Hullbeck girl for nothing.

"There, too," Barry says agreeably.

"What for?" Fawn asks.

Barry makes a face. "Some *people* say I get a feeling of *entitlement* when I drink."

Fawn is pretty sure that by "people" he means female staff and patrons and by "entitlement" he means putting his hand up someone's skirt, but she can't help being the slightest bit impressed. She's never known anyone who's been banned from Lefty's.

"But how do you get past the airport security?" Meredith asks suddenly. "Don't you have to have a boarding pass?"

"Clyde lets me in," Barry says.

"Who's Clyde?"

"Me," the security guard says, appearing abruptly at Fawn's elbow. Fawn remembers him dimly from the security gate. "Barry and I went to high school together."

"Which high school?" Fawn asks nervously.

"Cooley," Barry says, and Fawn relaxes because it wasn't Hullbeck. She never wants to see anyone she went to high school with ever again.

Clyde looks at Barry. "Are you leaving already?"

"I guess not," Barry says happily, taking his arm back out of the coat sleeve and sitting down again. He orders another beer and Clyde orders a club soda and Barry flicks a peanut at the bartender, who giggles. Stupid cunt, thinks Fawn.

From the depths of her purse, her phone chimes again.

* * *

When Fawn tells her boyfriends that she was once married to a man who played the zither at Renaissance festivals, they always laugh and say, "No, *seriously*," and sometimes Fawn lets them think she was joking and sometimes she doesn't. Anyway, the zither thing was a very occasional sideline (there just aren't that many Renaissance festivals), and actually Joel owned and operated a small store in the Hullbeck mall called *Airs & Graces*. Sometimes people telephoned there thinking it was a tuxedo-rental place, but it was a music store. Not the kind of music store that sold records; the kind that sold sheet music and clarinet reeds and violin strings.

Fawn had met Joel when she applied at *Airs & Graces* for a part-time job in high school. Joel was a slender—almost slight—man in his late thirties with gray-flecked dark hair that fell boyishly across his forehead. He had long-fingered, sensitive-looking hands and a smooth, olive-skinned face and smelled faintly of Blue Juice Valve Oil. He was even more soft-spoken than Fawn, and he hired her the very same day she interviewed.

It was the perfect place for Fawn to work because it wasn't perilous like working at Applebee's and having to wait on a table of popular kids, or working at the library and having to tell the popular kids to keep the noise down. The only people who shopped at Airs & Graces were piano teachers, or mothers of small children taking Suzuki classes, or kids who were in the marching band for unpopular reasons of their own. Fawn could sit on a stool behind the counter and answer the phone and ring up flute pads and bow rosin and endpoints as demurely as a dowager. Joel had a small workroom separated from the main store by a pair of swinging doors. He spent his time in there repairing clarinet springs, replacing violin bridges, and swabbing crusted saliva from saxophones.

Fawn worked the evening shift three days a week without incident through the fall of her senior year. Then one evening in early winter, just before closing, the phone rang and when Fawn answered it, a man with a deep-whisper voice said, "What's better than two hands on a piano?"

"Pardon?" Fawn said, confused.

The man seemed to breathe down the line toward her. "Two lips on an organ."

Fawn had never had her lips on a man's lips at this point, let alone a man's organ. She gave a terrified squeak and slammed the phone down.

"What's wrong?" Joel asked, pushing his head through the swinging doors. "Did Tina Simpkins drop her flute in the toilet again?" Apparently, that was the worst thing he could think of.

"No," Fawn said shakily. "It was an obscene caller."

Joel looked at her face closely. "I see," he said softly. He didn't ask what the caller had said, which was good because Fawn would have died rather than tell him. He paused for a moment. "Perhaps I should walk you to your car tonight."

"Thank you," Fawn said. "That would be nice."

And so that night, Joel had walked Fawn through the food court to the mall entrance, holding her arm protectively. She looks back on it now and thinks that she and Joel must have looked like the Pillsbury Doughboy and Pinocchio, but in truth, Fawn wasn't that fat and Joel wasn't that petite. Joel saw her safely to her car and waited until she got in and started the engine. He did the same thing the next night she worked, and the next, and on the fourth night, he kissed her shyly but urgently and that was

how Fawn finally felt a man's lips on her lips, all because of a crank caller who was undoubtedly Barry or someone and just like him.

The two airport gates are now like two gas stations in a price war, except that instead of dropping prices, they're delaying flights. First Fawn's flight by twenty more minutes, then Meredith's by twenty-five, then Fawn's, then Meredith's. All of it announced over the PA by a man who sounds like he should be teaching auto shop somewhere. Already it is six thirty. Fawn dreads spending another night with her parents, much as she loves them. The siren song of her life in New York—her *real* life, as she thinks of it—is calling her. She'll stay in a hotel near the airport if she absolutely must.

Meredith is so drunk now that she keeps closing one eye and squinting with the other, possibly to keep her vision from doubling. She has slumped to one side, the collar of her blouse askew, her cardigan hanging off one shoulder, her skirt riding up one thigh. It's like Meredith is slipping off the barstool while her clothes remain upright. Barry has become suddenly attentive, cupping Meredith's elbow and picking imaginary lint off her sweater. Fawn suspects that Barry can spot a drunk and vulnerable woman quicker than a lion can spot a limping zebra.

But Fawn isn't very drunk because Fawn learned to drink in high school. Fawn was shy but not friendless. She had friends, and some of them were pretty, vivacious girls who got invited to parties, and they took Fawn with them, as an escort or maybe a sort of bouncer. A thousand nights sitting on the couch at a thousand parties had taught Fawn something most people don't know: inebriation is voluntary to some extent. No point in getting drunk and giggly if no boy wants to lure you into a darkened bedroom, so Fawn did not get drunk and giggly, or even drunk. She merely sat there with her hands crossed over her stomach and drank beer after beer with a grim determination. You can drink a lot of beer and never feel drunk, the same way you can eat a whole sleeve of Oreos and never feel full. For Fawn, beer became just a new way to measure time: six beers and her friends might be ready to go home.

At seven o'clock, Clyde throws up his hands slightly and gives a small shudder—a sort of involuntary spasm—and orders a beer.

"You haven't finished your club soda," Fawn says. She's not drunk, but she has reached that stage of alcohol consumption where you feel compelled to comment on everything.

"My shift ended just a minute ago," Clyde says. "I don't like to drink on duty."

"But you've been sitting here for over an hour," Fawn protests. "You mean you were supposed to be working all that time? Who's been running security?"

"Girl from the Hertz counter covers for me," Clyde says, blowing the foam off a beer the bartender sets in front of him.

Fawn looks at him, wondering if there's a less secure, more dangerous airport in all the world. Well, of course there is—think of Damascus airport with the warring rebel factions and the threat of surface-to-air missiles! But at least everyone in Syria *knows* the dangers; here in Hullbeck, the passengers are just shuffling along as placidly as cattle, totally unaware.

Suddenly, Barry grabs his drink and Fawn's. "Come on!" he says urgently.

Fawn wonders if maybe some terrorists got past the Hertz girl after all, and Barry is running from them, but then she sees that Barry moved so swiftly because the corner table is available. She helps Meredith off her barstool—which is harder than you might think, since Meredith attempts to turn around and climb down it like she's on a ladder—and Clyde takes Meredith's beer, and they lay claim to the corner table. So now, for better or for worse, they seem to be a foursome, like a string quartet. (Barry is even pretty cello-shaped.)

But they don't make for an especially harmonious quartet, what with Meredith spending a full five minutes arguing with Barry over how many time zones there are in the United States. "Show me!" Meredith shouts. She pounds the table with her fist. "Just show me the fucking seventh time zone!"

Fawn keeps checking her phone. More texts from Joel, piled like pancakes:

Which flight are you on? The weather looks bad.

If you need a ride home, just call me.

*Fawn looks at him,
wondering if there's
a less secure, more
dangerous airport
in all the world.*

If you have time for dinner, I know a place with great chicken-fried steak.

Or I could bring sandwiches out to the airport.

Now the problem here is that she can't say her flight is about to leave, because Joel could go online and see that all the flights have been delayed. She can't say she's past security because he could text back and say he's right on the other side. She can't say she'd rather die than eat chicken-fried steak because Joel has seen her chicken-fried steak—great amounts of it.

She decides to just ignore his texts, which is, after all, one of the advantages of texting. She puts her phone on silent and slides it back into her purse.

"You seem nervous about something," Clyde says to her, and Fawn's faith in his security abilities takes a teeny-tiny uptick: he does notice suspicious behavior after all.

"Just someone I'd rather not see," she says.

"Everybody has one of those," Clyde says, and Fawn finds that oddly comforting.

Fawn and Joel married the June after Fawn graduated from high school. Her worried parents—shocked at the age difference—counseled delay, begged her to reconsider, hinted at missed opportunities for a girl with so much potential, tried to bribe her with college tuitions, but Fawn plowed ahead with the unmovable sort of stubbornness known only to teenagers and toddlers. She had never fit in as a high-school student; now she would fit in as a married woman. Starting as soon as possible.

She wore a shiny white satin wedding gown and a lace

Fawn has begun to feel that the night won't end until she has sex with someone.

headpiece festooned with ostrich feathers—it looked like a cross between a bathing cap and something you might sweep out of a birdcage. Fawn moved into Joel's small two-bedroom brick house near downtown and they adopted a kitten Fawn named Mr. Bingley. Joel hired a new girl to work the register at Airs & Graces and Fawn took literature classes at a community college. Fawn cooked newlywed breakfasts of french toast. She baked newlywed casseroles with pineapple and ham. She had newlywed sex on fresh sheets from JCPenney. She wrote thank-you letters on newlywed stationery and planned newlywed dinner parties and felt a newlywed despair as black and sticky as tar. After eight months of marriage, she moved back into her parents' house and took them up on that college tuition offer. By the following September, she was enrolled at Hamilton College. Fawn may not have been thin or popular but—perhaps for those very reasons—she got marvelous grades.

Afterward, Joel *bothered* her, is how Fawn thought of it. For years and years. Cards on her birthday and flowers for promotions and phone calls on Christmas Eve. This puzzled Fawn, and then annoyed her. Her main memory of her marriage now is the sinking sensation she got each evening when she returned to the little brick house. She would open the door and be greeted by a puff of warm air (Joel had thyroid issues and their thermostat was set at seventy-six) and the smell of Mr. Bingley's litter box and the swelling notes of a Shostakovich CD—as if Michigan winters weren't long enough without Russian symphonies

forever crashing in the background! To this day, Fawn doesn't like Shostakovich, or cats, or overheating, or Joel.

* * *

Fawn has begun to feel that the night won't end until she has sex with someone. She looks over her companions, eyelids flickering. Barry is out of the question, for a multitude of reasons. Clyde is resting his elbows on the table and talking to Barry about a friend of theirs who recently switched from briefs to boxers and then injured his scrotum on an ergonomic kneeling chair. "He had to sit on a package of frozen peas for two days," Barry says. Clyde shakes his head and clucks. His bicep swells against his shirt sleeve like the curve of an eight ball. Yes, Fawn decides: underneath her, Clyde would feel just fine.

Meredith begins pinching peanuts off the sticky table with great concentration and putting them into her mouth.

"Don't eat those," Fawn says to Meredith. "They're dirty." She and Meredith have gone from strangers to bar friends to mother and child in the space of two hours.

Meredith looks up, startled, and pops another peanut in. "No," Fawn says sternly. It seems that now they have moved on to owner and dog. But if there's one thing Fawn knows about, it's how and when not to eat.

In the months after she left Joel and before she went to college, Fawn had dieted and exercised herself down to her current size. It wasn't accurate to say she'd *lost* weight—it was more like she'd *chased* the weight off her body the way a farmer would chase a stray dog off his property. And like a suspicious farmer, Fawn still patrols the borders of her body, a shotgun propped in the crook of her elbow, ready to shoot any fattening food that tries to sneak back in. Of course, sometimes, foods do get past her—crunchy golden french fries, fresh sugar cookies—but there are ways of dealing with trespassers.

She graduated from Hamilton with an English degree (her major was in Elizabethan literature) and moved to New York and got a job at a magazine as a marketing assistant, where she sat in a windowless closet all day updating spreadsheets. From there, she scabbled her way up the editorial ladder, learning how to dress from the photo shoot stylists. She changed her name from the awkward and unsophisticated Evangeline Fyan to Fawn Evans and now nobody calls her Evangeline—let alone *Vangie*. (Except

that lots of people do, like her parents and her cousins and family friends. Name changes are never as immutable and decisive as you want them to be.)

Meredith and Fawn go up to the bar for the next round and suddenly Meredith's shouting at the snub-nosed bartender. "You didn't fill that glass!"

"Ma'am—" the bartender says.

"You didn't fill that glass!" Meredith is so enraged that she's spraying saliva. "You call that fucking *full*? It's not even close!"

"Ma'am, I just poured the bottle into the glass," the bartender says patiently. "You *watched* me do it."

"I saw no such fucking thing!" Meredith shouts. Somewhere along the line, she has lost the top two buttons on her blouse and now it looks like her breasts are about to spill out onto the bar top.

"You tell her!" Barry calls from their table.

"Oh, fuck off, Fred!" Meredith snaps over her shoulder. Fawn feels a moment of joyful connection: she's not the only one who thinks Barry looks like Fred Flintstone!

Barry blinks in surprise and, turning, Fawn catches his eye, tilting her head at the bar, a signal that he should take over the drink ordering. She grips Meredith's elbow, saying softly, "Come with me." She gives the bartender her warmest smile—although it is almost painful to give the bartender anything—and steers Meredith down the hall to the restroom.

It's been years since Fawn has had to pull someone back from the brink of drunk and disorderly in a ladies' room, but she discovers—happily—that it's a skill you never completely lose.

She leads Meredith into one of the toilet stalls and sticks two fingers down Meredith's throat. (This is a route that Fawn's fingers are more than fleetingly familiar with—the sometimes-necessary evil to get what you've put inside back on the outside.) It works on Meredith just like it has always worked on Fawn: the hack, the gag, the rush of stomach-darkened fluid. Fawn holds Meredith's hair back while Meredith vomits three times, a glut of murky beer with peanuts floating in it.

She hits the flush lever with her foot and pulls Meredith out of the stall to the sink. Meredith makes a dreadful moaning sound, as though a snarling Corgon has appeared before her, but Fawn ignores that. (This sometimes

happens—it'll pass.) She produces a teeny bottle of mouthwash from the little cosmetics bag she carries in her purse and orders Meredith to rinse and spit, and then to splash water on her face. Fawn tears open a makeup-remover cloth and wipes away the mascara smudges under Meredith's eyes. She untangles Meredith's hair with a small hairbrush and presses face powder on her cheeks so that Meredith doesn't look so freshly bilious. She cleans the flecks of vomit from Meredith's cardigan with a small packet of stain remover and uses a safety pin to close the top button of Meredith's blouse so she won't be wow-ing any ticket agent with unintentional cleavage. A little swipe of rosy lipstick and two ancient aspirin from a tarnished tin swallowed with a cupped handful of tap water, and Meredith is as good as new. Sort of.

Fawn leads Meredith out into the hall and wheels her around to face the huge clock on the wall. Together they watch while the second hand makes one slow circular sweep, and then Fawn asks, "Did you feel like you were going to throw up?"

Meredith shakes her head.

"Good," Fawn says encouragingly. "If you can go sixty seconds, you can go a whole flight." (This is a tried-and-true formula, more reliable than the three-minute egg.)

She slips the tin of aspirin into Meredith's coat pocket, and after a moment's consideration, she slips a condom in, too, because, let's face it, Meredith is still pretty drunk and she might sit next to some man on the plane who's attractive in an alcohol-related sort of way. Such things have happened. They happen to everyone. They even happen to Fawn.

* * *

Just before nine o'clock, the PA crackles and the man's voice comes back on. Apparently, they all know each other well enough now so that he dispenses with the formal wording and just says, "Folks, all flights are cancelled for the rest of the night. I repeat, no one's flying out tonight. Please see a ticket agent about getting on a flight tomorrow."

Everyone seated at the bar and at the gates groans. Fawn and Meredith go up to their gates and wait in line for flight reassignment. Fawn is re-booked on a 7:00 A.M. flight, Meredith one at 8:40 A.M.

The airport goes from fairly crowded to deserted

in a matter of minutes. People grab their carry-on luggage and head back toward the airport exit and the ticket counters. It's as though the crowd swarms together and takes the shape of one giant footsore, slope-shouldered, weary traveler.

Everyone except Barry and Clyde and Meredith and Fawn, that is. They finish their beers while the chubby bartender clears up around them. Barry says Fawn and Meredith are welcome to sleep at his house and play some Xbox. Fawn is fairly sure this is code for one of them playing Xbox while Barry has sex with the other one, so she declines. But Barry offers to drive them to the Holiday Inn and it turns out he's giving Clyde a ride home anyway, so they all leave the Wheels Up together. (The bartender gives a startled squeak when Barry passes behind her, and Barry smirks at Fawn over the bartender's shoulder.)

Unlike the other travelers, they are as animated as new converts leaving a revival meeting. Meredith wants to know if it's true you can jump a snowmobile over a stream, and Barry wonders if maybe enough time has gone by so they won't recognize him at the Turtle, and Clyde asks Fawn if her bouclé coat will shake itself when it gets wet, and they are almost to the exit doors when a soft voice says, "Hi, Vangie."

Fawn looks up automatically. She can't help it. You can leave the past behind but some part of you remains there, like a rough, sharp, splintery tree branch sticking out along the path that snags your sleeve.

Joel is standing alone near the exit in a puffy blue down coat with a fur-trimmed hood pushed back. His hands are in his pockets. His face is still smooth and unlined. Even now, he is a curious combination of boyish and elderly.

"Oh—Joel," Fawn says in confusion. "How—how long have you been here?"

"Not long at all," he says in a casual voice that makes her sure he is lying. "I just came out on the chance your flight was cancelled and you needed a ride."

"Well, thank you," Fawn says. "But I'm riding with these—people." She was about to say *these guys*.

These guys and Joel eye each other up for a minute. Fawn cannot imagine what a single one of them is thinking.

"Why don't you all go ahead," she says finally to Barry. "I'll catch up in a minute."

"Are you sure?" Barry asks.

Fawn nods. Barry gives Joel a little wave, and he goes out through the sliding glass doors, Clyde and Meredith trooping along behind him.

"It's good to see you," Joel says to Fawn.

"You, too."

"You look so pretty."

Fawn is saved from answering that because Barry comes running back in. She's so grateful to him for rescuing her that she gives him her most dazzling smile, but Barry only says excitedly, "The parking lot's empty! We can do doughnuts!"

Fawn had never liked the kind of doughnuts you do in parking lots as much as she liked the other kind of doughnuts, the ones with frosting and sprinkles and jelly centers. That had been the whole problem, really.

"I'll be there in a minute," she says softly, and Barry races back out, the automatic doors closing behind him.

Fawn looks at Joel and then looks at the floor. She pulls her gloves out of her coat pocket and puts them on as slowly as possible. Joel clears his throat. The silence between them is spreading like a wine stain on a tablecloth.

Finally, Joel speaks. "How are your parents?"

"Oh, well, they're moving," Fawn says. "You know. To a retirement community. It's an adjustment. You know." She keeps adding phrases, hoping they will add up to a reasonable conversation.

He nods. "Tell them if they need any help, they can call me."

Time has reversed Fawn's parents' opinion of Joel. Now she suspects they wish she'd stayed married to him.

"And how are things with you?" she asks.

He shrugs. "Same as always. I guess. Though I'm sorry to tell you that Mr. Bingley died."

Fawn looked at him, surprised. "Seriously?"

Joel nods his head sadly. "He passed just this fall from lymphoma. I'm sorry, I know it must be a shock to you."

Fawn is not shocked that Mr. Bingley is dead; she's shocked that he was alive until so very recently. Her marriage to Joel felt as fleeting as a goldfish's trip across its bowl, and yet—for twenty years!—Joel and Mr. Bingley continued on in some form of plodding existence with a Russian soundtrack.

"Look, I really should go," Fawn says.

"Well, I was hoping we could have a drink or something," Joel says.

Fawn bites her lip. "That's probably not a good idea."

"But I thought, after what happened last time—" Joel begins.

What happened last time! Is there a worse sentence in the English language? Well, maybe. *The bank is foreclosing* isn't great, and *North Korea just launched a missile* is pretty awful. But *What happened last time* is the worst because it almost always refers to an event of which the participants have wildly different interpretations. It refers to the kind of thing that happens when two people who used to be lovers page through their old yearbooks together and end up in a tangle on the sofa. Or when two people act in community theater together and get a little wild at the cast party. Or when two people go for an evening walk and one of them is worried about her aging parents, and upset about the cost of her kitchen renovations, and depressed about having her cover-line ideas shot down at a brainstorming meeting, and the two people end up having mistake sex on a freezing-cold bench in the Hullbeck Nature Center, right down near the fucking replica wigwam, which is *what happened last time*.

Fawn had thought that she and Joel would make love like old friends, but the problem with that is that old friends get together and have endless dinners that irritate the restaurant staff, or they have two-hour phone calls where they discuss nothing but how it feels when you hear a Stevie Nicks song on the radio. They don't have sex with each other; that's how they remain old friends. Joel emailed and texted her for weeks and weeks afterward. It was impossible to make him understand that Fawn sharing her body with him was no more meaningful and intimate than her sharing the name of her editor at the *Times Book Review*. (Actually, it was *less* intimate than that, because Fawn never shares the name of that editor with anyone.) In twenty years, Joel has not been able to figure out why Fawn had liked him when she was overweight and awkward, and why she disliked him now that she was slender and pretty. He doesn't seem to understand that fat people have standards, too. They just hardly ever get to apply them.

"Last time was three years ago," Fawn said. "It's not going to happen again."

"But—" Joel starts.

What happened last time! Is there a worse sentence in the English language? Well, maybe. The bank is foreclosing isn't great, and North Korea just launched a missile is pretty awful.

"I have to go," Fawn says firmly. "My friends are waiting for me."

"Friends?" Joel says. "Didn't you just meet them?"

"Yes and no," Fawn says, thinking how true this is. She stands up a little straighter. She is not going to touch him, not even to shake hands. "Anyway, goodbye, Joel."

She walks toward the sliding doors, feeling the weight of his eyes on her. She resists the urge to shrug her shoulders, to flick the weight of his gaze off like confetti after a New Year's Eve party. Why is she so eager to get rid of someone so gentle and kind? Is it fair to dislike someone solely because he reminds you of an earlier, awkward stage of your life? Probably not. But fairness has never mattered much in life.

* * *

Outside, the sky is as purple as a grape popsicle and the snow is falling softly and thickly. Sometimes Fawn has thought that the rain falls more slowly in Hullbeck, and it

appears that the snow does, too, in large, luminous flakes that look like the fading stars of fireworks. Oh, Michigan is beautiful, just beautiful. How had Fawn forgotten that?

In the parking lot, an old Pontiac Firebird is spinning in circles, engine wheezing, rear wheels skidding and throwing up plumes of snow. Even from where she stands, Fawn can hear the happy whoops and cries of the car's occupants. Fawn suspects that Barry's life skills may be somewhat less than stellar, but his doughnut-driving skills are excellent: the blank white surface of the parking lot is covered with looping tire tracks, each as perfectly formed as a young girl's penmanship.

Fawn crosses the access road outside the airport—she sees Joel's car parked at the curb—and scrambles over the median to the parking lot, waving wildly to the Firebird.

The Firebird spins over to her, although Fawn remains safely on the median—she doesn't trust Barry's driving *that* much. But as soon as the car comes to a stop, she jumps down beside it. Meredith hops out the passenger side and pulls the lever to make the bucket seat tilt forward. "Come on, Fawn!" she says, her face alive with drunken happiness. Her hair is one hundred thousand dark sprigs of curly parsley.

Fawn slides into the backseat next to Clyde. Meredith gets back in and slams the door. "Put on your seatbelt," Clyde says to Fawn. His voice is slightly chiding, as though doing doughnuts in a parking lot were some sort of regulated activity with safety standards and she is failing to live up to them. But in the next second, he puts his hand on the inside of her thigh and pulls her leg next to his.

Barry shifts gears and guns the accelerator. The car shoots to the middle of the parking lot and he turns the steering wheel all the way to the left, yanking the hand brake. The rear wheels begin to slide with a lovely floating sensation. It's like the feeling Fawn gets when sleep finally comes for her after a long night of insomnia—the lift and drop of surrender.

The inside of the car smells like Budweiser and wet wool, and the windows are fogged with humidity. Ted Nugent is blaring on the radio. Meredith whoops loudly and pounds her fist against the dashboard. Clyde shouts and hoots. Barry straightens the steering wheel and the car races toward the other side of the parking lot. He jerks the hand brake.

The car spins its rear wheels out to the right and Fawn feels that buoyancy again. She hopes it continues forever. But even when the car stops and she's thrown against Clyde, she's still happy. She can't wait to do it again. It's just like high school. Only now it's fun.

Katherine Heiny is the author of *Standard Deviation* (Knopf, 2017) and *Single, Carefree, Mellow* (Knopf, 2015). She lives in Bethesda, Maryland, with her husband and children.

EMMA SYWYJ

Cars in Malaysia, 2006

Photography, 8 x 8 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST