

## Zachary Tyler Vickers

### Old Wife in Fits

#### Fit #156

In the hospital, Mom poses an important question: why did Stan step on the crack?

She pulls one of her three false teeth and reprimands, “Gain a child, *looth* a *tooth!*”

“I saw you trip over the garden hose,” Stan says. Also, they live in Indiana—the land of karst. They’re all technically walking around on one giant crack. But this wasn’t any way to speak to Mom, especially when she’s fractured two vertebrae.

“*Ahem,*” Dad says. “*Hose* doesn’t rhyme with *back.*”

“What’*th* with that *nahty* knot?” Mom says, pointing to Betsy’s forehead. When Betsy furrows, her eyes uncross like she’s rewinding to her childhood *na-na na-na boo-booings*. “Your eyes are going to stick that way,” Mom used to *ahem*. Then they did.

“Picked a fight with a door and lost,” she says.

“Bet-*thy,*” Mom says, “your med*thz?*”

“I forgot, okay?” Betsy shivers. She does this any time she’s in a hospital—Stan’s supposed iron deficiency (he was sick from a neighbor’s gas leak—unseen, unsmelled, untasted), Dad’s hernia surgery, and Betsy’s own thirty-eight years of check-ins. “You shouldn’t forget some things,” Dad says. He squeezes Mom’s shoulder and gives Stan a look. Dad’s a middle school teacher with Assistant Coach eyes. *Take a lap,* the look says. Stan’s been lapping since he was nine, trying to walk it off.

#### Fit #31

“It’s only me and you,” Betsy once said to Stan. “So if the old wives’ tales are true, then how does she explain that *third* false tooth?”

When Stan was nine, he jumped into the pool after dinner. The

cramp buckled like a car seat to his thigh. Betsy, six, pulled out the ladder, *na-na na-na boo-booed*, and stepped on his fingers. His lungs burned, he coughed chlorine, he grabbed Betsy's feet and pulled. She fell back, her head *thanked* the deck, her eyes rolled white again. Dad lifted Stan out. Betsy lay there, fitting, flailing. Stan hated her for embellishing, trying to get him in trouble. The longer she thrashed, the louder he apologized. Dad pinched her tongue. When she calmed, her eyes scrolled down and turned inward. She blinked like she was waking from carbon monoxide poisoning—a connection Stan wouldn't make until many years later.

"You slipped," Dad told her, unleashing a look on Stan: take a lap.

"This is why we don't run," Mom said, and maybe that third tooth fell out.

Stan thought about Betsy's question.

"We find the answers that fit what we choose to believe," he replied.

### Fit #122

His apartment gas leak affected him like his broken ankle at thirteen. Twenty-something years later, Stan still rehabs it, writing the alphabet with his big toe. It frightens him to think things can't come all the way back. Since his neighbor left her stove on, Stan still blows into a spirometer, floating the ping pong ball, tracking his capacity.

The last time he'd been that breathless was Liz. She talked about the economy of her heart. Stan joked, "Hope it's Bull and not Bear!" But when he returned from the hospital (Betsy had fitted in a movie theater aisle) he noticed the purple condom packet in the wastebasket, and realized she'd meant her heart's *thriftiness*.

Fear can make you do desperate things.

Stan ambles. He enters data. He chews ochre crayons due to his wonky hemoglobins, an anemic habit from the misdiagnosed iron deficiency before the gas leak was discovered. He writes the alphabet with his big toe, gets misty over eggplants, and cheers against the Minnesota Vikings. If their purple helmets miss the playoffs, he collapses onto the couch and blows into his spirometer. He balances his check-

book, pays for Betsy's broken window, her parking tickets. He returns the silverware to the diner when she was fired. He picks her up at detox, spots bail, first month's, last month's, security deposit. He co-signs, because.

He believes if you get hurt enough at some point you're more gone than back.

**Fit #156**

Outside the hospital, some gristly guy lies on Betsy's hood. The wheel is booted.

"What's this?" she says.

"Parking tickets," he says, and offers his hand to Stan. "You must be the big brother."

"I must be the big brother," Stan says.

"This is Downey," Betsy says. "He must be the boyfriend."

"Like the fabric softener," he adds. He's whorl-bald, forty.

"I paid the tickets," Stan says to his sister. "Didn't you send the check?"

"Must've got lost in the mail?" she says.

"It was cashed," he says.

"Stan likes data," she says. "He enters it for a living."

"*Wild*," Downey says.

"He's applied to be a manager," she says. During a recent morning jaunt, Stan found a penny on the sidewalk. The raise would let him breathe easier into the spirometer, steady the ping pong ball. Let this tarnished cent be the answer to his ahems!

"You know the Power Pose?" Downey asks. "All managers need to. Lean over the table, or back in your chair. The key is to take up as much space as possible." Downey leans forward, grimaces, and rubs his back. "You both get the idea."

Stan looks over at Betsy. She's leaning away, too.

"Mind giving us a lift?" Downey asks.

"I didn't drive," Stan says.

"Stan walks whenever he can," Betsy says. His favorites were the

5ks: Walk Now for Autism, Make Strides Against Hunger, Light the Night Walk for Leukemia, Walk Your A.S. Off for Ankylosing Spondylitis. Or a just-because around the block.

“Thanks for asking about Mom,” Betsy says.

“How is she, by the way?” Downey says.

“Stan stepped on a crack,” Betsy says. “Broke his mother’s back.”

“She tripped over a hose,” Stan says.

“They give her Valium?” Downey says. “Magical stuff, that Valium.” He holds up a little bottle from his pocket and rattles it like a hinting snake. “Reaggravated an old quarry injury at Midas, moving tires,” he says. “She really think that, Bets?”

“Mom and Dad have always believed in stuff like that—*don’t open an umbrella indoors, don’t swallow your gum...* They really think I won’t get married because when I was six I didn’t lift my feet when we drove over some train tracks.”

“We should get married just to stick it to them,” Downey laughs.

Betsy looks in the car, “Where’s Pfenny? You didn’t pick her up?”

“Um?” Downey says and kicks the yellow boot.

Apparently, Downey has a kid from a previous marriage, named Pfennig. German currency is a family tradition, which Downey explains as they walk—Downey is *Mark*, his Dad *Reich*, Grandpa *Franc*, Aunt *Thaler* aka Auntie Thal...

### Fit #99

There have been 155 fits to date. Slips, mixed/missed/ineffective anti-convulsants, light flickering through Venetian blinds, over-tiredness, dreams she swore were real, a difficult crossword, standing too fast, an unexpected jalapeño, menstrual cramps, a roller coaster, a sneeze, an itch she couldn’t scratch, television, bumper cars, hopscotch, excitement, surprise, hunger, hazard lights, a disco ball at prom, a ceiling fan on a lazy afternoon, low blood sugar, too much sugar, a change in barometric pressure, an ice cream brain freeze, chewing gum, the smell of glue, alarm clocks, ticking clocks, even one from the erratic squawks of migrating geese, or maybe it was the way their shadows rippled over

the lawn...

But the worst fit: the undercooked muffin in the incubator. A boy. Betsy was only a talcum-powdered seventeen. She'd pushed and pushed, then clenched and trembled. The baby lost oxygen, distressed. Dad hugged Mom as she beat her fists against his chest. "This is *not* your fault," he said while doctors sedated Betsy and cut the child out. Mom and Dad chose adoption. Stan wished he wasn't born. He kicked the air, clicking his ankle, like a pen, or a nervous habit. Dad pulled his hair in the hall. Mom rubbed Betsy's feet as she lay in bed, palm on the apparatus that finished what she couldn't, palm over what was inside it and no longer hers, incompleting whimpers that Stan pictured as semi-circles, scythes of sound.

"It's not *my* choice," she said later. "Nothing ever is." The monitor beeped. Betsy pinched her arms. "Maybe I'm dreaming." She pinched and pinched.

Stan pinched his arms, too. He set up *Sorry!* on purpose. They didn't play.

"When I saw him," Betsy said. "It was like something new."

"He is new," Stan said. "You did that."

"I didn't." She bit her nails. "I can't do anything." The monitor beeped. Her pupils crossed and uncrossed. The monitor beeped. The monitor beeped.

"I saw things differently is what I meant," Betsy said.

"Tell me what it's like," Stan said.

"It's gone now," she said.

## Fit #52

There was the one during soccer—from a head ball. After the game, they stopped for ice cream. Stan wanted coffee-flavored but Mom shook her head, "It'll stunt your growth." The boot cast itched. His nuts tightened, thinking of his skateboard, his ankle's *pop* like a baritone kernel. His armpits were raw from the crutches. Deodorant stung. When he woke, his body smelled of some dankness, some sinus-opening pungency. He was aging, souring, dying. It worsened on hot days. Humidity brought

out the worst in people.

Betsy read the menu with a hand over an eye, like the pledge of allegiance. The body could be in opposition to itself: pigeon-toed and duck-footed, bow-legged and knock-kneed, cross- and wall-eyed. Closing one interrupted her own argument. Stan crossed his eyes until he got migraines, taking liquid aspirin because he couldn't do pills, not like Betsy could. The hand over her eye was a tough one for him to swallow.

"Tell me what it's like," he said.

"Like an optical illusion," she said. "Like the Penrose Stairs."

Stan looked at them in algebra class, the impossible objects. His brain tried to fit a square peg into a round hole, tug-of-warring itself. It made him wary. He didn't want to trust anything. Seeing is not believing. He didn't know where the objects began or ended—the Penrose Stairs, the Devil's Fork, the Impossible Cube—these inexplicable geometries.

### Fit #156

Science Day Camp at the elementary school, the Principal's Office:

Pfenny sits in a chair, hugging her knees beside a cop and lab-coated counselor.

"Your daughter," the counselor bleats, "held her horseshoe magnet like a gun!"

"She also made a firearm noise in the direction of another camper," the cop says.

"Like *bang-bang*?" Downey asks.

"It was more *kapow*!" the officer says, "which suggests a higher caliber."

"You shouldn't be teaching onomatopoeias at this age," the counselor says.

"She just has a very vivid imagination is all," Betsy says.

Pfenny has a magenta birthmark on her forehead. Mugginess rises behind Stan's eyes, thinking of Liz. The girl is silent, still—anything she says or does can be used against her in a court of law. "I read her her

rights,” the cop says.

“You *what?*” Betsy says.

Stan leans on the doorjamb and toes his ABCs.

“Someone has to do the parenting,” the counselor interjects.

Betsy covers Pfenny’s ears. She contracts, as if preparing for a violent expansion into limby hysterics. As a kid, Mom referred to her fits as “episodes,” and Stan pictured Betsy in a cartoon—that’s where she went each time. But this wasn’t that.

Downey Power Poses forward just enough so that the counselor leans back.

“How about I hard-boil an egg under your cocksucking eye, bud?” he says.

Stan looks at Betsy’s lump. A soup ladle lodges in his throat.

“Nobody’s raising anything other than this kid,” the cop says.

Stan remembers Betsy skating on “sherbet” (the frozen quarry water’s blue-green rock flour, dusk’s muddled orange-red reflection). “Time to go!” Mom would shout, “Come back!” But Betsy looped and looped, stopping hard to kick up “freezer burn.” What can he do about this lump? He’s already done too much as it is. Who hurt her first after all?

Pfenny looks at Stan. He forms a discreet finger gun at the counselor and mouths *kapow!*

She smiles.

Next, Stan’s body feels squeezed. Everything clenches and cramps. He’s on the floor, eyes bulging, tongue popping, ears stuffed with carpet. An electrical storm sizzles through his motherboard. He sparks, short-circuits, sweats. He’s buckled with one giant car seat. Hell! It’s as if he’s choking on air. His limbs these revolting fascists! Mutiny! He gurgles, garbles, drools. His mind races exclamation points like a stuck key on his computer’s word processor: !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! His body is a firework.

This is what she must feel like.

How horrible, this powerlessness! This kind of fear could make you do very desperate things. He’s never come so close to it—not with

one thousand spirometers, not on any spectrum of purple. To have no control of yourself, your occupancy, or lack of.

The taser quits. Stan's cuffed, read his rights. So is Downey. He's on the ground beside Stan, yelping about his back as the cop torques and cuffs his hands behind him. The counselor sits, rubbing his head nearabout where Betsy might've.

### **Fit #33**

The Fire Safety Trailer began to fill with smoke—a simulation, the firefighter explained, so the students could come as close to the truth without being actually inflicted. Each child crawled beneath the humid white vapor, feeling fake doors for pretend heat. At the other end, another fireman helped them out a window with an oval Tot Finder sticker—the one Stan had on his bedroom window—and whenever he saw its logo of the firefighter carrying the child he thought of his sister.

Later that day, more sirens—but not a fire truck's.

One student continued to Roll after Stopping and Dropping—perhaps it was the feel of the white vapor, or taste of the white vapor, or temperature of the white vapor, or smell of the white vapor, or the idea of what the white vapor represented, or nothing.

“All the kids make fun of me,” Stan said after school, “because of her stupid episodes.”

Dad raked the soap bar along Stan's upper teeth. His sob took on the shape of bubbles, rainbow-skinned and reflecting himself upside-down. Stan would spend the next two days spinning the soap in his palms to erase his teeth marks.

“Somebody must've spilled the salt,” Mom said, “or walked under a ladder.”

“And who's goddamn fault is it her eyes look like that anyhow?” Dad said.

“*Harold,*” Mom gasped.

At the end of the hall, Betsy watched Stan's bubbles with a hand over one eye.

**Fit #156**

Stan is detained on Suspicion to Commit Hostility under Title XI, Section 213 of the PATRIOT Act, re: Oral, Written, or Gestured Communications. He's interrogated: Do you overly clench your fists when reciting the Pledge of Allegiance? What's your opinion on the USA? Ever visit a website or rally that revolved around anti-West sentiments? Have you ever burned a flag or watched a video of someone burning a flag? Do you enjoy camping, prayer, a strict regimen? Do you eat meat? Do you eat vegetables? Do you act alone?

Yes, he acts alone, most of his life. Liz. Those pursed lips, maybe pursing around the guy who has purple condoms. It was too much data to process. He'd memorized 113 decimals of pi. Maybe he just wasn't fit for love, unconditioned to the unconditional. He didn't have ripe purple lungs for it. Love's loss reacted in him like a noxious fume.

Then he wonders: would a Hostile trip his own defenseless kin?

"It was an accident," Stan says.

"What was?" the cop says.

"Everything," he says. "Since the Big Bang."

"Did you just overly enjoy saying *Big Bang*?" the cop asks. "Do you find joy in fully-automatic onomatopoeias, like *ratatata!* or *brakka-brakka!?*"

"I'm not a Hostile," Stan says. "I'm barely a brother."

The cop shakes a fist. "If I find out you're so much as a treasonous exhibitionist," he says, "and that gesture was a venting of your anti-West opinion—of which you are most certainly *not* entitled to here..."

Back in his cell, he sits on the concrete bench, alphabetizing the air. Downey is placed in the adjacent cell after his questioning. He lies on the bench and exhales, knuckling his back. "I'm not as young as I used to be," Downey groans.

"What did you do?" Stan asks.

"I didn't do anything," he says. "The counselor moved first. It was self defense, I swear."

"That's not what I mean," Stan says.

Downey watches Stan's toe stop. "I didn't know how bad she needs

those pills,” he says. “I didn’t know how easy it was for her to—my grandmother called it *falling sickness*. You ever have a hard time kicking something? I’m in a good deal of pain, too.”

Stan begins to lift his fist, some onomatopoeia, when the cop appears.

“Uzzle,” he says. “Visitor.” He escorts Stan to the glass partition.

It’s Pfenny.

“Hello,” Stan says into the phone. She doesn’t respond. The phone is too big for her head. “Whatever you say or do won’t be used against you in a court of law,” he adds. He glances at the birthmark, the magenta of a broken heel. Liz used to chew her toothbrush...

“You scared?” Pfenny says, her voice small in his ear.

“Why?” Stan lies.

“You look like you’re going to cry.”

“I’m a little scared,” he says. “I’m scared of a lot of things, actually.”

“Like what?”

“Like things you don’t know if they’re there or not.”

“Know what I do when I get scared? I show my horn.”

“Your horn?”

Pfenny puts her thumb against the birthmark. She makes a fist and then extends her pinky—this sign-languaged bone. “My horn can pierce the sky,” she says, bucking her head up and up and up. She lowers her hand, “You try.”

He does.

Pfenny giggles, “You don’t have a horn, silly.” She drops the phone and Betsy appears.

“Why did you do that?” she asks. “It’s not like you.”

Stan shrugs. He feels something in the lining of his pocket—the sidewalk penny. Some luck. “This is going to kill Mom,” he says. “What will the neighbors say?”

“I know what,” she says. “There goes Betsy again. She’s corrupted her nice brother.”

“That’s not true,” Stan says.

“It is,” she says. “No matter what I do, it’s wrong,” she says. “Didn’t

you notice how Mom and Dad never even assumed I stepped on the crack? Because they don't consider me their kid. I can't break her back, Stan. Because I've broken her heart."

"You haven't," he says.

"I have." She buries her face in her hands.

"How did you bump your head?" Stan asks.

"It's my life, Stan," she says. "Let me live it."

"I don't know what you see in him."

"You don't know what I see at all."

"Why *him*?"

But it's in her eyes—those pupils uncross long enough to agree on one thing: Pfenny. Maybe old wives' tales worked backwards, too? Maybe if you lost a child, you *gained* a tooth? Grief can be an extra bone. Maybe that's what the lump was.

"She's not him," Stan says.

Betsy lowers her head, "I know." Her angular shoulders arch and look like umbrella stands. "He's in middle school now. Maybe getting his learner's permit. I hope he's good at math. I'm not. I hope he didn't get that from me."

"I'll call Dad," Stan replies, but she's already hung up the phone.

### Fit #1

There was a conception, followed by many other conceptions.

The first conception arose because the baby's heart rate was higher than 140 bpm. Elaine felt the flutterings of femininity within her. "It's a girl," she told her husband. "I know it." She leaned over and pinched Stan's tiny knobby chin. "Would you like a little sister, my Stanza?" she sweet-talked. At three, Stan communicated in vowels. "Yah," he said.

When Harold asked how she knew, she offered a corroborating conception: the bump.

"Stan sat low and round. Look how high and wide this bump is. It looks like an egg. She's in my hips, too." More conceptions followed: Elaine knocked on wood, threw salt over her left shoulder, carried a rabbit's foot on her keychain, a plastic horseshoe in her purse, looked

for four leaf clovers in the yard barefoot. She crossed her fingers.

“What’s gotten into you?” Harold asked.

“I’m just worried,” she said.

“Why? You weren’t worried about Stan,” Harold said, bouncing his son on his knee.

“I’m older,” Elaine said. “There’s more to worry about now in general.”

A major conception came toward the end. Elaine’s face grew pallid. Dark splotches of skin leoparded her arms and thighs. “She’s stealing my beauty!” Elaine wept. “I’m ugly! I don’t want to be a literal old wife!” Three weeks before her due date, her skin flaked. She found hair on her stomach and nipples. Little polyps of skin budded on her elbows. Her teeth shifted. Her upper lip darkened, acne on her temples. Spider veins crackled her calves. Stretch marks like old burns. Elaine worried harder, thinking jealous, resentful thoughts. She was young, a mother. She was frightened. Fear can make you do desperate things.

The baby needed to come out.

She tried to induce with acupuncture, then spicy foods. A long hair curled from her chin. She walked up stairs, took primrose oil tablets. A skin tag blossomed on her eyelid. She tried nipple stimulation, which Harold raised a hand and said, “I volunteer!” This could create long, intense contractions, the doctor warned. And it did. Massaging her hairy areolae, one struck her so hard and sudden she pitched forward and broke three teeth on the coffee table. Harold drove to the hospital, Elaine sucking a bloody washcloth. “Something’s not right!” she cried. These contractions felt like every menstrual cramp she’d ever had totomed, set on fire. It knuckled her pelvis and raked her spine. Her screams looked like spider veins.

In the waiting room, Stan sat with his worried grandmother, clapping and grinning.

In the operating room, doctors prepped for a C-Section.

“The baby is in distress,” the doctor said. “The heart is slowing. She needs oxygen.”

“Don’t leave me!” Elaine said and grabbed Harold’s hand. “Don’t ever go!”

Out, the newborn cried and screamed and wrenched its fists. “Congratulations,” the doctor said. He stopped. The baby went quiet and still in his hands. Then her legs shot straight, then jerked to her belly. Her torso lurched. It looked like jolted sit-ups. It happened twice, then a third time, then a fourth. Her little face looked calm and elsewhere.

“What’s happening?” Elaine and Harold asked.

They rushed the child out and the doctor pulled the mask from his face. But his story just didn’t fit. They drove over train tracks six years later and Betsy didn’t lift her feet, she didn’t jerk them toward her belly this time. That was what they chose to believe.

### Fit #156

When you become a parent, you draw lines—things you can no longer do, when to call it a night, how much you should spend, who to spend time with, etc. You change out of necessity. You construct thresholds out of responsibility. You don’t cross them out of loyalty. But sometimes you do. This is how a child learns that a line was once crossed—a parent will do the unexpected to avoid hypocrisy. Dad should’ve let Stan sit in that cell and mull over what he’d done—and how far back does this “doing” go? Yet, Dad drives right over.

“Explain to me again,” Dad says to the cop, “how onomatopoeias are suspicious?”

“They suggest,” the cop says.

“Americans don’t *suggest*,” Dad says. “They goddamn *do*. In the Seventies we had American radicalists—like the Weather Underground, the Black Panthers, the Symbionese Liberation Army—bombing, shooting, and kidnapping *other Americans*. If my boy was a Hostile, you’d know it.” Released, Dad asks Stan, “Your sister put you up to this?” Stan shakes his head. Dad reads his face, nods, “You tell her we’d like to meet this new friend of hers. And Mom will be home tomorrow. We’ll keep this whole misunderstanding between us, okay?” Then he drives away with a finger gun out the window, firing into the air.

Inside, Betsy and Downey touch palms through the glass partition, and Stan can tell that promises are being made. Downey's shoulders curl, shameful. He won't meet Betsy's eyes. But he makes promises. He makes apologies, excuses. And Betsy accepts them all. Seeing them both cry, Pfenny bucks her horn, trying to pierce the sky.

Downey can't make bail. Betsy raises her brow to Stan. He shrugs and pats his pockets.

So Downey spends the night. "A sleepover," Betsy tells Pfenny.

The three of them walk to the park. Betsy and Stan sit on the swings. Stan toes his ABCs. Betsy covers an eye to watch Pfenny twirl on the roundabout with other children, hang barefoot upside-down from the monkey bars beside a boy, giggling.

"You ever want kids, Stan?" she asks.

"Did he hit you?" Stan asks.

Betsy turns and snorts a laugh, "Jesus, Stan. No! He's got a bad back. Did you see how lamely he hit that counselor? Hurt himself more. I fell in the kitchen. It was another." She looks at the dirt patch below her feet. "He's been taking all kinds of pills now. He's the first person I've ever met who has maybe taken more than me."

"He's not a good person," Stan says.

"He bought me a helmet when he apologized. Just like old times, right?"

Stan pulls the sidewalk penny out of his pocket and drops it into one of Pfenny's shoes. "Dad said Mom's coming home tomorrow. They want to meet Downey. Maybe you should tell Pfenny the lump is just your own horn sprouting?"

"Time to go!" Betsy yells to Pfenny, putting the back of a hand to her eyes.

The high school is hosting a Walk to End Alzheimer's. Dusk, and volunteers light paper lanterns that each walker carries, written with the names of diagnosed loved ones. Stan likes to draft people, pass them like flatulent NASCAR. His competitive bone is as big as the middle ear stirrup. The high school principal marches around the track, sweated in awareness ribbons. The Alzheimer's ribbon is pur-

ple and Stan locates it, breathless.

One of the volunteers gives Pfenny her own paper lantern, just-because, and she climbs up and down the bleachers with it, aglow. Stan and Betsy walk around the track. One of Betsy's eyes goes one way, while the other takes a different route.

"Why do you walk so much now?" she asks.

"Liz always thought I should drop a few."

Betsy covers her eye, "You need to let it go."

"I can't," Stan sighs.

"I can't get custody," she says. "I can barely take care of myself, Stan. He can change."

"We all can," Stan says, and he chooses to believe it.

They go around and around.

Pfenny walks behind the mascot now, jumping as if she's going to step on its foam tail.

Betsy pinches her arms. "I'm still not dreaming," she says. "You do so much for me."

"I do what I can," he says.

"I don't know if I even say thank you," Betsy says.

"I compute data," Stan says. "Statistics, anomalies, inconsistencies, accidents. Sometimes it feels like there isn't really anything to be thankful for."

"Oh!" Betsy says and sits in the middle of the track. Stan's gut vertigoes. He recalls the fair, when she fell hard. He falls with her now. Walkers veer around them, like a current around two embedded stones in Salt Creek. Stan is there, ready to grab her tongue, catch her head. But she's not fitting. She's reaching for her lower back.

Stan's next reaction is to locate the girl. But he cannot simultaneously watch where he's going and find Pfenny amongst the walkers, curious to know if she landed on a crack zippering through the track. Only Betsy can do both at once.

### **Fit #78**

It was either the summer before or after Stan's first year of college. It

might've been the summer Betsy was arrested for vandalizing a DEAD END sign with a question mark. When she wore a helmet due to the excessive fits and cocktails of meds. It might've been the summer that Stan decided to major in Occupational Therapy or change it to Statistics. It was the summer where Dad's knuckles bled raw from knocking on wood, and Mom threw out all the mirrors in the house because she just couldn't take it anymore.

It was the summer of various mortgages, several fires that scorched the dry crops, covered with hay after, soaking up the pallid ashy mire that gave Oolitic this damp, campfirey musk. It reminded Stan of the Tot Finder sticker on his window.

It was the summer, as was every summer, of the county fair.

It was the summer where Betsy had her ninth fit in as many weeks. She'd been in the Fun House with her friends. They ran out screaming for help. Mom and Dad and Stan went in, then the operator, a policeman, a fireman, a medic. Nobody could find her, lost in the mazes, the music. The operator couldn't even find his way out to shut it off. Stan got lost in a room of doors, feeling them for something, all but one locked. He passed the rotating cylinder tunnel, a frantic Mom and Dad, a sweaty medic, a head-scratching policeman. He passed them again. He passed into different rooms with dead-ends but none of them with question marks. Then the room of optical illusions—running up and up and up the Penrose Stairs. He couldn't negotiate them like Betsy could, and he wondered if she'd traversed them and just vanished to some place where her mind could form the edges of things and complete them. The impossible trident on the wall hurt his brain, and it was a hurt that she carried always. What do we do when the world, what you see, stops making sense? Stan could hear others faintly calling through the thin Alice in Wonderland-ish walls, looking for Betsy. He double-backed, triple-backed, returned to the same rooms again and again, and eventually passed into the hall of mirrors.

"Betsy?" Stan yelled. Some mirrors made him short and fat or tall and thin, his forehead as big as a shoebox, one eye like a basketball. This convexity and concavity, the way light was a bully, these were the

ways in which Betsy probably saw herself. “Betsy?” He leaned on a mirror, lifted his ankle and toed the alphabet. “Betsy?”

Then she appeared.

Then she appeared.

Then she appeared.

Maybe one hundred sisters surrounded him. He couldn't tell which was real. Some were thinner, shorter, taller, fatter—parallel universes. She'd had paint chips in her hair like a paper doll chain after her head *thonked* the deck. Here was an impossible object, helmeted, strabismal, a hand over her left eye. Her nose was bleeding—that was new. “Stan,” she said, woozy. Her voice—she was scared. He realized that maybe one hundred of him were all looking back at her with a concerned look. All of the universes were unfair. If he'd had his inhaler he'd inhale. The bloody nose indicated an unknown. It was the summer of indications.

She fell or sat very hard on the floor. “Stan,” she said again, her voice quivering.

It was the summer that either Stan came home and missed everything, or hadn't yet gone and couldn't wait to get away. It was the summer that he broke mirror after mirror, racking up hundreds of years of bad luck, to find the single Betsy of this universe, the one he wouldn't trade for any other, because this was his sister. Stan's ankle clicked with each toe-driven shatter. He broke and broke and broke for her. He told her to stay put. She didn't need to come back. He'd come to her. He feared if it was her choice, she would not return.