

# cottonwood



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73  
Spring 2017

Cottonwood and Cottonwood Press  
Lawrence, Kansas  
Cottonwood 73  
©2017 Cottonwood and Cottonwood Press  
ISSN 0147-149X

*Cottonwood* is a review of the literary arts published once yearly.

Two-issue subscriptions to *Cottonwood* are available for \$15. Four-issue subscriptions are \$28. If you wish to subscribe to *Cottonwood*, or to become a donor, patron, or benefactor, please write to: *Cottonwood*, Dept. of English, 1445 Jayhawk Blvd., University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 66045.

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*Cottonwood* receives support from the Department of English of the University of Kansas. Production is facilitated by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences of the University of Kansas.

*Cottonwood* is indexed by the *Humanities International Complete*, *Poem Finder*, and the *Index of American Periodical Verse*.

Benjamin Obler

## THE SECRETARY OF GROVELAND

Michelle McLellan had been a teacher, like her mother and aunt, waking before dawn nine months a year, staging energetic performances five periods a day, taking eighteen minutes for lunch, tutoring after school, grading papers in the evenings, attending staff meetings in the mornings, chaperoning weekend dances, leading parent-teacher conferences twice a semester, proctoring exams, subbing for sick colleagues—in short, giving herself entirely, having no life of her own, and walking baggy-eyed among that class of noble servants whose health deteriorates and marriages fail but who achieve some notoriety in the school district, and about whom, when they are dead, divorced or disappeared, people shrug their shoulders and say, “What can you do? It’s a tough job.” For eight years Michelle lived this way, teaching a private Catholic high school in the Groveland neighborhood of St. Paul, until exhaustion put her in the hospital. Then, on the advice of a friend, she resigned and found work as a secretary.

At Gruber & Sons, a medium-sized firm handling employment law cases, she managed the appointments of fourteen lawyers who called themselves “senior counsel”—also the office supplies, the front desk and phone, some typing, filing, and proofreading. This was nothing compared to caring for the futures of 125 teenagers of families who thought of themselves as very important. For sitting in an ergonomic chair with soft pads under her wrists they paid her twice as much money as what she had earned on her feet in front of a blackboard, plus 401-K matching. She was appreciated, respected, and enjoyed good health benefits. Her hours were capped. She could not believe her luck, wondered why she hadn’t made the change years earlier, and the guilt was only occasional.

The people of Groveland, meanwhile, wondered how Ms. McLellan could just stop teaching when she was so good at it. They wondered if some scandal had precipitated the move, though

they couldn't imagine it in her case. She was seen around town, at cafes and the grocery store, and her former students often told her, in gushing tones awash in superlatives, how well she was remembered, the impression she had made, how they and their friends still quoted her lessons and catch phrases. "Lean into the discomfort!" for example. These moments made Michelle proud and nostalgic, but her life was her own now. Her ambition was to be not subsumed by her career—and this ambition was being fulfilled.

Though earning more, she continued to live thriftily. She sat on Craigslist furniture, and she didn't own a television. She walked for her errands, and the porch of her apartment was her only luxury. There she read books in a wicker chair overlooking the courtyard. At sunset, orange beams pierced through the poplars and cottonwoods. Time spread out before her like a sedated river. She heard things anew, like the excited twittering of birds at dusk. She smelled again—a sweet, yellow linden tree nearby. Even if someone from a company downtown, below the bluff and the cathedral at the end of her block, had come up and offered her a position with executive pay, if it meant a return to the overwhelming stress, she would have laughed the caller off her doorstep.

Living in a small apartment in Groveland was not a comedown. The house she had grown up in had been shabby, with winter ice on the windows and the shingles crumbling and streaked. Now Groveland was overrun with young professionals, the "housing stock" as they called it, all fixed up. She couldn't have bought back her family house on Goodrich Avenue if she'd wanted to. Luckily, she didn't want to. Having always earned a teacher's wage, having always lived alone (since college), having always committed only to her students, she was accustomed to small spaces. She never thought of housing as stock anyway. She put her stock in education. Children were a sound investment. Most of her friends had moved out of the city, to start families—they wouldn't have their offspring attending inner-city public schools. They couldn't understand how she could live in such a small place. It wasn't a complaint she heard frequently; Michelle kept friendships to a minimum.

The humbleness of her apartment was made up for by her formidable reputation in Groveland—both hers and her family's legacy as stalwart women educators. Her mother and her aunt both had taught at the same private Catholic academy that Michelle had left. Certain old shopkeepers in Groveland asked about her name, McLellan, whenever Michelle wrote a check.

Suitors—as they were called in some old books Michelle read—were many, now that she had a modicum of free time. There was one man she'd liked especially, and she'd started seeing him until she realized she was dumping all her energies into him rather than the classroom. He was too eager to marry anyway, and his dream of remodeling a big Victorian along Summit Avenue was well out of line with her plans to keep things modest. She kept him at arm's length for a while, then stopped answering his calls. She took walks at dusk, read novels that had come out during her teaching years, and experimented with ethnic cooking in ways she'd never had time to before. She was sometimes lonesome, sometimes consumed by worry about broad things beyond her control—war, crime, disease. But that was just an active mind running idle. She was greatly happy.

What didn't go away, however, were the faces. The children's faces. Their plucky optimism, their infectious energy. Even the hope hiding in the brooding, scowling, belligerent ones. She was at Nina's Cafe one afternoon, taking lunch away from the office, and she was brooding deeply on the great sense of value one has when young people turn to you for guidance, and how she missed it. Her eyes scanned a newspaper, but her mind was on the satisfaction of witnessing comprehension bubble, feeling a connection forged. Children that day appeared to her, even in daylight, like stars in a night sky. She watched two young girls order hot chocolate at the counter, one helping the other remove folded bills from a change purse. Outside the window, middle-schoolers passed in a gaggle with thumbs under their backpack straps. At a glance Michelle understood who was the most popular, who insecure, which one the troublemaker. She decided to find a mentoring agency and to sign up.



The next day Michelle called and an interview was scheduled, forms filled out, and a background check made. After several weeks she was cleared to participate in a program that paired needy youngsters from Frogtown and East St. Paul with mentors who could commit to seeing them once a week for a few hours.

"We're thrilled to have a woman such as yourself on board," the agent said. Michelle was copiously thanked even before she'd done a thing, which made her uncomfortable. Several candidates were presented to her, and, not wanting to be the selector in someone's fate, she let the agency choose.

They assigned her Donnelle, a 16-year-old who liked basketball and hip-hop. Michelle went home excited but with reservations. What would she do, take the girl to a Timberwolves game? How could she endorse paying sportsmen millions when the free pass given to student athletes at the academy had been so maddeningly counterproductive to her professional cause, and the battles with the coaches never-ending and always coming out in their favor? She couldn't picture it. Neither could she imagine holding her tongue about the misogyny and violence rappers rapped about—that seemed connected to the sport of basketball. She returned to the agency saying she'd better choose her own. That's how she found the listing for Nerese, a seven-year-old who loved to play checkers, swing on swings, bake cookies, and read! Nerese loved to read, her bio said.

The first meeting was set up, to be arbitrated by a social worker from the placement organization. Michelle went home gleeful and nervous, burbling with love already. She put Nerese's picture, in which she clutched a book to her chest and smiled, on her refrigerator.

At Kowalski's Market early the next week, while buying chocolate chips and a new baking sheet, she ran into Katy Sanford. Katy and Michelle had roomed together at college in Madison, though they both came from St. Paul—different high schools, but their families known to one another. They had found solace in each other among the college masses, shared an apartment, then fallen out of touch when Katy moved away with a boyfriend. Now they had not seen each other for . . . nine years, they calculated.

They gasped and exclaimed and clutched each other's arms, awed at what they were seeing.

Katy looked different. She was thinner than ever. Her face, once delicate and pale, now looked orange and synthetic. She didn't seem to be ailing though—she spoke with animation and energy. "It's so great to see you!" she said. Yet there was something pinched and twitchy about her. A stiff formality gripped her, as if her natural movements were constrained.

And she smelled different. Standing in the baking aisle, a musky and expensive-smelling perfume came off her. Katy used to complain, Michelle remembered, of women who bathed in perfume. The change perplexed Michelle. She could still see Katy in a flower-print dress, her feet dirty from shuffling around shoeless in their dingy two-bedroom up on the table as she clipped her toenails, putting off doing a paper for Professor Namath. Namath was a smarmy, feather-haired prof who had invited his students to call him Trevor, spawning Katy's phrase, *Never, Trevor!* Katy had been so assured then. Michelle had envied her confidence. Now when Katy spoke, her words came out reedy and phrased like a question.

Michelle asked if Katy lived in Groveland, realizing they might be neighbors.

"I live in Plymouth?" Katy said.

"New Hampshire!" Michelle didn't know the names of Minneapolis' far-reaching western suburbs. She had no business out there among the General Mills, Target, Cargill, and Best Buy executives.

Katy said no, she was in town visiting friends. "Oh, God!" she added. "And I've got two kids! Matthew and Emily. Matthew's six, Emily's four. They're starting school—that's why we moved."

"Oh?"

But Katy had to run. Her husband was waiting in the car. The women exchanged phone numbers and promised to get together soon. "You'll have to come see my house," Katy said, turning back at the end of the aisle. She waved one last time and disappeared, leaving Michelle with no chance to reply.

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In Kids' Corner of the Groveland Public Library, Michelle and Nerese beamed at each other as if they had both finally found the person they'd been looking for without knowing who it was. It was their first meeting. Michelle sat on a tiny stool in the carpeted reading area, the agency representative at her side. Nerese was scrawny, with beautiful braided black hair, large brown eyes, and a broad smile.

After some conversation, the agent said, "Well, you two seem like two peas in a pod," and left them. They gathered books and walked out of the library, Nerese's thin arms, with their curious little pink scars, piled high with hardcover storybooks such as *Charlotte's Web*, and *A Child's First Visual Dictionary*.

"What's your favorite?" Michelle asked.

"All of them!" Nerese said.

They became fast friends.

Michelle showed Nerese around her apartment—the girl had never been in one like it before, on an upstairs floor. They set about making cookies. Nerese insisted on being the one to get the ingredients out, measure the flour, and turn the oven dial. Michelle made Nerese the topic of conversation—she was the one who needed love and attention. Nerese answered Michelle's questions with enthusiasm, until a point when she became quiet and uneasy in some way. Perhaps she was embarrassed about her family, or that she'd never used a computer, or about the toys she didn't have. But following Michelle's lead, she came back around, and after successfully cracking an egg and being commended for it, she said, "Michelle, I love you."

Michelle's heart sank. The declaration was premature, obviously. Michelle put her hand on Nerese's shoulder but quickly moved on. She did not dwell. "We're going to have a lot of fun getting to know each other. Oh, hey, I know." Looking down at Nerese, she suddenly remembered a little wooden stepstool that used to be her grandfather's—it had always been around, just sitting in a closet. She fetched it, and Nerese stood on it to reach the mixing bowls.

Nerese's eyes grew wide. "I'm as big as you now!" she exclaimed, though she only reached Michelle's waist.



The little stool suddenly seemed like an object of destiny. "That's amazing!" Michelle said. "What a difference a few inches makes, huh?"

Nerese was not difficult, thankfully, though she could have been, with her father "out of the picture" as the agency euphemized, and being raised by her grandmother, a beer-drinking transplant from Alabama, and her mother, Tonya, who had a two-year-old boy by another man. Nerese's 15-year-old aunt, the grandmother's second daughter, also lived with them, and they were all supported somehow by Tonya, who worked evenings at a bank's call center.

Surely Nerese didn't comprehend all this for what it was, though—it was just her life. It was just the norm. She was well-mannered, well-spoken, and her mind seemed uncorrupted. She did slip sometimes amid the "yes, please"s and the "no, thank you"s into slang, saying "ain't" and "axed" and "nuh-uh." But after doing this she grew timid and more polite. Nerese's two vocabularies seemed to express a profound duality in the girl, but Michelle didn't say that one was more acceptable than the other. To both, she made a measured reaction of acceptance.

Every Saturday morning, Michelle picked up Nerese on her blighted block in East St. Paul, with its pools of broken glass on the road and signposts that had been crashed into. They went to Michelle's apartment, started a batch of cookies, and read books on the porch while the cookies baked—Nerese reading to Michelle, Michelle reading to Nerese, then each reading on her own. Nerese's attention span could be short. Sometimes they got out paper and colored pencils, or walked to the park and played on the swings. Other times, they went to the Children's Museum or the Mall of America, neither of which Nerese liked much. She didn't seem to mind being seen holding hands with a white lady, but her whole demeanor sank amid crowds, especially crowds of wealthier kids.

A seven-year-old is much different than a high-schooler, but Michelle's plan was a success. In giving, she felt connected again to a vital part of herself. However, all was not effort and payoff. Nerese's breath stank—she had rotting teeth, drank too much

soda, didn't brush regularly. Whether or not Nerese and her family had health insurance, Michelle didn't dare to ask. Her dad was in jail, Nerese announced once, though she didn't know what for or where or for how long. Nerese's grandmother, when Michelle stepped into the rented house on Saturdays, was always holding a can of Pabst, even in the early afternoon; and two-year-old Damone was often parked in front of the TV—rap music rattling the speaker, videos of rappers posturing beside gyrating women in bikinis.

Michelle's generalized worries had a specific outlet now, like a channel dug to standing water. She would buy Nerese a toothbrush and keep it at the apartment. Maybe she could see about getting her to the dentist. Court records about her father could probably be found, if her mother wasn't going to be forthcoming. She wondered if his crime had been explained to the child, some moral perspective given. And certainly Nerese should be in an advanced reading group; in skill, she really was about two grades ahead. Michelle could talk to the school about it. She would just have to be careful not to do like the agency had warned and overstep her bounds.

Five weeks of phone tag passed before Michelle and Katy found an agreeable date. "I'd love to have you out to the house," Katy said on the phone.

"Sure," Michelle said, though she had imagined them going to The Taverna or another of their old Groveland haunts. To gather in the old neighborhood seemed like the natural choice. But a house holds primacy over an apartment, and Katy seemed very eager for Michelle to see her home.

She went on a Sunday driving to Minneapolis and beyond, west on the freeway for what seemed like an hour. Off Hopkins Crossroad, she wound among pillared nouveau-Craftsmans, reading one after another 5-digit number on beige siding. The neighborhood—it felt to Michelle homogenous, like a compound—was new and barren. Elm saplings poked up in beds of cedar mulch, tied to the ground by ropes and stakes, as if they might be stolen.

In the foyer, Katy looked just as radioactive as she had in the grocery store. Her hair reflected a new tint of frost, and she seemed more at ease in her own house. "Come on in. Meet my kids," she said cheerfully. Behind Katy, Michelle saw Matthew, the six-year-old, on the floor of a sunken living room beside a Hot Wheels parking ramp. "Matthew, come meet Mommy's friend," Katy called. The boy continued to work with the big plastic play set. "Matthew, come here please," Katy said. The boy made no change. "I'm sorry," Katy said. "He's really strong-willed. He loves that toy." When introduced, four-year-old Emily clung to her mother's leg like a koala on a branch, suspicious eyes shielded by a heavy brow. Michelle could not coax a smile from her.

The women went to the kitchen, each making apologies about the busy schedules that had kept them from seeing each other sooner. Only moments passed before a chilling feline growl tore through the room. "Oh!" Michelle gasped, turning about, looking for the source. The hair on her arms stood up.

"Emily!" Katy said, striding to the living room. She removed Emily from the proximity of a cat standing on the couch arching its back. "Honey, don't do that, please. You know better." Katy brought the child to the kitchen and gave her a Fruit Roll-Up.

"Sometimes I have to divert her," Katy explained.

The women took glasses of iced tea, and Emily, to the patio outdoors.

While the women chatted Emily ate her snack, then played with a watering can for a minute, but soon came around and bit her mother on the hand. Katy scolded her. She took the girl on her lap. "Oh, sweetie, don't be sad. Mommy's sad that you're sad." The girl quieted, allowing the women to converse, though Michelle continued to observe the glowing hatred in the child's eyes. Shortly, Matthew appeared at the glass door inside the house, his wide-open mouth smeared against it. His pink gums showed and he pressed and waggled his tongue. Katy tilted her head disapprovingly and glowered at him. Matthew went on mashing his lips and tongue around, then cackled with delight, beholding the grand smudge he'd made.

"Boys," Katy groaned. Michelle's neck and ears grew warm. She shifted in her seat. She forced a smile at Katy, who continued with what she had been talking about. But now Michelle was distracted. She wondered what had happened to her formerly assiduous and clear-eyed friend. She questioned her own motivation for reconnecting with this woman from her past. It had been so long ago. A lot had changed. But she quickly righted her mind. It was her manner not to judge too soon. She could suffer a little distastefulness while awaiting encouraging signs. There was likely another side of the coin—there always was. In disputes among students, or between students and coaches, or between parents and students, there were always two sides of the story. Neither was the absolute truth. This was a lesson she had taken pains to impart to her students back when she was a teacher, not a secretary. Equanimity had served Michelle well in her career and in her life.

Filling the gap in their shared past, Michelle believed, would surely round out the picture and bring a sense of harmony between her and her old friend. At Katy's prompting, Michelle described her life since college, the years which she regarded with such clear delineation, like blocks of time: a year in Madison, waitressing for money to live on, figuring things out; the murderous months living with her mother back in Groveland while settling in at the academy, which they referred to by its acronym; the eight years teaching; the year since then as a secretary. It was all utterly clear cut.

"What have you been doing?" Michelle said, ignoring Emily's still-flickering anger, which she felt was resentment of her presence. But Katy's reply was nothing like she'd anticipated. It was scattered, imprecise, and lacking a thread of self-awareness. Or else it was greatly filtered. She seemed confused by recalling events and tying them together.

"Well, I didn't stay in Madison, obviously. Josh and I split up. I came back here, and that was . . . like, nehhh." Katy made a "so-so" sound. "It didn't take long before I met Paul. Then we got married. That was seven years ago. God, can that be right? You know, he's gone from marketing at General Mills to where

he is now, Carlson Companies. He likes it there. It's really great for him. And then Emily came and we had to figure out Matthew's school situation, so we put the house on the market."

The events seemed connected only by happenstance. What they all had in common was not that they had happened but that Katy had smeared them with a kind of truth, like joint compound.

Michelle asked if Katy hadn't wanted to send her children to school in Groveland.

"Oh, Lord no! Get real."

"Hmm."

"God, college was so long ago, but *not*. You know? It's like it's right there."

"Yeah," Michelle agreed, falsely.

"It was such a crazy time!"

"It was?"

"Yes! God!"

"Katy, we were tame. We went to one kegger. All we did was study."

"But the way we lived. That little apartment. The squalor. We had no money . . . Say, I haven't shown you around the house! You're going to love it. Come on. Matthew, watch Emily!"

It was a house for giants. Michelle felt shrunken. The doorways were wider, the windows taller, the ceilings higher, the couches puffier, even the handrails thicker. Everywhere one was surrounded by quantities of empty space. Several rooms were furnished but looked unused. Under the frightening sterility, however, Michelle perceived the allure—an anonymity, an undemanding plainness, like a hotel. There was comfort in that. Standing on the thick carpet, she felt as if she was atop a bed, like she could throw herself to the ground and get up unharmed.

They went out the lower level into a verdant backyard. There Matthew mounted a toy SUV with a whining electric motor. He drove around crashing into his other toys, for some reason narrating his exploits aloud like a play-by-play announcer: "The driver crashes with the dump truck! He cannot get away!"



His sister followed after him, imploring, "Stop! Matthew, stop!"

Stop driving, stop crashing, or stop narrating? Michelle didn't understand.

The women stood and chatted, Katy pointing to the neighboring houses. "Over there is Roger and Anne, they're great. In the blue house is Linda and Gary, they're great. And Brian and Stephanie, they're great."

Katy suggested a walk, but Michelle said she had to go. She drove home in silence, feeling like she'd visited another planet. After a long silent drive back to Groveland, she stepped into her apartment and dropped her keys in the dish with a sigh. At first her wood floors and antique fixtures looked old; the small rooms felt cramped. But it wore off. She went to the porch, sank into the wicker chair, and held a book in her lap a while before opening it. She watched a high bough swaying, and the cottonwood fluff, like snow, descending. In the distance, she heard a rake scratching the ground. She smelled burning leaves.

Michelle tried to get Nerese's family to take action on Nerese's teeth. She explained that there was a public assistance program to pay for dental care. Tonya said she would think about it. It looked superficially like they had discussed the issue, but in fact a wedge had been driven. Tonya must have felt like she was being accused of being a bad mother, because shortly after she retaliated: the following Saturday Tonya "forgot" about Michelle coming, and when she arrived, Nerese was away at her grandmother's for a sleepover. Tonya made no apology.

From there, it worsened. Their phone was shut off once, Michelle wasn't able to reach them, and Tonya made no effort to keep in contact. The family had no problem reaching her, though, when needing money: in November, the grandmother called asking for help to pay the electricity. Foolishly, Michelle gave over \$160 with a sinking feeling that she was crossing the line. Tonya never answered back about the dentist. What she talked about most now was her wish that Damone had a mentor too. This idea

she always left hanging, as if Michelle should snatch it up and make it happen.

The money was not repaid, but that was okay. It was a pittance on Michelle's secretarial salary. More important was the unfortunate fact that it changed the dynamic. Michelle made all the effort, and Nerese's family made none. Sure, Tonya told Michelle, "Nerese is always talking about you. Michelle this, Michelle that. Saturday morning, she's up at seven. I said, 'Child, she ain't gonna be here till noon!'"

But the family also teased Nerese about her special friend, shamed her for needing love. When Michelle came in the doorway, dropping Nerese off, they said, "What books did ya'll get?" eyeing Nerese's new armful. They sneered as if it was a rat she'd brought in the house. All Michelle could do was tell herself that Nerese gained from the experience, but once again, it was her giving everything, swimming upstream, wading against the current, throwing her weight into it.

These ups and downs endured for a whole season. Dealings with the family were fraught with ambiguity and tensions, little power plays, and passive maneuvers. Nerese's sociability improved. She ate carrots and could do handstands and cartwheels, and there was trust—but always some new problem arose stemming from the household. Most appalling was how Tonya saw no need for Nerese to join an advanced reading group, but had signed her up for dance lessons for her to learn to "shake her booty." Nevertheless, Michelle gamely persisted. She drove through the snow to pick up Nerese, looked up new cookie recipes for them to try, and paid the library fines when Nerese's books were lost or Damone trashed them.

Now that she was a secretary, she had an abundance of energy for these hassles. It was a fraction of the hardship she had endured and the will she had summoned daily to corral the attentions of 25 students at any one time.

Michelle and Katy got together for coffee every other month. It was clear they were quite different now than they'd been back

at UW, and it saddened Michelle they wouldn't be—couldn't be—as close again. But it wasn't only that. Frankly, seeing Katy was more exhausting than seeing Nerese. Even when Katy drove to Groveland and they walked to Nina's Cafe, their visit was dominated by Katy's attention to Matthew and Emily, trying to keep them fed, happy, clean and quiet. Conversation was like reporting from the streets of Baghdad—the machine-gun fire of Katy's corrective asides interrupting every other sentence. Matthew, could you not stand on the chair, please? Emily, Mommy doesn't want you to lick that.

But it wasn't only unruliness. A curious sense of enclosure surrounded Katy and her brood. It was like the children didn't see other adults. When the cafe staffperson brought the booster chair towards them—or when Michelle brought it herself—they acted aloof, even spiteful. Michelle supposed that, as a friend of their mother, whom they abused, she garnered no respect herself. Environments fared no better. The solemnity of Nina's—full of studying students, writers, and readers—didn't seem to register in the children's minds as something to respect. Territories were an extension of a world that was theirs to discover, ravage, and disown. Sadly, Katy resided within a similar bubble. Whenever they met, in an hour or two they'd pick up and leave Groveland, and Michelle was left to believe that this chilliness was necessary for Katy to stay close to her beloved children, to keep them understood and safe. It was as a shield.

One Saturday, sitting with Katy on the settee at Nina's, Michelle tried to salvage a friendly chat, one that rewarded the distance Katy had come, by asking about the kids. Katy in her usual manner said, "The kids are doing great! Matthew really likes school, and he's getting good reports. He's got a best buddy now, his friend Jonah. He's sweet. They had their first sleepover. Emily is doing great at TutorTots. She got a prize on Friday for good behavior. And she loves Ms. Nelson—don't you, honey?" Michelle couldn't reconcile these tales of agreeable progress with what she saw before her: the two children squirming across the furniture, uninterested in the cafe's children's magazines, doing violence to each other, their moods flashing from rage to despair to abjection.

There was a lot Michelle could tolerate, but she would not be a repository for self-serving gloss. Feeling deceived, made a dupe, Michelle vowed to reciprocate the veiled selectiveness of truth.

"How are you?" Katy asked. "How are things with Nerese?"

"They're great," Michelle said, disappointed in this as a lie. Things *were* great. Though not great the way Katy meant great. There were challenges with Nerese, but challenges were to be expected. Between Nerese and herself tenderness and friendship prevailed. "Nerese told me she wants to be a teacher when she grows up." This was true, and strangely, Michelle was annoyed that she couldn't dissemble in return.

"Really? That's so sweet. Does she know you're not a teacher anymore?"

"Yes."

"How old is she again?"

"Eight now. She was seven when I started seeing her."

"Hmm. I thought she was six."

"Matthew is six, not Nerese."

"It's weird though, you know—eight, and you never had to do diapers, teething, potty training."

"She's not my child, Katy." Michelle sensed, as she had at other times, that her friend felt as though Michelle had jumped ahead in line, unfairly bypassing motherly hardships—not to mention labor and breastfeeding.

"You know what I mean. So but it's good? It's going great?"

"Yeah, great. We have fun. She loves to bake. We've done every kind of cookie there is. It's probably time to move up to bread or cakes. We hang out at my place, we read, we do art projects."

"Don't you take her anywhere? She must get bored. Out by us, there's this IMax Theatre. My kids love it. You lie down under the screen, it surrounds you, it's 3-D."

"Nerese actually doesn't like movies. The television is always on at her house, and it bothers her. Anyway, we've gone to Como Zoo." That was a lie, they hadn't gone. They did go to the Raptor Center once, an avian rehab facility at the university. But Nerese had been frightened of the falcons and eagles.

"IMax isn't TV. It's better than TV. She'd love it!"

"She's a bit shy at new places."

"Oh, it's nothing. There's other kids there. She could make friends."

Michelle's blood pressure rose. "It really isn't her *thing*."

"All the more reason. Kids have to be challenged."

This was a ludicrous directive coming from Katy. Michelle took a deep breath and drank her tea. She was exhausted with competition already, though glimpsing how it came about was edifying. It appeared to her as a natural outcropping of duplicity. When you can say anything you want, claim any circumstance, the stakes easily get raised. But she felt unmoored, adrift in social pretension, and it made her nauseous.

Now an awkward silence bloomed between the women, shameful to Michelle, considering what they'd once been—educated women of integrity, feminists, aspiring careerists. Matthew and Emily, standing beside the coffee table, began to fuss. Matthew had hold of Emily's wrist, twisting it. Emily held something out of his reach. Michelle excused herself to use the restroom. When she came out, Katy and Matthew were squabbling over the boy's windbreaker hood. This niggling and suffering seemed their routine interchange—a baseline connection of controlling care and bitter helplessness. Michelle went to the cafe counter and stared into the case of scones and muffins. She was not hungry. She pondered whether she would see Katy again. She admonished herself to pity her friend and not look down on her. But it was hard.

Then a voice behind her spoke: "Ms. McLellan!"

Michelle immediately recognized a former student, Natalie Mahoney, class of '02. Not a great student, as Michelle remembered, but on the plus side of the divide. The girl had pushed herself, shown integrity, not rebelled or opted out. She had grown—the baby fat fallen away, taller.

"Oh my God!" the young woman said with wide eyes. "Hi!"

"Natalie, hi! How are you?"

"You remember my name!"

"Of course."

"You're so amazing. You must know a thousand names and faces."



"Oh, teachers don't forget," Michelle said, smiling now.

"Gosh, how are you? This is my friend Greta." Natalie indicated the young woman beside her.

"Hi," Greta said from behind snaky bangs and bright orange eyeglasses.

"How are you?" Natalie continued. She asked about the academy. "I heard Mr. Dupree retired."

"I don't know about that," said Michelle, with a hint of dispassion. She paused. "I left."

"What? No! Ms. McLellan!"

"Yeah. I made a career change."

"How could you? You were, like, the best teacher ever! Greta, tell her—I'm always talking about Ms. McLellan."

"She is, for sure!" Greta said.

"Lean into the discomfort," Natalie said.

"Lean into the discomfort. That's right," Michelle said, a convulsive breathy laugh passing through her. She had forgotten about this mantra she'd made up for Composition, to get kids over the hump of composing a thesis. She had forgotten about it, but had continued to live by it.

"Man, I can't believe it. What are you doing now?"

"Now . . ." Michelle said, "I work at a law firm." She was not able to keep embarrassment from rising up—her neck felt splotchy.

"A law firm?" Natalie looked stunned.

"Mmm-hmm." Parsing this was too much to deal with today, being already in the thick of it with Katy and her kids. She dissembled. "It's a managerial position. Downtown." As if that added prestige.

*I'm a secretary now*, she heard in her head. Her mind worked that way, always coughing up the truth anyway.

"Wow," Natalie said, with dimmed spirits. She looked like she'd just learned her dog had been hit by a car. "That's a tragedy. You're wasting your talent."

"You're sweet. But it was taking a toll." Michelle became aware of Katy looking in her direction, searching for her. Michelle looked over to Katy, who crouched beside Matthew, twisting

around. Their eyes met. A tight smile sprang to Katy's face, like a cable being tensioned. She made a doddering kind of nod and turned away. Michelle could see her conflict, her recognition that Michelle was speaking to Groveland locals, that she was known here, that Groveland was still her neighborhood. She was integrated, a fixture, and Katy was not. Katy had ejected. It wasn't her place anymore. Michelle perceived this in an instant, as she had perceived the social dynamics of the passing middle-schoolers outside a window. Katy was envious, regretful, and wanted to listen in and feel a part vicariously.

"I'm sorry," Michelle said to Natalie, facing her again. She touched the girl's forearm. "What about you?"

"Gosh, everything's happening right now. I just got engaged, like, what was it—" She turned to Greta. "Three days ago?"

"Two," Greta said.

"Two, I guess. Everything's kind of a whirl right now."

"That's great!" Michelle said. "Congratulations."

"He just got hired—Tim just got hired—at General Mills."

"Tim Sanderson!"

"No, no! Tim DeVorst. He didn't go to Groveland. We met at college. Tim Sanderson!" Natalie scoffed.

"Sorry. It's been a long time. Hey, do you live around here?" Michelle realized that she and the newlyweds might be neighbors.

"Actually, we're closing on a house next week. I'm taking Greta there now to see it. We're just getting coffee—it's a long drive. It's out in Orono."

"Orono . . . South?" Michelle hesitantly ventured.

"No, it's like out past Maple Grove. You get on 94 and go west, and then, like . . ." She turned to Greta. "Then what do we do?"

"I don't know. It's your house!" Greta said, laughing.

"I can't think right now!" Natalie laughed and lurched forward like an ostrich, as if to describe the absurdity of not knowing one's own home. Michelle recognized the girl's mannerism from eight years ago. Strange how it persisted. "It's, like, 94 west," Natalie staggered on. "Then um . . ."

Michelle held her eyes patiently, like a good teacher. Natalie implored her friend to help.

"Don't look at me!" Greta said, blushing, like young people do when their friends are on the spot and screw up.

A screech rang out in the room—Emily. Behind the young women, Michelle saw Katy stand, hoist a bag strap over her shoulder, and grab Emily's hand. She made an exasperated face, and an apologetic gesture toward the door.

"I guess we just keep going," Natalie said. "And going and going and going!"

Michelle faced Natalie with an open countenance, her wide inquisitive eyes waiting to understand where the women would go.