Once there was a hag who was really a princess, who lived in a storage unit that was really a castle. In summer the unit was very hot, so she kept the corrugated metal door open to catch the breeze, and set a fan just outside on the asphalt of her yard. The asphalt was really a beach, the grains of sand fine and white, silken as the hair of a baby, for in fact, the sand really was a baby. Most of the time, it lay very still; it was a good baby, not fussy at all, for inside it was a dewy flower, and flowers are happy unless they are being cut away from the earth and tied with twine or rubber bands to other flowers, then imprisoned in vases, soon to droop and brown and be thrown into a large, foul-smelling plastic bin. There was just such a bin outside the hag’s door. Inside, though it was full of things like shriveled flowers and old tax returns, the bin was empty.

The hag who was really a princess was unhappy in her castle, because what good is a princess with a castle unless there is a prince somewhere, dropping a sweaty T-shirt on the floor or putting together a lounge chair ordered off the internet or snoring like a house on fire? For a prince’s snores are really, in the end, the smoke of burning things, photo albums and funny gifts and Post-Its on the refrigerator. But there had been no prince for ten thousand years. The hag had looked for one in vain, among the frogs and snails that lived nearby, and especially she had looked for one each time it rained and the little square of grass she had laid as a welcome mat at the entrance to the castle grew sodden, and worms slithered up from the loosened soil and lay there panting from the effort, enjoying the soft caresses of the rain. The worms seemed promising. But when the sun came out again, they disappeared, or dried out and died and turned to brittle twigs.

The hag determined to go on a quest, for it appeared that no prince was going to wander past the storage unit and be struck dumb by her beauty, which anyway was difficult to see unless he had been drugged with the right potion by another hag, and in that case he was likely to be taken already, locked up in that other hag’s storage unit. So she put on her old coat that smelled of mothballs and moldy bread, a coat that wished it were really a magic cloak; but unfor-
tunately for the coat, it was really only a horse blanket, and though it could wish as much as it wanted, nothing would be granted to it, and the horse was wandering the earth elsewhere.

The hag packed a basket filled with objects that might tempt a prince to come to her, if she encountered one and he happened to be shy. There were several red, wet-mouthed smiles wrapped in tissue paper, a bottle of potion that required no corkscrew, and an extra large five-cheese pepperoni pizza. There was a small blue bird that could startle out at a moment’s notice, become a handkerchief, and flutter prettily to the ground. It was the usual stuff, nothing fancy, but she couldn’t afford the higher-end basket, which came with seasonal fruit and flattering lighting and chocolates that turned to nipples at the touch of a prince’s tongue. Still she set out, hopeful and a little nervous about venturing into the woods alone.

After several months of traveling, sleeping on the ground and sometimes finding shelter with a witch or inside a hollow tree, the hag spotted a prince. He was meditating in a little clearing where a unicorn was peacefully grazing. Though the hag was generally scornful of superstition, of signs and so-called miracles, the unicorn struck her as a good omen. The prince was so handsome, his handsome legs so defined beneath his tights, his equally handsome arms and hands oiled and shining like armor, that the hag was afraid to approach him at first. She watched him meditate for an hour or so, and when he finally opened his eyes she got up the courage to move toward him, quietly flipping open the wooden basket lid on its little hinge so the blue bird could startle out and flutter prettily to the ground. Which it did.

“Allow me,” the prince said, bounding to his feet to pick up the handkerchief. He returned it to her with a graceful bow, sweeping his cap off his head and then holding it against his handsome chest. Once he had drunk most of the potion and eaten the still-piping-hot pizza and sampled a few of the red, wet-mouthed smiles, he was hers. He was a very young prince, it hardly needs to be pointed out; he had never seen such wonders as the hag who was really a princess showed him.

The prince and the princess returned to her castle and lived there happily ever after, though ever after was actually a fairly short time, only a year or so. The princess kept a good supply of potion on hand, and there were frequent deliveries of pizza, but the wet-mouthed smiles were growing scarce. The market could not keep them in stock, so she often had to make do with tight smiles, or smiles of feigned interest, and sometimes there were none at all. Once upon a time, the prince had seen the hag for the princess she actually was. Now, he had begun to see that inside the princess a smaller, hag-like creature hunkered
down, with messy hair that hissed and wailed and sometimes tied itself into knots. No self-respecting princess would allow herself such terrible hair days. And it turned out that the prince, so handsome and loving and kind, housed a weak, pale worm deep in the apple of his soul. It weakly but steadily ate its way out of him, while the hag inside the princess inside the hag began to grow like a glioblastoma.

One sunny morning, the prince ate his breakfast, made now mostly from leftover frowns and sullen glances, then stepped outside, smoked a quick cigarette, and ground it into the sand with his princely boot. He called for the unicorn with a secret signal, and was on its back and gone in an instant. Behind him, the castle filled with smoke. The hag ran to and fro, waving her cloak and crying. The tears hissed as they fell, and left little holes in the dishtowels and sheets. In a fit of rage and grief, the hag strangled the princess inside her until the princess turned purple and her eyes bulged and her shining hair fell out in big clumps and she shit all over herself and lay still forever.

Out of the princess’s shit crawled a teeny old woman, slightly dazed. She blinked at the hag and held out to her a jar filled with warm water. At the bottom of the jar lay a handful of golden seeds.

“Wait for these to sprout, and then plant them in your garden, and they will bring you happiness,” she said.

“Impossible. Nothing will ever make me happy again,” said the hag, more than ever wary of superstitions, of signs and so-called miracles.

But this being a tale, nothing was impossible. “They will make you happy,” the teeny old woman insisted.

Which, eventually, after another ten thousand years, they did. The hag’s garden flourished with all manner of strange and interesting flowers. The basket that had accompanied her on her last journey was now set into the earth, beside a stone fountain whose water tinkled like fairy pee, and was a perfect spot to grow basil.

And what of the blue bird, that could startle out and float down so prettily, inspiring the gallantry and solicitousness of strangers? It flew off to live on a nearby light pole that was actually a tall, ancient tree. It sang sometimes in an unpleasant voice, sounding like a hinge that needed oiling. In cold weather, it tucked its small blue head under one wing. It may have wept, but even the mites who inhabited it could not tell if that was so. Every year, during summer thunderstorms, worms wriggled to the surface of the earth, and the bird watched them luxuriating in the garden, beneath the soft caresses of the rain, and then it swooped down to impale them.