



LIFEBOAT

"No big," I say when my mom calls to tell me my father died. "I never knew the guy."

She pauses, and I can feel her wanting to probe but deciding it's my lost tooth, my choice to explore that emptiness—or not.

"His sister called me," my mom goes on. "She started talking to me as if thirty-eight years haven't passed since I last saw them all. It was surreal. She talked about his wife and his other children as if I knew them. Finally I told her that all I could really remember about him was that he used to walk from our apartment to his work through a meadow growing under the electrical lines thinking, *I'm a free man among serfs*. That always stuck in my mind—what it meant about how he saw the world. I expected him to start brewing mead or something."

I'm on my pedicab. I have a delivery to drop off at the homeless shelter on 33rd and a donation to pick up at Mort's Bagels. I keep telling the dispatchers it would be more efficient for me to pick up the donations first, but they don't mind. Some of the other drivers take them home with them, sell them to their friends. I don't think that's right—and not because I'm white, although the other drivers think so. I'm a week shy of forty, college educated, and the only incorruptible delivery boy for Seasoned Giving, a high-end charity that redistributes uneaten food from fancy restaurants, corporate cafeterias, and bakeries to the homeless, flea-infested, and meth-raddled of this city. I may be the only person in the whole organization who really believes in the mission. I have to. Otherwise how can I explain how I've chosen to spend the last four years? Why shouldn't the destitute nibble on nouveau cuisine, complex reductions, hand-fed beef?

If I weren't biking for my livelihood, I think I'd be a chef. My mother