

MATTHEW BARBEHENN

## THE STAYERS

Three years earlier, when Peter Roslowski weighed three hundred and seventy-two pounds, he couldn't have run this fast. He couldn't have run at all. Now his body was limber and lithe, his breath light, easy, and he bounded between the hurried people swarming the streets of downtown Corpus Christi, spilling into the traffic lanes of South Padre Island Drive. The already flooded thoroughfare tightened further, squeezing traffic to a standstill, teeming with furious honking, profanity, shoulders pressed to shoulders, shoves and trips and grunting stumbles as they overtook the streets. The sky rained thickly. Peter snaked strategically through the crowd.

He'd left his house in search of carpentry nails well over an hour ago, and all the hardware stores were sold out. He knew where all the hardware stores were in this business district; the house he'd recently moved into had needed repair badly, and Peter, the avid self-improver, bought home improvement books and undertook all the projects himself. He knew the town in relation to the hardware stores, and often found himself driving past one in order to orient himself and get home.

Today, though, driving proved impossible. South Padre Island Drive was one thick bar of metal. Peter looked up. The clouds dumping the rain were still high, part of the sky itself. Despite the wetness, a dry force had pushed its way in. A foreign-feeling crispness survived through the ropes of rainfall. It was sharp, papery in his throat.

He ran. There was one last store that he knew of, a half-mile away, a quick three-and-a-half minute jog if Peter could maintain his speed. At a crosswalk he pulled out his cell phone and, while waiting for space enough to cross between cars, called home. This time, finally, it began to ring. His twelve-year-old daughter Annemarie answered. "Hello?"

"Hey, sweetheart. Daddy's taking a little longer than he thought."

"Don't talk to me like I'm a baby. You've been gone for seventy-eight minutes."

"I know," he said. "Are you getting hungry?"

"I want to order pizza."

"How about you make yourself a sandwich. Can you reach the bread?"

"Yeah I can reach the bread."

"Do you know how to make a sandwich?" he asked.

"Yes, I know how to make a sandwich!" She paused. "What are those sounds?"

“Car horns. People are being impatient today.”

“Oh,” she said. “Will you be back before Calliope gets here?”

“Of course I will. I told you that Calliope’s not coming until midnight.”

“Well hurry up,” she said. “I’m getting worried.”

His daughter was prone to fear. When his aeronautical engineering firm had transferred him, the very idea of relocation to Texas had scared her. When he showed her Texas on the map, back in Pennsylvania, she cried hysterically for hours. She claimed it wasn’t the size but the shape of the state that freaked her out; she wouldn’t say anything more about it except that she didn’t want to go, not even for the summer, as had originally been planned, and she would say this adamantly to herself in her room, “I don’t want to go to Texas, I don’t want to go to Texas,” though he sensed that she knew it was inevitable.

A woman erupted from a corner market with her arms full of toilet paper and boxes and children’s cereal. A man, maybe her husband, held a large umbrella over her head and opened the back door for her, and she let the boxes and bags spill from her grasp and land in the backseat. Peter watched them with a sort of scientific interest. She wore a blue blazer and matching pant suit and her hair was professionally pinned back. They seemed to communicate without speaking.

It was three p.m. He jogged towards the last hardware store and three minutes later, found himself facing a rack full of boxes of carpentry nails.

Peter had left his car outside a large, spacious McMansion that sat off a Waldron Drive side street. The newer developments like this weren’t as heavily shaded as his. They advertised themselves to highways miles away. Saplings had grown six, seven feet tall, guided by thin plastic slats and twine. All the driveways were empty. Particleboard and slats of wood covered the windows. He drove home at an exceptional rate, squealing to stops at the appropriate signs because he knew that dealing with the Corpus Christi Police would only delay his arrival home. If you weren’t heading north or northwest, they would arrest you. FEMA and the state had declared the evacuation mandatory, and the local cops were patrolling the neighbourhoods, looking for signs of people staying behind, and they were knocking on doors and dragging these people away.

So Peter stopped at all the appropriate places. His car moved effortlessly down the empty roads (this was one of the changes Peter noticed a few months after he’d reached his goal weight of one hundred and seventy-five pounds—even his car wheezed less).

At home, he opened the door and Annemarie stood there, holding up a large piece of paper covered in blotches of paint.

“I made you this!” She pushed it at him so forcefully that he thought paint would touch his jacket. He backed up. She smiled. There was paint on her face, on her hands. The size of her smile acted as a litmus test for how he was doing as a parent, moment-to-moment.

“What is it?”

Her smile began to fade. She said, “It’s Calliope. Duh.”

He examined the picture. It was a blonde girl holding a lollipop. She wore a multi-coloured checkered skirt and stood under a rain cloud. He said, “It’s very nice.”

Her face went completely sour. “You hate it,” she said.

“I don’t hate it. I love it.”

“No, you’re right, it stinks.”

“I didn’t say it stinks.”

“Yes you did! You said it with your eyes!” She stomped away and set the picture face down on the beige living room carpet.

“Annemarie, what are you doing?” he asked.

She turned her face toward him and dropped to her knees, pressing the paint into the carpet with both of her hands.

It had been his neighbour in Pittsburgh who told him that he didn’t have to be fat if he didn’t want to be. Peter didn’t believe this at first. Being fat was who he was; he wasn’t even sure he wanted to lose weight. The last time he’d been below two hundred pounds had been in middle school. He married a fat woman who bellowed alto in their Methodist church choir and a few years after that, she gave birth to their daughter. They conflated both their mothers’ names into one: Annemarie.

Around age five, Annemarie started squinting in class, and her clothes began to shrink around her expanding body so quickly that Peter believed the process had to be visible to the naked eye. By the time she was six she was medically obese, and she had thick, round-framed glasses that fell to the edge of her nose, a problem she corrected by constantly scrunching up her face. She often ate so fast she’d become stricken with violent hiccups.

That same year Peter started wearing contacts and his neighbour, Benjamin, started him on a strict diet and exercise regimen.

The first day out he was unable to jog even to the end of his driveway.

When he thought back on those days, it was like remembering a different person, a deceased relative whose memory came paired with pain. He remembered how his fat wife sang in church, her large mouth reverberating vibrato through the sanctuary, his fat little daughter holding the hymnal on both forearms, and his blue and silver striped tie, a men's tall, which at its longest ended just above his navel. People used to stare at him, at them. They whispered among the pews.

Benjamin told him that his body was just too large to maintain itself efficiently, and that one day it would stop working, like an old car on a cold morning. Peter prayed to God for strength, at church, at night, silently at family meals while his wife and daughter ate voraciously. He prayed until it was seemingly all he did, until he did it unconsciously, under his breath and in his sleep.

Serendipitously, the hardware store he'd visited earlier, Reynolds' Hardware, had been double-stocked with carpentry nails that week due to a shipping error. Most people were boarding up. Corpus Christi hadn't seen anything over a Category Two in almost a hundred years, and nobody was equipped with storm shutters or safe rooms like they were in Galveston and south Houston. The man at the store had said plywood worked, pre-cut to the size of his windows; Peter could store them in his basement and minimize the time it would take to secure his home in the future. For now, though, simple boarding was his only option.

He wasn't sure where to start. It was like choosing a favorite room. He opted for the living room, since the bay window faced east and the wind was projected to travel westward. Annemarie stood behind him eating potato chips out of a bag. The wind swirled mildly, the water eddied in the street. He learned from his neighbours to always board windows from the outside. His skin felt heavy, saturated. He hammered the first slat of wood across the bay window, and when he was done, he turned and said, "Do you want to help me?"

"I don't know," she said. Water streamed from the tips of her hair.

He turned and lifted up another board. It rose easily from the ground, as if he weren't using any muscles at all. Rain collected in the grain. "Well, you can go watch TV if you want, but not the news. And stop eating chips, we're going to be having dinner in a couple hours."

"But I'm starving."

"Then have an apple. There are tons of apples in the basket on the counter."

"I hate apples."

"You can't eat a whole bag of chips, Annemarie."

Between the hammering sounds, he heard her cry behind him. He turned and she was running into the house. Peter followed her.

A trail of wet footprints led to the locked bathroom door. He heard her sobbing from the other side. "Stop crying, I didn't mean that I thought you were *going* to eat the whole bag of chips, okay? Just unlock the door and come out."

There were no sounds of movement from the other side. She cried, turned on the faucet.

He said, "Just come out and you can have all the chips you want. You can't stay in there all night, okay? We need to get ready for Calliope."

"Go away!" she said. "I'm going to stay in here and starve myself!"

The phone rang in the kitchen. The phone lines were clearing up as people left the area. As he passed the half-boarded bay window, he saw the sky darkening. Long fingers of grey cumulonimbi stretched in from over the Gulf. Annemarie bawled from the bathroom.

"Hello?" he said.

It was his wife, Gretchen, calling from Pittsburgh. "What the fuck are you still doing there?" she said. It sounded as if she, too, was eating something. "Put my baby in your car and drive out of town right now."

"I can't do that. Traffic's blocked up for miles in every direction."

"They gave the evacuation notice two days ago," she said, "you could have left two days ago!"

"Nobody's evacuating," Peter said. "Not for a little Category Four."

"Yes, they are! I saw it on the fucking news, Peter! They said, 'Stay, and face certain death!'" He thought he heard her crying, but then it might have been Annemarie. He held the phone away from his head and the sound of his wife's sobs blistered the air around the phone; his daughter wailed now in deep, stuttering wheezes from the end of the hall.

"'Certain death' doesn't mean 'certain death' anymore," he said. "It's a blanket term they use to scare people."

Gretchen said, "Nothing better happen to my baby." He heard her blow her nose into something. "I swear to God."

"Everything's fine here. I'm boarding up the windows. They say as long as wind doesn't get inside, then the house will be fine."

"What if it does?"

"Dad!"

“What if you miss a crack?”

“Dad!”

“I’m not going to miss a crack. I’m an engineer. An aerospace engineer. I know wind.”

“These storms aren’t predictable, Peter. This isn’t one of your wind chambers, something you can turn on and off.”

He’d had this thought over the past few nights. He dreamt Calliope to be a real thing, not an unfortunate collection of abstract forces, but an actual face conjured up into the clouds, looming over their house. In his dream he’d finished nailing boards over the windows but at the last minute realized he’d forgotten one. It was too late, though. A thread of silver cloud reached down and shattered the window. The thread crawled through his home, coiling itself around his daughter like a lasso before yanking her violently into the sky.

Gretchen said, “I should have made her come home at the end of the summer. I shouldn’t have let her stay with you.”

“Dad!”

“She was finally making friends here,” Peter said. “Church friends. Those kids she was hanging out with in Pittsburgh were bad news.”

“You didn’t even know her friends here,” Gretchen said. “Look, this isn’t the time. Just get out of there.”

“Dad!” Annemarie stomped out of the bathroom, and she latched onto his leg. She pointed to the bathroom. “There’s a man in the yard.”

“I have to go, Gretchen.”

She cursed at him, and, as he hung up the phone, her voice slid farther away from his ear until it was gone.

“What man in the yard?”

“I don’t know. I saw him walking around. He looked in the window.”

She was trying to hide behind his legs, but she was too wide. His legs were all muscle now. They no longer doubled in width when he sat in chairs. Peter looked through the bay window, beneath the wood. The man approached his front door. Three years ago Peter would never have opened it. Three years ago, there were many, many things he didn’t do.

Gretchen could only orgasm when she was on top. It had nothing to do with him, he theorized. It was gravitational. When he was three hundred and seventy-two pounds he’d had to be on the

bottom during sex. Gretchen, who weighed two hundred and twenty pounds, was on top due to necessity. These days he didn't even want to remember it. When he thought of his wife he saw himself lying on his back, his fat splayed out to the sides, his wife's stomach overlapping his. He often didn't know when foreplay ended and sex began. For him, pleasure and love came from the distinctness of crossing certain barriers. Gretchen seemed to have no such problem.

One year ago, he'd weighed himself at Benjamin's house, and was two hundred and twenty pounds, the same weight as Gretchen. He immediately drove to the liquor store and bought a bottle of Moët White Star. He always bought White Star because the clerk had told him that they'd served White Star on the *Titanic*. It was a dry champagne and didn't contain unnecessary sugars. He managed to pawn Annemarie off on his mother-in-law for the night. An hour before Gretchen was due home from choir rehearsal, Peter laid rose petals around the couch and set the champagne in an ice bath on the coffee table. He dimmed the lights, took all his clothes off, and waited for her naked. He waited in the soft, silent light. A new virility coursed through his body, and his penis became erect. He marveled at it, willing it to rise using only his imagination. He tensed his groin muscles, moving himself up and down. His wife came home to find him this way, lounging naked on the couch, surrounded by red petals, in the dim light, staring down in wonder.

That night, he insisted that he be on top. His eyes obsessed over the sight of his penis entering his wife. He was a man having sex with his wife. The words chimed in his head. Man, wife, sex.

As his body continued to shrink, it seemed to him that Gretchen's was getting larger. The needle on their bathroom scale couldn't stay centered on zero. They had sex nightly—Peter on top, rubbing the inside of Gretchen's mouth with his fingers, his eyes locked on their communing parts. After a few weeks Gretchen wanted to be on top again—like the old days, she said—but Peter wouldn't have it. He liked to be able to see, to admire his body's superhuman abilities, and when he was ready, to bury his face in his wife's neck and bite a mouthful of fat and skin.

The man in the doorway closed his right eye to keep the water out. The rain had changed, slanting dramatically. His flannel shirt clung to his chest. He was in decent shape, a little thicker in the arms than Peter. His hair was dark, wet, grey.

“You looking in my bathroom?”

The man nodded.

“You were going to rob us?”

“No, sir, I—”

“Show me your hands.”

The man trembled.

“Hands, now.”

He put his hands up. He said, “It’s my wife. She’s insulin-dependent. The pharmacy closed and with everything going on, I ... well, I’ve been looking for houses that aren’t boarded up. Senior citizens and what not. People that might have insulin, you know. She could die. The stores are all closed.” He motioned his head back to the main road. “I’m sorry if I scared your little girl. I don’t mean to scare. I just need some insulin.”

“Your phone working? You call any hospitals?”

“Everybody’s been moved out of town. Even the hospitals. They said if you stay, don’t expect help. Everyone’s on their own. My wife’s too sick, though. She can’t handle the stress of being moved.”

“So you’re staying, too?”

The man started to drop his hands. “She ain’t got much time left. Home’s home. If you can’t help me I should really be going.”

“Good luck, then.”

The man backed away from the door and turned, but then stopped. “Ain’t many people staying for this one,” he said over his shoulder, and then jogged away, into the mist and down the street.

“Is he going to be okay?”

Peter shut the door. “He’ll be fine. He just needs medicine for his wife.”

“He looked scared.” She sought comfort in the bag of chips again, cradling a handful of them and stuffing them into her mouth. Yellow crumbs and grease were smeared on the sides of her face. She said, “I bet he dies.”

Peter knelt in front of her and smacked her hard across the mouth. Bits of chips and spittle flew sideways onto the carpet. “Don’t you ever, ever say that about someone.” This, somehow, didn’t make her cry. She locked eyes with him, lifted an even larger handful of chips from the bag and, cupping them in both hands, ate them like an animal eats from a bowl.

“If you want to be a little pig, be a little pig,” he said. “But don’t get any crumbs on my carpeting.”

Most of their fights had been about food. Around the time he'd reached two hundred and fifty pounds, he'd sat at the dining room table finishing some work-related paperwork. Annemarie sat reading a thin child's novel on the couch. While reading, her hand darted to and from a bowl of chocolate non-pareils. The page edges were brown from where her chocolaty fingers turned them. Peter didn't say anything at first. Her face, though, had recently begun to take on the shape of her mother's, and he knew that the teasing at school would start soon. She would soon learn that the world considered her ugly. Had genetics been a factor, perhaps he could have accepted her obesity's inevitability, but the rest of Gretchen's family seemed to reside within the boundaries of moderate weight, and his own family was somehow very skinny. They were simply a family of gluttons. Gretchen cooked a lot and Peter ate a lot and Annemarie watched it happen as if it were normal. Peter had often eaten an entire roasting chicken, three helpings of stuffing, enough potatoes for several strong men, and the proportional amount of gravy. He had enjoyed omelets with chopped hot dogs, six or seven links of sausage covered in maple syrup, battered pork chops deep fried in peanut oil. The worst were the eggs, though. An entire lifetime of eggs.

When he looked up from his paperwork, the non-pareils were gone.

"Did you eat all of them?"

She looked at the empty glass bowl. "I didn't mean to," she said. "I didn't even realize that I was eating them."

"You're going to be one fat little girl if you keep eating like that."

"I don't care. Mom's fat. *You're* fat."

"None of us *have* to be fat," he said. He sounded like Benjamin, his neighbour, who had said the same thing to him every time they saw each other—the pool parties that Peter couldn't fully enjoy, the bowling nights that left him winded, the poker nights when his hands couldn't reach the table. There were worse things than sounding like Benjamin. Benjamin was one hundred and sixty-eight pounds. He had a thin, sexy wife who cooked moderately-sized dinners and gave him above-average oral sex. His daughter was a cheerleader, and smart, and she ran across the yard and leapt into his arms, kissing his cheek and saying she loved her Daddy more than anything.

No, there were worse guys to imitate than Benjamin, he thought.

"Did you hear me?" he said to Annemarie. "You are sitting there, choosing to be fat. And I don't feel bad for you at all."

When Peter finished with the living room, it was eight o'clock and he was heavy with water. The bay window had proved a greater challenge than he'd anticipated; some wooden slats weren't long enough and needed to be positioned and nailed to pieces of wood already in place. The air was dense and grey, and the wind fast, thirty miles per hour at least, he figured. The rain came almost parallel to the ground now, swept in off the surface of the Gulf. He started on the kitchen windows. Annemarie handed him nails and wood when he needed. The wind and rain were warm. They stood with their legs spread far apart, bracing themselves against the deep gusts that pushed through the yard. Annemarie looked east. Peter quickly slapped boards over the windows and nailed them tightly.

She may have been crying. With the wind and the rain, it was difficult to tell. About a half an hour earlier they'd gone inside and seen on TV a ponchoed newsman reporting that the highways were clearing up and that the station was now going off the air. Annemarie hadn't spoken since.

Peter did his best to distract her. He explained his basic strategy, to board up the kitchen and the bedrooms and then the study last. He said that if the wind was too strong then they would shut the study off and board up the door. It would be a one-room sacrifice to Calliope. It would appease her, somehow, taking that room. They could remove the books and computer in a matter of minutes, he said, until all that remained were the meaningless walls.

"Hammer, please," he said. "Hammer."

Annemarie was no longer behind him.

"Annemarie?"

The wind was stronger now. He noticed the pile of wood planks rotating atop each other like helicopter rotors. A gust knocked him off balance and he fell towards the wood, throwing himself on it. The stream of air pressed down upon his back. He gathered the wood in his arms and slowly stood and took his tools inside.

The house swelled with music. An acoustic guitar strummed a delicate major chord progression and a piano laboured far behind it, slow and deep. Unprofessional production quality. Annemarie stood in the kitchen, a fist in front of her mouth holding an invisible microphone. He said, "What is this?"

"Mom's record."

"You mean her demo. She doesn't have a record."

"Same thing."

He said, "It's not the same thing," and started boarding the kitchen window from the inside.

Gretchen's voice came charging through the speakers then. He recognized the song now. She'd sang it to him softly after Annemarie had been put to bed, sitting in their bedroom, the guitar looking tiny, like a toy, set against the backdrop of her body. This particular song was about a choir girl who falls in love with a preacher, and who unrequitedly loves him for her entire life. Unfortunately for the song's protagonist, the preacher is married, and his wife, who is thin and blonde and rather angelic, sings next to the unfortunately love-stricken woman, and even when they all grow old, and the wife dies, the love-stricken woman remains reticent.

Gretchen recorded the four-song demo when Peter weighed around two hundred and forty pounds.

Annemarie sang all the words as the song progressed, handing him planks and nails when he needed them. It was nearing ten p.m. Wind pushed the trees westward. The branches reached for something far beyond their grasp. The kitchen was secured, though Peter began to feel sick in the pit of his stomach. He heard his neighbours' voices telling him to board from the outside; he heard the evacuators' prophecies, the evacuees' car horns. But mostly he heard wind.

Peter moved on to the master bedroom, where he found Annemarie staring out at the bent trees. She was crying. Peter touched the back of her head. She said, "Is it going to get worse than this?"

Some light trash, paper, cardboard, lurched into their view, slamming itself against the ground and the tree. "Just a little bit."

"Just a little?"

"Just a little." Peter wasn't sure how hard the wind blew now, but he knew it would get much worse. He had been told so. The rain came in long, thick sheets, battering the ground and sides of the house. It sounded like gunfire. Peter looked down at his daughter, who stared out at the backyard. The rain shook and shimmered. Her eyes, fearful, dilated to take it all in.

"Back up now," he said, and threw a board against the window. The hammer moved with greater intensity. He noticed his arms, the visible vein running up his bicep. Everybody had said he'd be a giant fat-ass for the rest of his life. His wife's voice filled in the spaces behind him, her fake country accent mingling with the roars and gunfire outside. They said once a person got so fat, they were unable to lose weight because exercise became impossible. He heard their voices, his wife's voice. But look at him, lifting heavy boards with one arm, shielding the hurricane from his poor, fat, helpless daughter. Watch his body flex and tense when he brings the hammer to the wood. Where

were the naysayers now? They were running, hiding. They were cowering and crying and asking *God, Why?*

He heard the weatherman's voice, the word "landfall." Around midnight, the southern eyewall of Hurricane Calliope would cross over Corpus Christi before turning north and dissipating over the empty bulk of the state. Winds would reach one hundred and forty-five miles per hour.

He'd abandoned the office. Annemarie's job was to remove its contents and stack them in the hallway. She cried as she did this; it carried some meaning for her, a sense of failure. From the guest bedroom, as he dealt with the last of the windows, he told her that she should think of it like an operation, an office-ectomy, a quarantining of danger. This didn't help her. The walls vibrated, creaking under the strain of the wind. He looked after his daughter in the hallway and met her eyes and for the first time the thought occurred to him that they were both going to die.

They were Methodists, and attended a wealthy church in Flour Bluff, near the water. The previous Sunday, Calliope had been just a depression, thousands of miles away, churning over the South Atlantic. It was then that God dipped his finger into the clouds and gave them their violent spin. In areas around the Gulf, hurricane seasons become religious experiences, times of trial, testing, faith. The preacher spoke of the two differing types of people, those who fled and those who stayed. The ideologies behind them were so vastly different that it was impossible for one to understand the other. They might as well speak different languages, believe in different gods.

To the fleers, those who stay seem suicidal. They are thrill seekers. They don't understand the value of life. The fleers will protect their families at all costs. They pack what they need and go to their parents' houses and watch the storm from television and pray that their possessions are safe.

The stayers are generally the minority. They believe that hurricanes are survivable. They believe that when the storms clear, when the long, dark arms of cloud retreat into the sky, they will be the human presence left behind, the inextinguishable heart beating defiantly. They will be at the front lines of recovery and rescue missions, before FEMA and the Coast Guard and the police show up. Theirs will be the faces that the injured and maimed and drowning and scared will remember forever. They know the only certain death is being born at all.

Peter imagined how strong Annemarie would be after this.

The preacher likened this analogy to suffering in general, the way some people retreat into sadness and some people wake up every day and face the world that is trying to destroy them. It was well known amongst the congregation that the preacher himself was a pancreatic cancer survivor.

He said that God made the body stronger than we thought. The body expanded and shrunk and absorbed blows and pain, it survived regimented radiation poisoning and temporary alopecia. Even the weakest, the most depressed, the scared, have bodies that in the morning will wake their minds and say, *Get up*.

Most Sundays, Annemarie slept through the sermons, her throat snoring loudly under the weight of her neck.

Peter finished securing his house. The windows and the door to the office were boarded up, and there was not enough room for Calliope to reach in and grasp them. At eleven-thirty the power went out, and he lit the Coleman lantern and sat on the living room floor with his daughter.

It was only a matter of time, after they'd stopped having sex, before Gretchen and Peter were separated. The appropriate moment seemed to be Peter's transfer to Corpus Christi. Gretchen didn't want to move to Texas, she said, and didn't want to be married to a man who wouldn't fuck her. She said she missed the days when he weighed three hundred and seventy-two pounds. She missed his half-hard penis and his gargantuan, sweaty chest. It wasn't great sex but it was their sex. Then he changed. She said she couldn't come when she was on the bottom. She'd told him this many times, had pleaded, "Please let me on top so I can come, baby, please," but he barely acknowledged that she was speaking. One night she even accused him of being a homosexual. She was crying in bed, rolled away from him, said that it wasn't normal for a guy to get so turned on by the sight of himself.

Peter said if she lost some weight she could be on top again. He meant it motivationally. She didn't *have* to be fat, after all. Why couldn't she understand this? How was his ability to lose two hundred pounds not the least bit inspirational?

He resented her for not trying to lose weight, and she resented him for not loving her despite her being fat. They both pushed the issue. Peter prodded her to exercise and threw out all the unhealthy food. Gretchen ate excessively, gaining fifteen more pounds. They no longer had sex or even said good night to each other. Their marriage grew cold and still and finally they both stopped trying to resuscitate it.

The wind screamed louder than jet engines. It was a real thing now. It had weight, texture. It rubbed the side of the house with such intensity that Peter touched the living room wall and felt heat. Outside the lamp's light was darkness. Peter wished they could see outdoors, but knew it was

impossible. Every so often he placed his hand to the wall to check its temperature. He feared that the heat would damage his house's infrastructure.

"I should've gone home," Annemarie said. Calliope was deafening, the sound of dark metal colliding and grinding. Annemarie spoke loudly though they sat next to each other, close and distanced at once. Peter thought of his wife.

Annemarie said, "I wish Mom was here! She would have made us leave! We would be safe somewhere!" Debris hit trees, the walls of their house. Anything not secured or taken inside would be transformed into a missile.

Suddenly, Peter realized that they hadn't eaten dinner. He asked Annemarie if she was hungry.

"Yes, I'm starving!"

"What do you want to eat?" he shouted. "Pizza?"

"Yes!"

"What do you want on it?"

"Pepperoni, sausage, and extra cheese!"

Peter stood up and went to the phone. There was silence from the other end. He knew the phone lines had to have been severed by now. All cables running in and out of southeastern Texas were useless. They were completely alone. His daughter sat in the glow of the lantern, looking his way but not at him. He had disappeared into the darkness of the kitchen. The floor vibrated. The air had a salty, chemical smell. He gave the silence his address and pizza order, and asked the silence to please hurry, his daughter was hungry. The silence said nothing and then he hung up.

Glass exploded behind the boards and several shards flew to the kitchen tile at his feet. The shrieking wind intensified, its pitch raising several octaves as Calliope forced herself into the house. He placed his hand below the bottom board. A thin, piercing stream of air pushed against his skin.

He returned to Annemarie.

"Thirty minutes," he said, but she didn't say anything that he could hear. Calliope's fingers had already penetrated their home. A board ripped off the kitchen window, then a second. From the east end of the house Peter heard a loud, deep creak, a splitting of wood. He threw Annemarie to the ground and placed himself on top of her. Imprinted into the carpet in front of his eyes was a finger-painted little girl standing under a raincloud. Was this picture of Calliope, like she'd said, or of Annemarie herself? She quivered, as if cold.

It happened in one quick, thunderous crunch. Without looking Peter knew the roof was gone. Water bombarded them from several directions at once. He opened his eyes and looked up and forward to the east wall. The last visible edge of roof spiraled into the sky, and the furniture around them shifted as if coming alive; the couch somersaulted over them and into the splitting wall. The family pictures fell and shattered silently behind the roar. Calliope bit chunks from the exposed top of the wall.

Peter closed his eyes so as not to see the walls disintegrate and vanish into the air. He felt something, a great hand attempting to pluck them off the floor and fling them into the sky. He suddenly couldn't feel the floor any longer; he was surrounded by water and streaming, shrieking air. Still, he didn't look. He covered his daughter's body with his, because that was all there was left to do.

**Matthew Barbehenn** is an MFA candidate at Temple University in Philadelphia. His work has previously been published in *The Three Rivers Review* and *The Front*.