Call Me When You Land

By

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INTRODUCTION

When I was a child, we moved often. I attended two middle schools, three high-schools, and always felt like the new kid. After college graduation, I loaded up a U-Haul and drove it from Ann Arbor to Los Angeles, and later, after relocating back to Michigan, I moved to different neighborhoods and into new apartments every year, then to San Francisco, then to Nashville. If I've lived somewhere too long, I get restless. I've lived, at various times, in six different states, in countless apartments and houses. Actually, I did try to count them: it's around twenty. I'm not sure if this is significant to my writing, but it feels as though it might be, now that I can see what I've written over the past two years placed together into a collection. In class, Lorrie Moore said that it's only after you've written something, often years later, that you can understand it. This feels true to me, and I'm not sure I can fully understand what I've written yet, but this is my attempt to try.

Though I've moved often, the states that I grew up in feel the most like home: Minnesota and Michigan. But because I rarely stayed in a single town for an extended period of time, in many ways, nowhere feels like home. My sensibilities are a strange hybrid of West Coast and Midwestern. Despite having lived in California for almost a decade, I still don't consider myself fully Californian. And though I've been told I sometimes pronounce words with the telltale long o, I certainly don't feel fully Minnesotan; I have no family there and we left when I was an adolescent. Michigan feels the most like home—the northern landscape most familiar—but I spent most of my childhood years elsewhere, and as soon as I could, I left. I'm not sure that I feel part of any specific identity or culture, and one of the great joys and regrets of my life so far is that I'm always meeting new friends and discovering new communities, yet I'm distant from

familiar landscapes and people. Like many of my characters, I'm still searching for home, for connection, and I'm often weighing what is gained and what is lost when one leaves the region one comes from.

Though I haven't lived in the Midwest for many years, growing up in "The Land of Ten-Thousand Lakes" and "The Great Lakes State" was formative. I may not feel rooted to a specific town or community, but the landscape, specifically the water, triggers feelings of home. I became a competitive swimmer at the age of eight, and as a child, I competed at the state and national level. Swimming, both in pools and in lakes, was an important part of my childhood, and as an adult, I still seek out water wherever I live. Throughout my life, swimming has been a way of finding solitude, of developing physical and mental endurance, and it's been a social activity, with bodies of water serving as settings for parties and romance. As a teenager, I became a lifeguard, and this gave me a heightened awareness of water's potential to harm. Whenever I swim in open water—rivers, lakes, oceans—I'm humbled by the power of nature, by currents and riptides, freezing temperatures and unknowable depths.

Now that I've placed these stories together, I can see that water flows throughout the collection. "Penitentes" and "Reservoir" feature the swampy canals and ponds of my Minnesota childhood. The Great Lakes are central to the settings of both "Today, Today, Today," and "Crawl Space." Characters meet up at pool parties in "Shelby Drives" and "Rooftop Pool, Los Angeles," while Lake Tahoe features prominently in "Desolation Wilderness."

The danger, mystery and power of water are evoked, as well. In "Practice," Layla fears the underwater subway because it runs one-hundred feet beneath the San Francisco Bay and there could be an earthquake. In "Crawl Space," a child almost drowns his younger sibling in a manmade pool. In "Desolation Wilderness," Gil mentions that drownings are common in Lake Tahoe.

Aside from the thematic element of water, these stories are also perhaps all about loneliness and the passage of time, about leaving or returning home, about feeling adrift and unmoored in the world, and about the search for connection. In "Today, Today, Today," a young man travels to the town of his birth in search of information about his dead father. In "Shelby Drives," an artist named Layne returns home, and after many years, sees a friend who changed the trajectory of Layne's life. In "Crawl Space," a lonely adolescent girl with a broken family relocates from California to a rural island in Michigan and searches for friends. In "Practice," after suffering a trauma, a young woman searches for emotional support from her fiancé, her mother, and from a neighbor child. In "Desolation Wilderness," a young woman returns to a family vacation destination after moving to Albuquerque years earlier, and tries to connect with her brother's ex-girlfriend and a grieving local man. In "Penitentes" a woman returns to her childhood state of Minnesota to comfort a dying friend from her youth.

Until I began to write this introduction, I didn't see this parallel from my life to my work, that these common feelings of dislocation and loneliness are heightened when one relocates. I've titled this collection *Come Closer* in hopes that the title encompasses some of these themes.

I'm still unsure why I feel compelled to move frequently; most likely it's banal—humans often perpetuate difficult childhood experiences. Or perhaps I just crave the adventure. But for my parents, the choice to move felt urgent and necessary. They both grew up in dysfunctional homes with no financial stability, and they wanted better for me. We moved wherever there was opportunity. Though I was hyper-aware of money, I had a solidly middle-class childhood and excellent education; my mother was a fifth-grade teacher. As I grew older and my parents spoke more freely in front of me, I began to realize that many of their experiences had been horrific. They, on the other hand, laughed as they told their stories, stories that sounded like nightmares, stories involving hunger and poverty, death, abuse, and fear. But as they told these stories, they'd

sometimes laugh so hard my mother would tear up and my father's face would turn red. The sad stuff was just the background; it was only the context. The real stories were about people: ridiculous yet resourceful; crazy yet sometimes wise; desperate people in difficult circumstances trying their hardest.

Now I can see that humor was my parents' way of coping, and now I share their belief that humor makes life bearable, but as a child, I didn't get it. I would sit, stunned, unable to understand what was so funny. Or rather, I did think the stories were humorous, but I was so bewildered by the context that I found them more tragic than funny. I usually didn't laugh. My parents often accused me of being too serious.

But slowly, over time, like most children, I became fluent in my family's language: a blending of the tragic and the absurd; an appreciation for the ways in which sad people can be so very funny, both deliberately and accidentally; and an understanding that life often forces funny situations or characters upon us, even while we're in the midst of grief. I also learned a valuable trick of storytelling: humor can allow you to tell sad stories without depressing everyone around you, without losing friends.

What I think this might mean for my work is that I find it hard to write truthfully about life without humor, and even more difficult to write about death or illness or loneliness without some levity. For a while, in college, and for a time after, I tried to write what I thought were serious stories. They sounded nothing like me and they lacked energy, the spark that makes stories feel alive. Once I allowed myself to write humor when it felt right, I found my voice.

Another breakthrough I had in trusting my instincts occurred when I allowed myself to experiment with first-person narration. In school, I was taught not to use first-person, that it was appropriate only when a compelling, unique voice grabbed you by the throat. The example tossed around was *The Catcher in the Rye*, and so I feared my protagonists, mostly female, were not the best characters to tell their stories in first-person. I also got the sense that, in order to

show you were a serious writer, you had to use third-person. I hadn't yet read enough to know that this simply wasn't true. For years I wrote primarily in close-third, and while I know it is perhaps most flexible, and though I plan to continue to write in third-person for future projects, first-person allowed me to find my way into this particular collection.

Storytelling is a part of my family's culture, and perhaps because of this, I've always been drawn to natural storytellers, to people who always have anecdotes or crazy tales, to those who monologue and talk with their hands. Many of my best friends are excellent storytellers. I come from a loud family, particularly on my father's side, and my in-laws are boisterous Italians. I could never get used to having to shout in order to be heard, so I became an avid listener. I love the rhythms of speech, the way a story speeds up when the teller is excited or upset, the way they might start a story, then double back to fill in information they've only just realized you need in order for the punchline to land, for you to see how appalling their enemy is and how they are surely blameless.

As a lover of storytellers and as a lifelong listener, I'm fascinated by the way I simultaneously enjoy a story, while also making periodic adjustments to my understanding of whether or not my friend or family member is a reliable narrator. I don't really believe in reliable narrators, or perhaps I believe we are all reliable, but only in telling our own version of events. Every human, and therefore every storyteller, myself included, has blind spots, and most of us cannot see ourselves clearly. Granted, there is a continuum of self-awareness, and some narrators are better able to judge a situation impartially than others. But I'm also interested in blind spots, in the narrators who remind me of the people I love, who, in their human way, simply cannot see why their brother-in-law hates them, or why their boss fired them, or that their new lover has obviously lost interest. There are risks inherent in using this type of first-person narrator, and I've tried here to walk that fine line, allowing my narrators some blind spots, while taking care not to leave the reader adrift and annoyed. I hope that for the right readers, I've struck a balance.

I'm also interested in my own reactions to difficult or unreliable narrators, and in listening as an exercise in empathy. I think, at its best, good writing can teach empathy, and this is a goal I'm always working toward in my writing. Once I began writing the stories in this collection, most of which are in first-person, I started to feel that there is something important about hearing directly from a person telling her own story, knowing that she is perhaps misguided or unreliable, as we all are, and still finding empathy for her. This has been part of my role as a friend and relative: listening to intelligent, but occasionally delusional people telling me their stories, and still loving them. And this is part of my project here.

Writing these familiar types of characters also allows me to incorporate small mannerisms and memories I have of the people I've loved, both living and dead. And because I've moved around so much, there are always people I am missing. Writing, in a way, allows me to be in conversation with people I care about, to preserve them. Even if it's something as small as the way a person tries on a hat in front of a mirror, for me, writing is an act of love, though I'm not sure it would be interpreted that way by the hat wearer.

I've spoken at length about the ways my life has influenced my writing, but I find it more difficult to discuss the books that influenced me, mainly because I'm not sure which writers I wish I was influenced by and which are actual influences. I'll offer my appreciation and admiration here, and take my best guess at what narratives actually shaped the way I think about telling stories. I admire more writers than I can discuss in an introduction of this length, so I'll focus on some of the things I'm trying to accomplish in my fiction and the writers that I look to as masterful examples. Note: most of the below admired writers overlap into multiple categories, and for the sake of space, I've assigned each writer to only one category.

Many of my stories are set in northern Michigan. For their ability to make both the beauty and the harshness of this landscape come alive, I've always admired Jim Harrison and Ernest Hemingway's Nick Adams stories.

I'm interested in the vulnerability and power of adolescent girls, and in unapologetically making the lives of girls and women the central focus of my fiction. For this, I look to Alice Munro, Toni Morrison, Elena Ferrante, and Lucia Berlin.

Energy on the page excites me, and when I'm writing, I'm always trying to work toward that. I'm not sure I can define this energy; I just know it when I see it. For their remarkable energy on the page, I look to Zadie Smith, Jeffrey Eugenides, and Ottessa Moshfegh. I believe that some of this elusive energy comes from dialogue. I love reading dialogue and I love writing it, and many of the writers I most admire—listed here in all categories—are masters of dialogue.

In addition to energy on the page, I'm also striving to capture the moments in life that feel ecstatic, the brief glimpses of the metaphysical or divine. For this, I admire James Baldwin, Tove Jansson, and Denis Johnson.

As a reader, I'm thrilled by the power of language, by its musicality and ability to surprise. As a writer, I try to write the best sentences I can, to think about diction and word order, variation and rhythm. For their ability to stun me at the sentence level, I return to Vladimir Nabokov, Leonard Michaels, Charles D'Ambrosio, and Lauren Groff.

I often think about the weight of the past, the ways lives are shaped by events, the clarity or nostalgia that arises over time, the feeling of time slowing or speeding up, and the way nonlinear events exist simultaneously in the mind. Time interests me in life and in fiction, and for me, the masters of time are Munro, Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf.

Perhaps what I love most as a reader of fiction are stories that are moving and sad, yet also deeply funny. For me, this combination feels most true to life, and in my work, I'm always trying to write toward this balance. For inspiration, I bow down before Deb Olin Unferth, George

Saunders, Lorrie Moore, and Grace Paley. I may never be able to accomplish what they have, to blend tragedy and humor so gracefully, but I'm thankful they've set the bar so high.

I'll stop here on admired work, but this is only a very small selection of the writers I admire, and the list continues to grow every day. I can only hope that I've been influenced by some of them.

The other thing I'll say about influences is that perhaps what I loved in childhood was as influential to my writing as what I admire now. From my mother, a teacher, I received books often given to young girls (at least in the eighties): the boxed set of Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little Women*, *Pippi Longstocking*, Anne Frank, the Brontës, Jane Austen, and Willa Cather. I adored the female protagonists in these novels and read them multiple times.

My brother is almost eleven years younger than me, and I am the oldest, so growing up, for better or worse, my father, in many ways, treated me like a son. Wanting to share the stories he loved, stories of human courage and adventure and travel, my father gave me books about Shackleton and Lewis and Clark, all of the Tolkien books, Mark Twain, Daniel Defoe, Robert Louis Stevenson, Jules Verne, Jack London.

It has been brought to my attention that many of my stories are about women on the move, women attempting to save or rescue others, and women in wilderness settings. Looking at what I've written in this collection, I think my childhood reading may have contributed to my impulse to blend female protagonists with adventure, risk-taking, and travel. As an adult looking back at the books that I loved as a child and teenager, I'm acutely aware of how many stories there are about men leaving home, exploring, broadening their horizons, having interesting conversations, partying, while the women stay home or seem not to exist at all. But as a child, I didn't notice. It would perhaps be more poignant for me to say that as a young girl, I longed to see myself reflected in these adventure narratives, but because they were dominated by male

protagonists, I couldn't. But the truth is, I could. I did imagine myself crossing oceans, saving lives, setting out on expeditions, taking road trips, taking risks, having epic adventures.

Because so many of my stories are about leaving home or road trips ("Crawl Space," "Today, Today, Today," "Penitentes") or involve outdoor adventures or wilderness areas or physical tests of strength ("Today, Today, Today," "Desolation Wilderness," "Penitentes"), or are about women setting off across the country to rescue or help the people they love ("Today, Today, Today," "Penitentes," "Rooftop Pool, Los Angeles"), it feels important to the adult me that these protagonists are women. I'm interested in writing female characters that are adventurous and strong, and also women that are a bit lost and unmoored ("Crawl Space," "Reservoir," "Rooftop Pool, Los Angeles," "Desolation Wilderness," "Practice"). I hope my fiction is especially exciting to female readers, and that the women in this collection lead them on interesting and surprising adventures.

Like many new kids in many towns, books were my consistent friends. I read under towels at beaches, in cafeterias before I knew with whom to sit, on the bus, under the covers at night with a flashlight. Throughout my life, during times of stress, grief, or loneliness, I've taken refuge in books.

Finishing this thesis during a pandemic has been challenging, but it has also been a reminder of how vital art is in times of uncertainty and fear. Throughout this period of quarantine, friends and family have shared videos of virtual choirs, visual art posted online by museums, recordings of poets reading admired work, online fiction readings, streaming operas from the Met and Shakespeare productions from the Globe, videos of Italian opera singers serenading their neighbors, a photo of a masked ballerina dancing in Times Square. Art makes us feel connected and alive; it shows us that our stories are important and that our lives hold

meaning. Art gives us hope. My wish is that someday one of my stories might offer to a reader something vital.

Crawl Space

For weeks after we arrived in Michigan, I holed up in the backyard bunkhouse and slept on a moldy cot that my father had used as a teenager. The bunkhouse was no more than a shed, repurposed by my father in order to escape his father. Whenever I entered, my lungs ached with a chemical burn from the Raid I sprayed at regular intervals. The wasps I'd evicted were relentless and territorial and, during daylight, forever hovering.

My father had decided to move us to a small island near Detroit, not far from the Canadian border, where we would live for the summer in my grandmother's house. In January, we'd watched as houses near Sacramento succumbed to a great flood, aerial shots showing miles of still, muddy water. Hundreds of shingled roofs peeked just above the surface, like an army of whales coming up for air. We lived then in a dull neighborhood in LA, and in March, four miles from our house, Biggie Smalls, King of New York, was murdered. People said it was the end of an era, the end of rap. We watched footage of a green Suburban parked curbside at Cedars-Sinai, the passenger door dotted with bullet holes. A few weeks later, authorities loaded dozens of bodies into trucks near San Diego, after members of a comet-obsessed cult all committed mass suicide. Inside, they'd looked asleep, each tucked into their own little bunk bed, belly up, like children, black pants and Nikes sticking out from purple diamond-shaped shrouds. I was glad we couldn't see their faces. "Jesus, fuck," my father said. "I need to get you out of this state."

I hadn't seen my grandmother in years. My father had told me she was dying, but each time he visited her, I made excuses involving school and choir practice, then cried for days after he'd left. I pictured her dark curls and glamorous wine-red lips, her long cigarettes and thin white neck that flashed whenever she threw her head back to laugh. When I'd enter a room, even if she was mid-conversation, she'd say, "Hey, toots," and toss me a smile. I loved the smell of her perfume, had burrowed into that scent on my pillow in the months after my mother left, the

months my grandmother had slept next to me in my twin bed because it was the only way I could fall asleep. Before he left to visit her, my father would call a college girl to stay with me, then ask how he'd raised me to be so selfish, how I could be so unconcerned about my grandmother, my grandmother who had dropped everything for me. I never corrected him.

Now, inside her small brick ranch, my grandmother slept all day on the living room sofa. It felt like a stranger's house. The television was always flashing, the volume turned off. Her hair had gone white and her skin had turned a grayish color, and she had nightmares about the war that caused her to scream and cry out in Polish. Sometimes, during these dreams, it was almost impossible to wake her. At night, when her strength permitted, she'd wander from room to room like a ghost. A sharp smell of urine clung to her clothing, and her lips held crusty residue at the corners. I stopped going in the house at night.

Back when my mother lived with us, my father had been in a grunge band, but now his hair grayed at his temples, and he wore a suit to commute each day to the Detroit office of a large flooring company. A hospice aide named Sandy took over the house. She was plump, with brassy short hair and large glasses, and when she wasn't giving my grandmother medicine or helping her to the bathroom, she watched soap operas on mute while munching frozen grapes. Whenever I passed her, she touched my shoulder, shook her head, and said, "Poor thing." I began to wander the island, only returning home to eat and sleep.

During my walks, I would get myself lost inland amid the summer smell of mown grass, and find my way back to the shoreline when the wind changed, when I could follow the scent of dead fish. Vacant, weedy fields sprawled across the north and west sides of the island, while renovated Victorian mansions hogged the south shore, occupied only in summer months by rich people from suburban Detroit. Locals, including my grandmother, lived on the east side, near the ferry docks, where narrow streets led to tree-lined neighborhoods of modest, crumbling homes. When it rained, the septic tanks released a rank smell of sewage. My grandmother's house was

better kept than the other homes on the street because my father paid a handyman and a gardener. Her green lawn and manicured shrubs announced themselves on a block of peeling paint, tarped cars, and dandelions. In LA, it seemed like everyone at my school was richer than we were, but here, for the first time, whenever I stepped out onto the porch and felt the neighbors' eyes on me, I experienced the shame of having more.

Back home I'd been bullied on account of my huge breasts, fat thighs, and unfortunate habit of talking too much, but I was an optimistic thirteen-year-old. I'd hoped to hang around the Santa Monica pier all summer and strum the only four chords I knew, until a talent agent inevitably discovered me, recognized my latent beauty, and cast me as the next love interest of Leonardo DiCaprio. But since those plans had fallen through, I decided to cash in on my status as a Californian; from television I'd learned that, outside of the state, being from LA carried social cachet among teenagers. All I had to do was meet a group of popular kids and they'd make me their leader.

Each of my walks ended at a small bridge, where local teenagers sunned their thin bodies and drank from flasks. They dove into a murky creek from a railing posted with a sign that said *No Diving*. I would walk past them, and spread my towel on the narrow pedestrian path about twenty feet away, near the bottom of the bridge. There I sat, fully clothed, listening to Nirvana, while cars flew across the bridge and sprayed gravel.

Weeks passed, and my grandmother stopped eating. My father and Sandy held hushed conferences in the kitchen. Whenever my grandmother went to use the bathroom, she'd look in my direction, but past me, and then hobble into the hallway, clutching Sandy's arm. Her long neck had disappeared into a hump on her back. She seemed to have shrunk. I stayed away from the house, and instead, I hung around the bridge, though I was still afraid to approach the kids. They spoke with a northern accent and used unfamiliar slang. Mayonnaise, they pronounced *man-aze,* and really, *rilly*. I watched one of the kids with particular interest: a dark-haired boy

with a lighter torso and bronzed arms; a farmer's tan that somehow seemed cool. Each time he glanced anywhere near my direction, I looked down. The other kids called him Jesse.

One afternoon, from behind my sunglasses, I watched him lift a blonde girl from her towel as if she were a large dog or a particularly heavy duffel bag. He carried her, as she writhed and clawed, slippery with tanning oil, and tossed her over the bridge. She stomped up from the river, leaking water from her bikini bottoms, and called him an asshole, and I thought, *yes, what an asshole*, but I also wondered what it would feel like to be singled out by him, to be noticed. I was too young to understand what I might want from his body; I feared it a little; but there was something about hers—the way Jesse kept checking on it like you might a blind spot in traffic. Later, at night, in the shed, on my cot, I thought of them together, and made myself come. After, I fantasized about being thrown off the bridge, of being lifted from the earth, my skin warm and sliding against his chest with each of his footsteps, the calm that would come from someone else deciding where I should be.

At home, there were few rules. As in LA, my father was always at work. I had to be back by seven for dinner. Occasionally, I had to grocery shop if my father was running late. And I had to be in the bunkhouse by midnight. My father had grown up on the island and often said that, unlike in LA, kids here could safely roam.

One evening he'd asked me to buy green beans and milk, and as I stood in the checkout line, I recognized the cashier as the girl from the bridge. Her hair puffed away from her face in a platinum nest, and black smudgy liner rimmed her eyes. Her lips were bare but pink, and I could see small crumbles of powder where she'd applied makeup to her eyebrows so they wouldn't be invisible.

The man in front of me grabbed his bags and the cashier had to ask me twice if I were a discount club member. I told her no and she shrugged and scanned my items. She looked bored

in the way beautiful girls often did. Her nails, long and oval, were painted an army green. She recited my total in a voice that sounded as if she were reading from a teleprompter, and I handed over my father's credit card.

"I'm going to have to call the authorities," she said, holding up my card and tapping her nails against the plastic. "Unless your name is David?"

"It's my Dad's."

She shook her head. "Don't think so. Sorry, they're gonna have to take you in."

I tried to swipe for the card but she dodged me. "Please don't call the 5-0." I'd never used the phrase before, but I'd heard older kids from my school yell it whenever cop cars rolled by.

She squinted at me. "Where are you from?"

"LA."

"I would've guessed-" She paused to appraise me. "Maybe Ohio. Me and my boyfriend are moving to California soon." She handed me the card. "I was just messing with you." When she smiled, her gums showed.

A man got in line behind me, set a case of beer on the belt, and said, "Hey, Larissa."

She gave him a wave, then turned to me. "Are you going to Warren? How old are you?"

My limbs still felt weak from the flood of adrenaline. "I'm just here for the summer," I said, and thought I saw a flicker of disappointment cross her face. "I'm fifteen," I lied.

"No shit, I'm fifteen!" She smiled the gummy smile again. "You look young," she said.

"It's because I'm chubby." I pulled at my cheeks, then felt sick when she didn't laugh.

"I don't blame you for not staying, this town sucks." She lowered her voice and leaned toward me. "There's this thing later. You can come if you want?"

"Sure, maybe," I said, trying not to sound desperate. I didn't understand why she was inviting me. I thought of the time Kaitlyn Kader invited me to her pool party as a joke.

"I'm Larissa," she said, pointing at her name tag.

"Ryan," I said.

"Cool you have a boy's name. That's so California."

When she grabbed the case of beer and scanned it, I started to walk toward the exit, not wanting her to change her mind. "Wait, how will I find you?" I said.

"I'll pick you up. You're on Orchid, right?" I didn't respond, and she said, "Small town."

She rang the doorbell around eight and charmed my father from the porch; she told him his rental Mazda was cool and that she hoped to buy a similar car after college, once she had a real job and didn't have to work at the grocery store. When he invited her in, I said we were in a hurry. I didn't want her to see my grandmother. I'd been worried my father might comment on Larissa's makeup or baggy pants, but his face was full of relief over my finally having made a friend. He said, "Ryan needs a girlfriend here," and I blushed. I'd asked him a year ago to stop referring to friends as girlfriends.

As soon as we were in the street, Larissa said, "I like your boots. I wanted some like that, like Courtney Love, but they were three days of work after tax."

"My mom gave them to me. I'm pretty sure they weren't that expensive," I said, but she ignored me. The last I'd heard, my mother was touring Europe with her new boyfriend's band. She'd met him in rehab. I hadn't seen her in over a year, but she sent me postcards depicting castles and Renaissance art. I kept them in a box under my bed. She'd sent the boots from England for my birthday, with a note that made sure I knew they were not just from her, but also from her boyfriend. "You can have them. I don't even like them," I said. Larissa laughed. "I'm serious," I said. "I'm an eight. What size are you?" She said she was also an eight, and I sat down on the curb and started unlacing. I'd worn them only once, and a popular girl at school had asked, in front of everyone, if I was trying to be a rock star like my mom's fuckbuddy. "Trade me," I said, and handed her a boot.

Larissa sat and pushed her black One Stars off with her feet. On the rubber, she'd drawn little doodles in blue ink. "Sorry they smell," she said. She lit a cigarette and offered me one.

"I quit," I said, knowing I would cough and look stupid.

She nodded. "I thought you'd give me shit about Virginia Slims." She put on my boots and paced around in the street. "They fit," she said.

The night was warm and not yet dark and clouds of mayflies bombed around under street lamps. The smell of a bonfire hovered in the humidity. I pulled on her old sneakers and we kept walking. They were warm and moist, my new favorite shoes. "I remember those," I said, pointing at the flies and recalling my one visit when I was much younger. My mother hated the island, so my grandmother had always come to California. The memories I had of the island were few: my grandmother holding my hand in a penny candy store, where I would leave with a brown paper bag filled with gummy worms coated in a chalky residue; my mother passed out on the sofa in the screened porch, an arm dangling to the floor, her mouth open, revealing dark fillings; my grandmother's elegant fingers, her nails always filed into long ovals, showing me her brass lamp that turned on by touch, like magic.

Larissa picked up a stone and hurled it at the bugs. "They're disgusting," she said.

"Yeah, there aren't a lot of bugs in California."

"That's why we're moving there. This whole island is nasty." She pointed to a red clunker idling at the end of the street. "Jesse's driving."

My stomach seized. "Jesse?"

"My boyfriend. He's seventeen," she said, and tossed her hair.

"Why is he way down here?"

"Would your dad have let you get in a car with some random guy?"

"Good point. So do you do this every time with your dad?"

"My dad's in prison." She walked ahead of me, flung open the passenger door, and

flicked her cigarette onto someone's front lawn.

I crawled in the back seat and Larissa introduced us. "Cali, huh?" was all he said. Like Larissa, he showed no indication of ever having seen me.

We parked in a gravel driveway, and when we got out, Jesse gestured grandly to the squat brick house and said, "Welcome to the palace."

"Jesse's mom claims his dad is a millionaire," Larissa said. "Some married businessman with a mansion in Florida."

"He's probably a fat truck driver," Jesse said, and led the way toward the front door. As we walked, a mosquito landed delicately on my arm and I watched it feed before I slapped. The sound echoed off the house. The silence of the island made me anxious; I had trouble sleeping without the numbing rush of freeway, the incessant air traffic like the sounds of distant war.

Inside, a small group of kids stood around the kitchen table, drinking from beer cans and coffee cups. Music blasted through buzzing speakers, vibrating my chest, and I could barely hear when Larissa shouted for me to follow her. Another group of kids lounged in the living room, and a couple was on the floor in the corner, under a blanket, having what looked like vigorous sex. In another corner, a young child in a complicated-looking wheelchair sat facing the room, his eyes closed in sleep, a blanket over his lap.

When we entered, Larissa pointed at me and yelled, "She's new," over the music, and a few of the kids gave me a nod. All the males had facial hair and deep, intimidating voices.

Larissa and Jesse joined a kid on the couch and I sat in a chair. A skinny guy in gym shorts lit a joint, and the smoke slowly filled the room, making it hazy. I studied the kids as they smoked, the way they held their breath after inhaling, then coughed out clouds or released expert rings toward the ceiling. When it was my turn, Larissa got up to bring me the joint, and I pinched it from her fingers and pretended to take a hit, then passed it to a girl on the floor.

A cute, freckled kid who looked about ten years old peeked into the room.

"Go back to bed," Jesse shouted.

The kid scampered closer. "Cody's tummy hurts again."

Jesse groaned. "Alright, get some bread and go the fuck back to bed."

The kid jogged toward the kitchen, and reappeared a moment later, carrying a loaf of white bread toward the hallway. I wondered where their parents were.

A while later, Larissa and Jesse led me to a screened-in back porch, where the three of us listened to roaming, distant thunder. They slipped something into each other's mouths and kissed. Jesse bit at her bottom lip, and Larissa opened her eyes and saw me watching. "You want one?" she asked, her lip still touching Jesse's.

"What is it?"

She sat back. "A vitamin," she said.

An hour later, as a fizzy feeling began to pop up through my body, I had to call my father, and for the first time, lie to him. He allowed me to sleep at Larissa's, despite my response when asked if her parents were home. "I'm sure," I said. "I don't know where else they'd be."

I stayed on the back porch with Larissa. Occasionally, Jesse went inside, but he always came back. The three of us massaged each other's heads, tickled forearms, and hugged. I heard my voice telling Larissa that I loved her hair, the way her ears connected to her neck, elfin-like, that I was so happy we were friends. She begged me to describe Venice Beach in detail. I had to repeat the word soda again and again. At one point, I went inside to pee, and it was silent and still in the house. Everyone had gone home. The light in the kitchen cast everything in a golden glow, and I stood under it, basking. In the living room, the child in the wheelchair was gone; a front window had been left open, and wind chimes across the street played glorious tinkling music. I danced into the bathroom and grinned at myself in the mirror. I rubbed the softest hand towel across my face, over my lips.

When I stepped back outside, a mist hit my face, and the roar of rain entered my body.

"Water is coming from the sky," Larissa said. She stood with her face pressed to the screen, watching a gushing gutter. Lightning flashed on the side of her face, and she took off outside. When she reached the middle of the yard, she turned to us. Her hair slowly deflated and clung to her scalp, and fat droplets splashed off her head. She reached up and fingered the leaf of a maple tree, exposing her stomach, and, as the sky flickered again, a glinting belly ring. She tugged on the branch, and water poured. Thunder rumbled, closer, and Jesse ran out to her. They hugged under the tree. I watched them sway, like old people slow dancing. Then they walked, holding hands, and lay down together in the middle of the yard. The sky cracked and exploded, and I thought I felt the house shake, but the two of them stared up at the sky, arms and legs spread like snow angels. At one point they called out to me, but I stayed safely behind the screen.

After they came inside, soggy and glassy-eyed, Jesse and Larissa changed into dry hoodies and pajama pants, and we all fell asleep on the rug, in a warm pile, like puppies.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed, but it was still dark outside when Larissa and Jesse rolled away from me. I felt cold and abandoned. Jesse slept on his back, within reach. On the other side of him, Larissa nested in his armpit, her hair grazing the soft folds of his sweatshirt, and her lips, with each exhale, releasing a faint whistle.

I sat up and leaned over Jesse. I placed my thumb over a small scar on his chin and felt a calm charge, as if I'd plugged back into my source. An impulse to get closer overwhelmed me, and I kissed his top lip. He opened his eyes and studied me. The only sound was the rain hitting the metal eaves and Larissa's sweet, rhythmic breath. I glanced at her. I was afraid of hurting her feelings. I wanted to crawl between the two of them and sleep there, like I used to in my parents' bed. Jesse leaned forward and kissed me, less softly. It was the first time I'd ever felt a tongue in my mouth, and it was larger and less pleasant than I'd imagined. I struggled to breathe when he rolled on top of me, but I closed my eyes into his warmth, the luxurious weight of him. He squeezed my breasts and pushed his thigh between my legs. His breath was loud and sharp and

he kept whispering, “You want it?”

I said yes. Yes, I said. I pulled up his sweatshirt so I could feel his skin. I gripped his back and tried to mimic his style of kissing. Our movements felt choreographed, like I knew what he would do next with his hand or his mouth before he did it.

Larissa rolled onto her side, facing away, and I felt a vague guilt. We needed to go back to hugging and sleeping. The three of us, together.

When Jesse pulled a blanket over our heads and started to unbutton my pants, it felt like we’d tripped, hit a pothole. I waited for him to feel it too, but he kept tugging at my waist. I wanted him to love me, but I was scared of being touched, that it would hurt, so I pushed his hand away and unzipped his jeans. He yanked his boxers down, sighed too loudly, and lay back. Under the blanket, the air was stuffy and humid. When I touched him, he wrapped his hand over mine and showed me what to do, but a moment later he climbed back on top of me, and before I understood what was happening, he pushed his way into my mouth. His torso moved up and down above me as I struggled to breathe through my nose. His stomach smelled like calamine lotion; a pink smear crusted over a bug bite near his navel. He thrust harder, but when I tried to push his hips from my face, he grabbed the back of my head so I couldn’t ease away. I held my breath and waited for it to end. From kids at school, I had a vague understanding of what would happen, but I was unprepared for the volume. After he came, he kissed me, and I felt ashamed that my kisses would taste bad, like calamine and rank detergent. After a minute, he climbed over me toward Larissa, so he was in the middle again. He left me the blanket.

I remember thinking daylight would never come, and then a jab to my back forced me awake. The bottoms of my jeans were soaked from being near the screen, and outside, the morning sky was white with rain. I sat up. Jesse and Larissa were still asleep, spooning. I glanced over my shoulder. A red-haired woman in very short shorts stared down at me.

“I work two jobs so I can come home to this? Who are these people?” The woman walked around to Jesse and nudged him in the ribs with her boot.

“Mom, you’ve met Larissa before,” he said, without opening his eyes.

Larissa pulled her hoodie over her face and rolled onto her stomach.

The woman kicked Larissa’s calf. “Get up. This isn’t a goddamn brothel.”

Larissa kissed Jesse, stood, pulled on my boots, and walked out into the downpour. I followed, struggling to keep pace, and said a silent prayer when she ran up the steps to take cover under the entrance to a small church. I was afraid Jesse had told her what we’d done or that she’d know by looking at me, so when I got under the awning next to her, I stared at the gum stains on the pavement. She laugh-screamed and hugged me and said, “That was a good night.”

Still hugging, a piece of her hair in my mouth, I said, “Best night of my life,” and in some ways, in that moment, I meant it.

“Yeah, right,” she said. “I’m sure we party so much harder than LA.” She tugged on a tendril of my dripping hair. “I’m gonna be late for work,” she said, and dashed back into the rain.

The next few days, it rained incessantly. I didn’t hear from Larissa or Jesse. I was sure Larissa knew what had happened, and I became paranoid and afraid to leave the bunkhouse. I reread magazines and tried to stop thinking about Jesse. I didn’t bathe. I slept all day.

Late one afternoon, my father came out to the bunkhouse and gently shook me. “Wake up, my sleeping ugly,” he said. It was his joke. He always laughed after, never trying to be mean, but each time he said it, for a moment, I hoped he’d say beauty. “Your grandmother is awake.”

In the living room, she was sitting up on the couch, drinking water, faint light behind her. I had forgotten a window was there; the blinds had been closed since we arrived. Sandy sat in a chair, glued to the television.

“Mom, your granddaughter, Ryan, is here,” my father said.

“Hi, toots,” she said, setting her cup down.

My father went into the kitchen and I sat beside my grandmother on the couch. I hugged her and tried to kiss her cheek, but she turned her face and I kissed part of her mouth. I reflexively wiped my lips, but she didn’t seem to notice.

“Have you been outside, enjoying the weather?” she said.

I laughed, assuming she was joking, but she looked at me expectantly. Her skull was so tiny. Her scalp showed beneath wispy white hair. Every bone in her face seemed visible; I could imagine what her skeleton looked like. “I went swimming,” I said.

She smiled. “Do you remember when you were just a babe, you would yell to us from way down there?” She pointed a crooked, arthritic finger past the living room and kitchen, to the screened-in porch. “You’d say, ‘I’m ready!’ and we would all have to sing, “One for the money, two for the show,” and you would come running on those little legs.” She clapped her hands and laughed. “One minute you were crawling, the next, running. Now look at you. Beautiful!”

I had to look away to keep from crying. “I remember,” I lied. I was pretty sure she was thinking of someone else, maybe my father.

He walked in from the kitchen and handed Sandy a glass of water. She reached toward the side table and pulled a white candy from a brass dish.

“Holy Hell, don’t eat that,” my father said, and grabbed the candy from her. “Those have been there since I lived here.” He held it up for Sandy. “See? Christmas trees.”

“Oh,” Sandy said. “I ate some yesterday.”

“Where is Lisa?” my grandmother asked my father.

“She’s coming tomorrow,” he said.

It was what he’d told me to say if my grandmother asked about my mother. She’d forgotten the years she spent living with us after my mother left. She’d forgotten that she’d been my mother, while my father had holed up in his basement music studio. Things she had

forgotten: teaching me to roller skate, and afterward, picking gravel from my kneecap with tweezers; letting me cry for hours in front of the otter exhibit, while pups lolled on their backs, dove under flashy wakes, then surfaced, slick and glimmering, and after, buying me a pen at the gift shop with tiny springs and ten colors of ink; teaching me to play baseball in the courtyard of our apartment building, and when I finally made strong contact, getting a black eye; telling the neighbor kids they should've seen the other guy; rubbing my back until I fell asleep, every night for months, after my mother left for the fourth and final time.

I didn't care if she couldn't remember; I just wanted her alive. I overheard Sandy telling my father that if she started eating and drinking again, we might get quite a bit more time with her. I imagined her at my high school graduation. College.

That night, my father and I ate dinner in the living room, and my grandmother stayed awake and ate some small bites of food. She spoke of the river boats in Detroit that her parents had taken her on when she was a girl. The pecan brittle from a shop near their home. She and her best friend filling jars with fireflies and walking to school holding hands.

The next morning, she was in her deep sleep again, and she didn't recognize me when I tried to wake her. A watery sound burbled each time she gasped for a breath.

My father was already at work, and Sandy was asleep in the chair, the smell of recently applied nail polish heavy in the room. I picked at a bowl of Cheerios and then hid out in the bunkhouse, dozing until I heard a tapping at the window. The sound was so mild, I let it go on for a minute, half-asleep, forgetting the rain, thinking it was a wasp hitting glass. I grabbed the Raid next to my head, sat up, and saw Jesse squinting in at me. His breath had made a little foggy patch on the glass. He wrote HI on it.

I lay back down and pretended I hadn't seen him. It was almost noon, and I was still in my pajamas, zit cream crusted over my chin. He began tapping again, so I opened the door, and

could feel him staring at my chin while we spoke. He wore a large black raincoat, and as water drained off him, a pool formed near his feet.

"Hey," he said. He gave me a quick hug, and I wished he hadn't pulled away so soon.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"Standing in your shed thingy," he said, looking around. "Do you want to hang out?"

I couldn't tell if what I was feeling was fear or excitement. "Where's Larissa?"

"She's working," he said, looking at a pile of dead wasps on the windowsill. He picked one up and held it close to his face, then put it in his coat pocket.

I thought of my grandmother, of Sandy snoring inside. I looked at the pile of wasp carcasses. "Okay," I said. "Turn around while I change."

He turned around. "How long do you think you need? It's just, I'm supposed to be watching the kids."

I changed slowly, wondering if he would try to peek, but he didn't. "I'm ready," I said, proud to seem like the sort of girl who didn't care how she looked. As we walked to the car, I splashed rain on my face to wash away the zit slime.

We rode in silence for a while, and then he put on Radiohead at full volume, and everything outside seemed changed, choreographed to the music. I wanted to keep driving forever. The sky was blue-gray, the windshield wipers working overtime. Across a field, long veins of lightning pulsed, and Jesse sang along until we pulled into his driveway.

In the front yard, under hard rain, the freckled boy from the other night leaned over a white painter's bucket. Two smaller boys stood behind him, one a smaller version of him, and the other darker-haired, like Jesse, and no older than four. They wore grubby white t-shirts and shorts slick with mud. Jesse ran to them, and I trotted behind. "I told you to wait inside," he said. The bucket was close to full, and sheets of rain hit the surface, spraying water onto us.

The middle boy said, "We almost have a pool again."

“You said you’d stay out of the basement, Cody,” Jesse said to the middle boy, who looked about eight. “I told you not to go down there anymore.”

“I know I made it all up,” Cody said. Freckles covered his face and lips, and his hair was buzzed almost to his scalp. “Dustin wants to swim, is all.”

Jesse looked at the oldest. “Did you tell them to do this?”

“No,” Dustin said. Rain had clumped his eyelashes together into little spikes.

“We’re building a pool so our friends can come swimming, right Dustin?” Cody said. “I’m not even getting in this time.”

“No one’s getting in. Go around back so you don’t track mud,” Jesse said.

They trudged around the side of the house, the toddler running to keep up. Jesse kicked the bucket over, soaking my shoes and socks.

“That’s cute. They’re trying to make a pool in the basement?” I said.

“Yeah. They’re retarded.” He left the bucket there and we walked toward the house.

“Isn’t your mom worried about water down there? My dad freaks out if there’s even a drop of moisture in our basement.”

“No. The whole thing needs a new foundation anyway.”

Muddy footprints soiled the front entry, and had been tracked through the living room, across the small kitchen, and through a doorway on the right, which opened onto a tiny landing with a door to the backyard on the left, and on the right, a staircase to the basement. The floors throughout the house were linoleum, but in the living room the boys had stomped stains across a braided rug. The place looked different from the way it had the other night: smaller, boxier, more generic. No photos hung on the dingy walls. The child in the wheelchair was in the same spot in the corner of the living room, asleep again, or maybe permanently vegetative.

After he pulled carpet cleaner from under the kitchen sink and sprayed the rug, Jesse went into the kitchen to unlock the back door. From the living room couch, I could see into the

kitchen. Jesse yanked muddy socks off and wiped their hands with paper towels. The toddler cried, and when Jesse told him to shut up, he cried harder. In the center of the kitchen, Dustin helped Jesse erect a pen—something you might put a dog in—and when they were finished, they set the toddler inside with a plastic giraffe. Cody climbed in with a book and a sleeve of Saltines, and then Dustin stepped in and rolled onto his stomach. They were still in their wet clothes.

"Don't you dare get out of here," Jesse said to them.

He told me he'd show me around, and I followed him from room to room. The toddler and Cody slept in a little room off the kitchen, in bunk beds, next to stacked laundry machines. Jesse shared a small, untidy room with Dustin. Both twin beds were unmade, their sheets twisted and exposed. Stains of various colors and sizes covered the carpet, and above one bed hung a cracked mirror. On a nightstand, a half-empty coffee cup cultivated white scum. Jesse sat on the edge of a bed and I sat on the other, a few feet away, and removed from underneath me, a bottle of warming, cherry-flavored lube. I felt my cheeks get hot, and pushed the bottle aside. I didn't know what it was for, but I imagined it had something to do with licking the liquid off each other's naked bodies.

"That's Larissa's," Jesse said. "We haven't used it yet."

"It would be cool if you did. I mean, it wouldn't bother me at all. It looks like it tastes good." I couldn't stop talking, could hear my heart thudding. "It's none of my business," I said.

"Larissa really wants to. Have sex."

"You don't?"

He shook his head.

"What about-" I started to say.

He turned to face me and our knees touched. "That wasn't sex," he said.

"Right," I said. It was quiet for a moment.

"Don't tell Larissa." He rubbed his face, and it made him look sleepy. "Or anyone."

"Okay," I said. "I don't know anyone."

He laughed and then looked at me seriously. "I want to be a priest."

A flimsy ceiling fan circled above us. I thought about the other night.

"I know what you're thinking," he said, startling me. "It's sad not to have a family. But I have to make sacrifices." He leaned in close. "We can't ever do that again."

"Okay," I said. I felt embarrassed that he didn't like what we'd done, and relieved.

"We aren't married. Or even in love." He gave my knee a squeeze and smiled, gestures that seemed to mean *cheer up*.

I nodded and tried not to cry.

"So please don't-" He leaned back. "I have to stay on track."

"Why do you want to be a priest?" I asked, though I didn't care. What I was trying to ask was what I'd done wrong.

He rubbed his palm against his thigh and it made a loud brushing sound. "So, my sister died. She was a baby. Well, she was two."

"My mom died," I said. The lie came so naturally. I think I wanted to tell someone my grandmother was dying, which felt like my mother dying. It's also possible I just wanted to have something in common with him.

"Sorry," he said.

"What happened to her?"

He lay back flat on the bed. "She drowned. My stepdad was giving her a bath and he went to check on the boys and forgot. How do you forget about a baby?"

"Is that why you don't want them making a pool? You're afraid they'll drown?"

"No, I taught them all to swim after." He kicked his shoes off and they fell to the floor.

"How old were you?"

"Oh, it just happened. In December."

I counted the months in my head. Just over six. “Did your mom forgive your stepdad?”

“He died too, in February.” Jesse stood and walked over to a dresser in the corner and leaned over it with his back to me. I could hear the desperate flick of a lighter, then the gas whir, then quiet, then the flick again, the gas, quiet. He came back and sat next to me on the bed. The edge sagged under our weight. For a while we didn’t say anything, his bare bicep touching mine. His skin felt hot and dry. I wondered why he’d asked me to his house, if he wanted to be friends, or something more. Long distance relationships were romantic. I thought about how the first time I saw him, I’d known we would meet. Perhaps he wasn’t in love yet, but was falling.

He flicked on the lighter and held it up between our faces. I tried not to flinch or back away. “So, I guess that’s why I want to be a priest. To know why shit happens, you know?”

I wanted to ask what happened to his stepdad, but I didn’t. The flame wavered closer to my face than his. I could feel a concentrated heat near my right eye. I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to sound mature. “Do you and your brothers have a good counselor?”

“Yeah, and then after we go to Disneyland and eat lobster.” He snorted. “And they aren’t my brothers.” The lighter went out, and he set it beside him on the bed.

“Oh,” I said. “Well, they seem like good kids.”

“They’re my half-brothers. My stepdad was their dad. And the toddler’s just a foster.”

The two older boys had Jesse’s full upper lip and lean build, but they also had reddish hair, fair skin, and freckles. The toddler, the unrelated one, looked the most like him. “Is the boy in the wheelchair your half-brother too?” I asked.

“Foster,” he said. “I think my mom does it for the money. We’ve had him since he was little.” He yawned. “So, I almost forgot, but I told Larissa I’d stop by on her lunch break. Is there any way you can watch them? I’ll only be gone a minute, and you can play video games or whatever. Just don’t let them out of the pen.”

I agreed, though I wanted to tell him I didn't know how to watch kids, that I was only a couple of years older than Dustin. Only after he'd rushed from the house and I heard tires splash through puddles, did I realize he'd had me over so I would babysit. So he could see Larissa.

I sat on the couch and read a *TV Guide* and tried to ignore the sopping, miserable children in the kitchen. Dustin and the toddler appeared to be asleep. Cody obsessively picked his toenails. An hour passed while I read, and Jesse was still gone. I pictured him apologizing to Larissa, biting her lip the way he had the other night. I walked over to the child in the wheelchair and touched his arm. He didn't wake up. I shook him and asked if he wanted anything, but he remained in his peaceful sleep. I touched his eyelid. He didn't move.

"Don't do that," Cody called from the kitchen.

"I was just checking on him," I said.

"Don't," he said.

Dustin woke up and hit Cody in the arm and told him to shut up, and the toddler woke up and began wailing. I sat back down on the couch and watched the three of them crawl around the pen, pinching and slapping. A pacifier hung from the toddler's mouth. When he screamed, it fell to the muddy linoleum, and Cody stuffed it back in his mouth. I got up and took it away and rinsed it in the sink.

"Does Jesse always make you stay in this thing?" I asked. I pictured Jesse and Larissa now doing what we'd done the other night, in a stock room or bathroom. For some reason it hadn't occurred to me before that maybe he'd done the same thing with her.

Cody nodded.

"Well I'm not going to make you," I said. I felt a rush of power, a blue light blazing up through my feet. I pushed down the safety lock and yanked open the door to the pen. "Have fun, be kids," I said, something my grandmother used to say when she lived with us. No one moved. "Go play," I said.

Dustin stood. “Can we do the pool?” he said.

“I don’t care,” I said.

“We aren’t supposed to go down there,” Cody said.

“Do whatever you want,” I said, and went back to the couch. I heard muffled voices, the three of them pulling their shoes on, the back door closing with a creak.

I walked to the kitchen sink and watched through a window decorated with short, apple-themed curtains. The children each carried a bucket, even the toddler, though his resembled a large beach pail. Dustin held a five-gallon bucket and Cody a slightly smaller version. When they reached the center of the yard, they split off. The toddler planted his pail at the far edge of the yard, on the grass, under open sky. Cody placed his bucket under the overflowing eaves of the shed, and Dustin placed his near the house, under a rushing drainpipe. The three of them stood solemnly, waiting for the rain to fill their vessels. Their t-shirts clung to their scrawny torsos, and their bangs were plastered to their foreheads, rivulets of rain running off their chins. Out there in the center of the yard, it looked like the toddler was shivering.

I moved back to the couch and paged through a magazine about knitting. All of the patterns were frumpy and for old people, but the models were young. After what seemed a long time, I went back to the window. The boys stood in the same positions. Eventually, they came trudging back toward the house, Dustin leading the way, his body slanted to the right to compensate for the weight of his bucket. Cody waddled, carrying his bucket with both hands, out in front of him, occasionally knocking it with his kneecaps and sending water sloshing over the sides. The toddler hugged his pail to his chest as if it weighed nothing at all.

The door creaked open and I stepped back toward the stove, watching as they marched single file back inside and down the basement stairs. Their faces when they passed the kitchen were blank and focused, as if they were sleepwalking. From the basement came splashing and pouring sounds, and a moment later, footsteps coming up the stairs. Not one of the boys glanced

at me as they passed by on their way back outside. I watched for a long time, as they repeated this bucket-filling sequence over and over: the orderly march down the stairs, the pouring sounds from below, the slow slog back up the stairs and into the yard, the positioning of buckets, the sober waiting in the rain. On the landing to the stairs, a widening pool of muddy water.

I sat down at the kitchen table and thought about turning the overhead light on, but didn't. I ate stale wafer cookies from a package left open on the counter and stopped thinking about when Jesse would come back. I entered the ebb and flow of the boys' ritual. Despite trying to push my grandmother from my mind, her ragged gasping and pale, shriveled lips kept reappearing. *Have fun, be kids.* I thought about Larissa, pleaded with some higher power that we might still be friends. She'd visit and I'd take her to Venice Beach. We'd rent bicycles and watch celebrities and drink virgin pineapple cocktails at an outdoor café.

As I was dabbing up the last of the cookie crumbs, the toddler appeared on the landing, sucking his thumb and crying. He pointed behind him to the basement. Only then did it occur to me that the boys had not been back upstairs in some time.

"Come here," I said, not knowing how to comfort him.

"No shoes inside," he wailed.

I got up and patted his damp, dark hair, told him I would go check on his brothers.

As I descended the stairs, it became increasingly cool and dark, and the air tasted of a pungent minerality. When I stepped off the bottom stair, I felt my shoe give to earth. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, to decipher forms and depth. The ceiling was so low I had to hunch. The area was more like a crawl space than a basement. About ten feet ahead, a huge hill of dirt rose to the ceiling, and continued along the entire back wall of the space. I turned right, toward a long, narrow open area. Rotten-looking wooden posts erupted from the earth at random intervals, presumably structural, and pink insulation dangled from above, torn and ragged, like dirty cotton candy. At the far end of the space, I could see Dustin's silhouette

backlit in front of a glowing window. I walked toward him, and stumbled. Clumps of dirt and rocks comprised the floor.

Now I could see he was standing over what looked like a huge puddle, dunking his arms in, the water up over his elbows. His back was to me, and when I stood up straight to see, I hit my head on a wooden beam. I bent over, holding my head, and saw something thrash in the water. Only once I was next to him, could I see that he had Cody pinned under by the chest. Legs broke the surface and scissored the air; arms grasped wildly at nothing.

I shoved Dustin aside, and Cody sat up, gasping and screaming. I walked into the water and carried him out, across the dark space, up the stairs.

The boy still clinging to my torso, I lowered the two of us onto the linoleum. The light in the kitchen seared my eyes. My head where I'd hit it hammered. Cody coughed in wet, rattling fits, then shivered. His body had already soaked my shirt and the top of my pants, and I could feel water seeping into my bra. I stroked his back. The toddler had stopped crying and was sitting at the kitchen table pouring salt from a shaker into small mounds. He climbed down and sat next to us and petted Cody's back.

We heard the sound of boots on stairs, and then the door fanned open and Dustin burst into the kitchen and sat at the table. "Don't tell Jesse," he said. Dustin was only a couple of years my junior, but now he looked so young. "Please," he begged, and wiped his nose on the shoulder of his wet shirt. "I was counting. It was only twenty seconds. It takes whole minutes to die." He shrieked the words, desperate. "I wasn't going to hurt him. But he wouldn't stay under."

"I made it up," Cody said from my chest.

"He can talk to our sister," Dustin said, and began to cry. "I just wanted him to see if Dad found her yet."

"I told you, I made it up," Cody said, leaning away from my chest. He retched once, and a trickle of warm water flowed onto my sternum. I wiped it and felt my hand shaking.

“Liar. I know you saw her,” Dustin said. His skin was blotchy and red and streaked with dirt. “He saw her last time we made the pool, and she told him she’s not a baby anymore and there’s cows where she is.” He took a deep breath. His shoulders shook. “He can see her. Not everyone has the gift,” he said. “That’s what the books say.”

“Mom and Jesse told you,” Cody said, his voice rising. “It’s not real.”

“God, I hate you.” Dustin dug a thumb into the salt mounds, flattening them one by one.

“Bodyfafe!” the toddler shouted at him.

“What is he saying?” I asked. My voice came out quiet.

“It’s his word when he’s mad,” Cody said, still glued to my chest. “It means something really bad, like worse than cocksucker or butthead.”

Dustin ran toward his bedroom, and a door slammed. A minute later, the toddler wandered into the living room and climbed on the couch. Animated voices and exaggerated sound effects blasted from the television. Cody squashed my breast as he pushed himself up. He sat beside me on the kitchen floor. Dark lines of dirt defined his toenails.

“I didn’t make it up,” he said, looking at his hands.

“I know,” I said. I at least believed he thought he didn’t make it up.

“I tried at the school pool, but it doesn’t work there,” he said.

I did not call the police or Larissa and Jesse at the grocery or my father. Once I could stand, I told the two little kids that I had to run a quick errand and I walked out the back door. Outside, the lightning and thunderstorms had passed, and a steady drizzle fell. To the left, purple clouds hovered over the water, and to the right, the sky brightened into a hazy white. I jogged home in the direction of the clouds.

My father was home early. I saw his car in the driveway. He met me at the front door and said my grandmother had developed a lung infection. A doctor was with her now, but she was unresponsive and on morphine. “You should prepare yourself,” he said. That night, I slept on the

floor next to her, and listened to her lung's wet ripples, the low murmur and intermittent clicking of her oxygen machine.

In the morning, the sun was out. I could hear my grandmother's inhalations, jagged and erratic, and my father clinking around in the kitchen making breakfast for the two of us. I was still half asleep on the living room floor when Sandy rushed into the kitchen. "Who would do such a thing?" she said. She looked at me and wiped her eyes. "Don't listen to them," she said. "The kids here are no good." She walked over to me and knelt down and squeezed my calf through the sleeping bag. "You're a nice, good girl," she said, before going back into the kitchen. She and my father spoke softly while my father flipped bacon, then Sandy took over and he went outside. When he came back in, he was red-faced and wild-eyed, and he stood in the front doorway and told me I was not to leave the house. I ran through the kitchen and out the porch door. Toilet paper tinged with red liquid streamed from the willow tree and clung in wet clumps to my grandmother's roses. The driveway and my father's car were spattered with crusty raw yolk and shards of eggshell, and on the red brick exterior of the house, in black spray paint, the word SLUT stretched from window to door.

My father helped me pack my things. He booked me a flight for the next morning, and arranged for me to stay with our neighbor, a family friend who'd helped out after my mom had left. "I don't know why I dragged you here," he said. "Your mother was right about this place." He didn't say anything about the vandalism, and this made me more ashamed. I wanted him to say that of course this wasn't my fault, to ask what had happened and who had done this, to be angry in the way that my grandmother would have been. I thought about what Sandy had said. I wondered if this meant I was not a nice, good girl. My father put a hand on my back and said there was no need for me to stay for the funeral; she wasn't with us anymore.

I hid in the bunkhouse until late afternoon, when I heard a car pulling in. From the window, I saw Jesse standing in the driveway. I was looking for places to hide, and then my father was beside him. For a moment, I was afraid Jesse might hurt him, but then I saw Jesse stepping backward toward his car, gesticulating wildly. My father took slow steps forward, his arms at his sides. Jesse looked suddenly young and small. I went outside and stood in front of the bunkhouse door. I couldn't hear what they were saying. Jesse was about to get in his car, when he saw me. He raised one hand, as if he were taking an oath. "Sorry," he said.

That night, I couldn't sleep. My plane was leaving early out of Detroit, and my father had told me to say goodbye to my grandmother, but he hadn't told me how.

For years now, my father has told the story of the night my grandmother died: After dinner, I curled up on the floor next to the couch where my grandmother lay, and my father relaxed into the recliner. We watched a movie and both fell asleep. He woke to the blue screen and high-pitched note signaling the end of a VHS, and found my grandmother had passed peacefully. He let me sleep there on the floor until morning.

What I remember: my father falling asleep, and my grandmother, not long after, exhaling one long last breath. Sliding from my blankets on the floor and walking outside, barefoot, in my pajamas. Bugs hissing in the tall grasses, and an older, drunk couple waving from a stoop. I waved back. As I strolled from our neighborhood and down a street lined with new vacation homes, flood lights flashed. I walked toward Jesse's house. I wanted to submerge myself in the pool and find out if I could see my grandmother, but I was frightened, and instead, I wandered to the bridge, deserted now. Moonlight on the water. I tossed a rock in, and the plunk caused the insect chorus briefly to rest. I scrambled down the hill to the grassy shore below, and I lay down and closed my eyes and imagined I was in that muddy pool.

First, morning sun through my white wooden blinds. Stripes of light and shadow across her sleeping back. From just outside the window, a breeze of bitter tomato vine, and powder

from the rosebush she'd planted. Her left arm exposed, partially covered by my plush sheep. The sheets smell like Downy. I reach out and touch her crepey inner elbow, soft like the nose of a horse. Thin blue threads of veins. The sound of my voice wakes her when I ask how you sleep on your stomach without suffocating. She says you have to turn your face to the side, and she turns and faces me.

On my flight home, as a kind woman patted my back and offered Kleenex from her carry-on, I found a note tucked inside the sack lunch my father had made for me. *Daughter of my dreams*, it said, *Call me when you land*.

Today, Today, Today

My mother called and I accidentally answered. She'd caught me distracted, walking my boss's neurotic pug. She said, "The Pole Vaulter dumped him again."

"Naturally," I said.

She told me not to be glib; Tanner hadn't answered his phone for days.

A few months ago, he hadn't answered because he'd been in jail after getting blackout drunk on campus and robbing a delivery guy of his pizzas. The time after that he'd crashed a friend's motorcycle on a back road thirty miles from his dorm. The farmer who took him to the ER told us he knew my brother as a regular at the rural diner, but Tanner had never mentioned this place to anyone.

"Try not to worry. The best thing to do is to keep your brain occupied." This was part of my mother's new mind control technique. "It's too bad you don't have a passion," she said.

I agreed it was too bad.

"It's really important to channel your energy into something positive."

"I'm positive we've had this conversation before," I said.

To keep her mind from wandering dark hallways, she would instead be stressing out over hosting a departmental reception in honor of an old friend, a visiting anthropologist named Mick. "Call me if you hear from your brother," she said. "And promise you'll stick to our plan."

I promised, but didn't mean it. It was her plan and it consisted of radical detachment: no police, no cold-calling his friends, no dropping everything just to check on him. She used to drop everything. She missed months of work. She took a strongly suggested mental health leave.

My brother lived in a dorm room in Ann Arbor, where he smoked pot, allegedly studied music composition, and was worshipped by misguided young women. My mother lived in Phoenix. I lived in LA, where I worked as an assistant for the actor Rob Bissonnette, famous for his childhood role as an orphan whose adoptive parents discovered their new child was in direct communication with God. The film had aged poorly.

Rob considered himself a feminist, which to him meant paying me for doing very little and diminishing the word *genius* by deploying it whenever I displayed mild competence. I think he felt sorry for me. He knew I didn't have a lot going on outside of work. Most recently I was a genius for watching YouTube tutorials and then taking apart and fixing his espresso machine. It was a dead-end job, but hard to quit. I'd graduated two years earlier with a degree in Philosophy. I had a lot of loans and few prospects. A childhood friend with delusions of stardom convinced me to move to LA, and then left seven months later for nursing school.

I tried Tanner a few times, then booked a flight for the next morning. Rob insisted on driving me to the airport. He apologized that he couldn't offer paid leave, so he bought tacos as a consolation prize and we ate them in the car. It's embarrassing when exceptionally attractive people eat tacos; they should do it in private. As we pulled into Departures, he wiped some hot sauce from his square jawline, looked at me earnestly and said, "Family is karmic debt."

I flew from LA to Detroit on a cheap hacker flight, which meant I actually flew from Ontario, California to Flint, land of lead-poisoned water. When we landed I tried Tanner again, but it went straight to his voicemail, a crackly recording of the Sex Pistols screaming about no future. I rented a car, drove to campus, and parked for free in a neighborhood with ivy-clad brick Tudors. This was in early December. Heaps of dead leaves clogged the edges of the streets and the air smelled of crushed earth and smoke. It was barely dinner time and already dark.

I'd visited Tanner's dorm twice before: when my mother and I moved him in four months earlier in August, and when he'd been briefly hospitalized after his accident in October. It was an

old brick building with tiny windows and appallingly small rooms. In the hallway, I passed a group of four guys, one in a smoking robe. No one answered when I knocked, so I sat next to my duffel bag and waited. A group of girls in weather inappropriate attire entered from the stairwell and squeezed into a room a few doors down. I could hear male laughter and commercial rap.

I fell asleep out there and woke with my face plastered to my bag, a large drool spot under my cheek, and Jonathan, my brother's roommate, petting my hair. I smacked his hand.

"Tanner's not here," he said.

I stared at him.

"Right. You know that." He kicked a dirty towel out of the way as he opened the door.

The room smelled of old socks and ejaculate and was at least ten degrees warmer than the hall. I set my bag at the foot of my brother's unmade bed and climbed on.

On either side of the door, dressers had been crammed inside tiny closets. The two beds were wedged against opposite walls, with a gap between them, barely wide enough to walk through. Shabby desks took up the last remaining floor space. From the back wall, faint streetlight dribbled in through a depressing window.

Jonathan sat down on his bed and watched me. "You have a thing." He pointed to his lip.

I told him it was herpes.

"Practically everyone has it," he kept saying, until I took pity and told him the truth.

A few days ago I'd let Rob's girlfriend's seven-year-old daughter give me a makeover. She ordered me to close my eyes, smeared garish shadow on my lids, and accidentally gouged my cheek with tweezers. When I examined my face after, I saw she'd painted a large beauty mark over the wound, brown sludge mixing with a drop of blood. From the scrape, a red lump had later sprouted, and since then, it had grown and birthed a baby lump and the two had crusted over and formed a resistance army against concealer.

"Weird," Jonathan said, looking closer.

“Showbiz isn’t all glitz and glamour.”

“Your mom called me,” he said.

“Sorry.”

“No, she’s cool, I like talking to her.”

“I’d like you more if you weren’t always so nice,” I said.

He nodded rapidly, like a player listening to a coach. “I’ve gotten that before.” He flopped onto his back. “Morgan still doesn’t want to sleep with me.”

Every time he said his girlfriend’s name I pictured a sturdy brown horse. For all her mistakes, at least my mother hadn’t named me Morgan. “I wasn’t talking about your game.”

“I have none,” he said, and moaned in a vaguely sexual way. “Your brother, though.” He sat up and squinted.

“Glad he’s doing well for himself. At least one of us is.”

I could only attract frighteningly old men or guys who lived with their mothers. Also, men with exotic pets. No one would ever call me beautiful; I’d put myself somewhere in the fifteenth percentile. Tanner got all the good genes. We didn’t look alike. Everyone admitted it. He was tall, with dark curls, blue eyes, sharp features. I was pasty with hair the color of worms. I couldn’t gain weight though, so there was that. I looked like our mother. He looked like our father, who died snowmobiling when I was six and Tanner was still an ugly fetus, leaving our pregnant mother to chop her own firewood in a tiny house bordering a forest, outside a small city in the Upper Peninsula. I couldn’t remember much. Just the smell of ice and, in summer, stepping stones leading through tall pines to a field alive with buzzing ladybugs and feral cats.

“So you really haven’t heard from him?” I said.

“I’d tell you.”

I believed him. Since Tanner had started college we didn’t talk as often as I’d have liked, but he called whenever anything major happened and never meant to worry me. I was trying not

to panic, but even during bouts of depression and hypomania, or the times they had his meds wrong, he'd still come home at night. It was cold outside and my mother had already called all the hospitals and jails. We'd agreed not to call the police yet. We used to every time.

"Do you think he's using again?"

Jonathan shook his head yes, then no, then yes. "He smokes weed sometimes."

"Yeah, he really shouldn't, but I mean other stuff."

"What, like, coke? Pretty sure only at parties." A guilty look crossed his face and he added, "Maybe only once though, and he never drinks. Well, since the pizza thing."

"What about heroin?" I said.

Jonathan laughed. When I didn't, he said, "He told me he went to rehab. Was it for *heroin*?"

"Mostly Oxy, actually."

"Is that allowed?" His mouth hung slightly open.

"No, it's definitely illegal."

"No, I mean, they can just give me a heroin addict as my roommate? I really like Tanner, we're like best friends now, but—."

"It was a long time ago." Actually, it had been just over a year since he'd come home clean. "Don't say anything to anyone. I assumed he'd told you."

"Yeah, no." Jonathan dropped flat onto his mattress and the springs squeaked.

After Tanner's first week at college he'd called, breathless, to tell me his roommate was rich. The kid had multiple laptops, a credit card for cab rides, and, on Friday night, had ordered pizza for the entire floor. I'd always assumed rich kids had seen everything.

My phone said it was after ten, so I tried my brother once more. After the beep I said, "Call me asshole. I love you."

I went to brush my teeth in the men's bathroom and picked at the scabby rash above my lips. A shirtless, muscular guy stared at me in the mirror as he shaved under his nostrils. When he left, he left his whiskers in the sink.

Back in the room, Jonathan huddled under the covers with the lights off. "I have to get up early for class, but I'll be quiet," he said.

I told him I could sleep through anything, then swallowed some temazepam and rolled onto my stomach. I slept in my clothes on top of the sheets.

The next time I looked at my phone it was after nine. Bright light streamed through the little square window, directly onto the beds, and Jonathan was stumbling around in his boxers. He was tan but too skinny, with nice, thick black hair kept short. His face was still round with youth, but had the potential to become handsome. Above his lip he sported a collection of sparse hairs in the style of Amish adolescents. He leaned down and peered at me, saw my open eyes, and jumped under the covers.

"I thought you had a morning class," I said.

"I already went." He grabbed a t-shirt from the floor, keeping the blanket demurely over his nipples as if he had breasts. He wrapped the t-shirt around his head, covering his eyes, like a blindfold, and yanked the knot tight.

"What are you doing?"

"I can't sleep with the light."

"Why don't you get a shade?"

He shrugged, then lay down on his side.

I caught myself smiling as I pulled the blanket over my head. I was dreaming of slipping around on muddy banks next to an overflowing river when Jonathan's voice woke me. He'd propped himself up on one elbow, like a pin-up girl. Only twelve minutes had passed.

"How did he first get it?" he was asking.

"What?"

"The heroin."

"*The* heroin?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know, a friend, I think." Tanner's best friend, a shy, anemic boy named Justin, had ODed when they were sixteen. So had three other kids in his grade.

Jonathan nodded and the knot on the back of his head moved up and down. He'd tied it so tightly that the bottom half of his face looked deformed; his top lip curled up onto the cloth. "Yeah, he hangs around with musicians and art majors."

"That must be it," I said. Sleep dragged me under.

"I saw this girl from orientation today."

"Are we going to wake up? Is that what's happening?"

"Sorry." He lay back down and placed his hands beneath his cheek in prayer position.

I could no longer sleep. After twenty minutes, I sat up and nudged the lump of Jonathan's legs with my foot. "Tell me about the girl."

He scratched his head, leaving dark clumps sticking out. "It's embarrassing."

"Most of life is."

"Well, she's fucking incredible looking."

"What about Morgan?"

"I love Morgan." He turned his head to me, still wearing the t-shirt mask. "I do."

A light knocking interrupted and we cocked our heads. It came again. I opened the door and my brother's ex-girlfriend, Angela, stood in the hall, all long legs and scuffed chucks and stringy hair. On her head was a knit hat that looked like Tanner's. She was pretty, with thick,

close-set eyebrows, a little upturned nose, thin lips, and an admirable resting bitch face. I'd always liked her.

She threw her arms around my neck and filled the room with the smell of stale cigarettes. We'd never before embraced, so I stood there, waiting for it to be over. She stepped back and I could tell she was looking at my lumpy face. She waved to Jonathan and said, "He called me."

"When?" I wanted to rip the beanie off her head.

"Just now, I ran here." She removed her hat as if she'd read my mind. "He's up north. He said to tell you sorry, he's in a house with no reception. I think he lost his phone."

The familiar soaring rushed through my torso in the way it always did whenever I received news that my brother was still alive. I sat down to enjoy it. "Did he find it?" I said.

"I don't think so, he called from a weird number." She pulled off her mittens and sat on the edge of Tanner's bed. "He said he had to drive for reception."

"Did you get an address?"

"I forgot. I'm so sorry." She frowned. "He's done with classes though and he says he's writing a bunch of new songs. He feels really bad you flew out here."

"It's fine, it's just my life savings."

She looked at the floor.

"Did you tell him my mom's been trying to call and is losing her shit?"

"I think so, yes. Or, I might have forgotten? I might have just told him you flew out here." She sighed. "I'm an idiot, sorry. It was a really short call."

"Did he sound normal?"

"I think so. I don't know, maybe?"

"This is not super helpful."

"Sorry. I mean, he maybe cried a little." She looked away from me as she said this. "He still wants us to be together."

"My Mom said you dumped him."

"She speaks the truth." Jonathan was still under the covers, but he'd lost the blindfold.

Angela tugged at a strand of long hair. "You don't know the whole story."

"You like torturing him," Jonathan said, just before I kicked him.

I thanked Angela, but I was jealous he'd called her instead of me. Lately, she always knew more than I did. They'd met in August, and within weeks, had become grossly conjoined. Whenever I video chatted with my brother, the two of them appeared on my screen, finishing each other's sentences.

"Are you going home?" she asked me.

"No, I want to check on him."

She started crying. "It's like what he says and what he does don't match. Or sometimes they do, but then they don't the next day." She wiped her eyes. "Can I come?"

I shook my head no, though I knew Tanner might want to see her. She didn't ask again.

She let me borrow her flip-flops and I took a shower. In the mirror, I picked at my scab army until it bled. It had recruited a third lump, a satellite guerrilla an inch from its comrades. After my shower, I made Jonathan face the wall while I changed, and he whined about his afflictions: celibacy and lethal boredom. He said his classes had ended, plus he could raid the cafeteria for road food, thereby saving me money. I accepted his proposal and he came back with a sack of bagels, cream cheese, and two soggy waffles. I asked if he'd remembered to bring caffeine and he shook his head in shame.

We stopped at a drive-through coffee hut and set out on the seven-hour drive. The weather was bleak and I remembered why I secretly liked LA. Here, a thick gray hung over everything. Jonathan informed me he didn't have a license, but he could help navigate should I need assistance. A born and bred Manhattan boy. He put on David Bowie, chugged his entire coffee, and immediately fell asleep.

My blood pressure rose as I downed coffee and tried to avoid the torn-up asphalt and asshole drivers of Detroit. We still didn't have an address, so I just drove north, and after a while I began to relax into the slick grayness sliding by. Somewhere north of Midland I realized I hadn't called my mother, so I shook Jonathan awake and made him do it. They spoke for a few minutes and I could tell, based on Jonathan's refrain, "yeah, for sure," that my mother was still scared. Since my brother's motorcycle accident, she'd been working on what her therapist called, "letting go." Tanner was technically an adult, she often told me; he made his own choices; she couldn't control him. Transcendental Meditation, which she practiced under the guidance of someone named Shiloh, allowed her to control what she could: her own thoughts. All this was against her nature though, so she still lost sleep over him.

Jonathan hung up. "She says you broke a pact? And she thinks he's near Marquette."

I watched the bare treetops as Jonathan updated the GPS. I'd never been back to the UP. When I was seven and Tanner was a year old we'd left for Phoenix. My mother had liked the mythology in the name. She's a professor, but still she believes in fates, planetary forces that cannot be seen.

My brother was born on the darkest day of the year. My mother often said, "We should have known." She told me I was born in the time of year when days stretched into each other, children ran barefoot after dinner to jump in great lakes, fireflies flickered and music floated from revelers celebrating the coming summer solstice. "I'm not sure what happened," she'd said to me, "You were such a happy child."

Tanner could not be described as a happy child. His preschool teachers had nicknamed him Little Man because of his preoccupied, serious demeanor. But he'd had surges of joy that seemed transcendent. Once, when he was three and I was nine, he'd been playing in our backyard, a vast lawn that had gone to dandelions, a carpet of yellow. I sat on the back stoop, supervising, while my mother made lunch. It was summer and the sun shone directly above us.

He was wearing only blue shorts and little cowboy boots. When he was a child his hair had been fair, and it glowed in the sun. His bare back was to me and I watched his delicate spine emerge each time he squatted to pick another dandelion for his pail. He moved methodically, in a straight line, as if picking berries or grapes. I smelled macaroni boiling inside. I listened to the neighbors' sprinklers. When his bucket was overflowing, he stopped, tossed some blossoms in the air, turned his tiny head skyward, and sang out.

"Today, today, today!"

"Is that your happy song?" I said.

He turned around, startled to see me sitting there. He squinted at me and shrugged, then continued with his work.

He'd sung the words in ascending pitch. I could still hear it. I sang it to myself sometimes, but rarely. I reserved it for those delicious moments of dumb pleasure over nothing.

"Do you want a bagel?" Jonathan ripped off a hunk, sending a cascade of poppy seeds to the floor. He dunked it in a tub of cream cheese, took an enormous bite, and licked his thumb.

I told him to hand me a cinnamon raisin. "Did my mom say why she thinks he's there?"

"She was maybe crying," he said, chewing, "so it was hard to hear, but it sounded like a while ago Tanner told her he wanted to write an album there." He swallowed hard, then drank from my water without asking. "You know, where his dad died."

"He was my dad, too," I said. It struck me that we always referred to the UP as where my father had died, never as the place Tanner had been born.

We drove for hours past strip malls, through barren birch groves and squat evergreens, and, eventually, across rivers and small streams. Signs for campgrounds appeared, signs for the bridge. Jonathan snapped pictures as we crossed the Straits of Mackinac, his head out the window, hair rippling in the icy wind. The water below us was a gray blue, unfrozen. On the

other side, Highway 2 hugged Lake Michigan. Most of the drive wound through dense forests, but every so often we'd burst out into open stretches with the lake on our left, only feet from the road. Scraggly bushes and dunegrass blanketed the beach; water sparkled into the distance. "Wow, why don't people live here?" Jonathan kept saying.

My phone rang twice on the drive. The first was spam narrated in Japanese. The second was Rob. He followed up with a photo of his girlfriend, an emaciated blonde who played an evil twin on a teen show, in an upside down yoga pose near the Santa Monica pier. "We are thinking of you. XO," he wrote.

As we neared Marquette, the sun started to set behind the trees, casting long shadows across the two-lane highway. I pulled over at a combination inn-restaurant and rented a room from a friendly woman with rosacea and a long gray braid. Jonathan agreed to sleep on the floor.

At the yellowing pedestal sink, I washed off the makeup I'd plastered on in the dorm. The guerillas had gained ground. The spots had multiplied and the original rebels had merged into a large faction that oozed yellow liquid from a scab. It was sore to the touch and a little swollen.

"Holy shit," Jonathan said, when I emerged.

"I've seen it."

"Have you though?" He was sitting on the bed flipping through channels on an ancient television. The room smelled of animal. He'd already taken his shoes and socks off and was rubbing his bare feet together to keep them warm. His overgrown toenails made a nasty scratching sound. "I think you need a doctor."

"It's just a little infected or something."

"It needs steroids or surgical intervention."

"I'm fine."

"I'll go with you. There's got to be a walk-in place." He pulled out his phone and reported a location twenty minutes away.

"I don't have insurance."

He stared at me. "Who doesn't have insurance?" He came over and assessed my face, wearing the expression of someone sweeping up a dead rat. "Let's at least go to a pharmacy."

I drove, but was too tired to cake on the makeup again, and when I approached the counter to purchase a tube of triple antibiotic cream, the young pharmacist recoiled.

"How are you today?" he said, wincing.

"Fine."

"Is this supplemental?"

"Oh, yes."

He eyed me suspiciously. Jonathan approached with a Snickers bar.

"And this," I said, pushing it toward the pharmacist.

"You should have that re-checked," he said as we were leaving.

We ate burgers and fries in the tiny restaurant attached to the motel, cooked by the same woman who'd handed me our room key. Later, after Jonathan noted how filthy the carpet was, I allowed him to sleep with his head at the foot of the bed, his toe talons next to my face.

When I woke just after eight I had two voicemails from my mother. I texted that I hadn't heard from Tanner yet, and she wrote back, instructing me to pick her up at the Marquette airport at 8:30pm. She'd be waiting outside near baggage claim. Jonathan was curled in a ball, hugging his pillow. I'd stolen all the covers.

My face was under serious siege. More lumps had joined the forces overnight and all now leaked suspicious liquid. In the shower, I located new recruits on my arms. My forehead felt hot, and while dressing, I shivered.

A meek sun gradually brightened as Jonathan and I drove up and down country roads. I concentrated our search on the town I'd lived in as a small child. Modest brick homes dotted the highway and dirt roads. A motel with an attached bar stood at a small intersection, a motorcycle

parked out front, a For Sale sign swinging from its headlight. A gas station with one pump advertised lottery tickets. None of it looked familiar.

Then, at the end of a gravel road, I saw a house I thought looked like ours. I pulled over across the street and tried to imagine the tree in full leaf or the driveway with mountains of snow on either side. I didn't have memories of this in-between, this gray blankness. It was all lakes and green canopies, or being pulled in a red sled through silent stretches of white.

The driveway was empty and led to a small brown ranch, a prefab home set sideways on the lot. It looked like the trailers on movie sets temporarily lived in by people like my boss. If this had been our house, it no longer backed to woods; vast farm fields encroached on the yard, and next to the driveway, a row of dry, mangled stalks had dropped over dead. I got out of the car and walked along the side of the house, searching for the stepping stones, but the ground was hidden under dead leaves. A graying rope dangled from an ancient oak. I had a flash of my mother pushing me on a swing, her hair long and dark then, dappled with sunlight.

"Can I help you?" A woman stood behind me, her arms crossed over a purple sweatsuit.

I apologized and told her I might have once lived in her house.

"You don't know where you lived? Most people know if they lived in a house or not." A lifelong yooper. Mohst peeepole noooo.

"I was a child."

"This some new joke? Pretending you lived someplace?"

I started walking back to the car, and the woman followed me to the driveway. In the rearview mirror I watched her become smaller until her purple figure disappeared.

"Was that the house?" Jonathan said.

"I hope not," I said. "I think so."

We hit four nearby towns before noon, but didn't see Tanner's truck, a junky Chevrolet that our uncle had given him before he died. Our uncle was our father's younger brother and had

looked and sounded like him. He and Tanner had been close, and now my brother had an unhealthy attachment to the truck. He worked odd jobs and spent gig money on a new alternator, rotors, a timing belt. The truck's color was what he lovingly called, "baby shit yellow."

Around one, Tanner called. He sounded like he'd just woken up. He was staying in a duplex he'd found online. "The guy's cool with day-to-day rent. And he doesn't mind musicians." He didn't even acknowledge that he'd disappeared.

"Just so you know, Mom's on her way."

"Shit."

"You didn't answer your phone for days."

"Yeah, I'm borrowing Les's."

"Who the fuck is Les?"

"This guy here. I stuck my phone in Angela's purse before I left."

"Why?"

"So she couldn't call me." He made a nervous clicking noise. "Sorry it took me so long to call. I couldn't remember your number, so I had to call Angela again to get it. Are you mad?"

"No." It was hard for me to stay angry at him. "I'm coming over, what's the address?"

"Where are you?"

"Down the road."

Tanner was waiting in the drive when I pulled up, standing in the way he had since childhood: head down, shoulders hunched, knees angled toward each other, then the quick glance up, the shy wave. He wore skinny jeans and an old denim jacket over a t-shirt; he looked like an ad for Levi's.

We hugged first and then the boys embraced. Jonathan said, "You really don't look like a heroin addict. The skinny part maybe, but your face and teeth look normal."

"Thanks. You might be thinking of meth, though." Tanner turned to me. "*Your* face, however, does not look normal."

A burly man in a detached garage nodded at us. "Hey Les," Tanner said. "That's Les," he said. Behind the garage, out of sight from the highway, sat Tanner's truck, parked under a tree. We went inside. I prepared myself for crusty dishes and bottles of pharmaceuticals, but his rental was tidy. A single long room contained a black futon, a small table and chairs, and a seventies kitchen. Natural light streamed through a large window. On the table, stacks of paper sat under a full ashtray, and his open guitar case exposed the instrument, its wood grain gleaming in the sun.

Tanner flopped on the futon and smiled at us. Jonathan sat next to him and I lowered myself to the floor. The carpet was rust shag and coordinated with the kitchen.

"How's Angela? Did she say anything?" Tanner said.

He didn't ask how I was. "She's fine. Yes, she spoke."

"She wanted to come," Jonathan said.

Tanner sat forward.

"I didn't know if it was a good idea," I said.

"No, I get it." He looked like he might cry. "I tried to get her to come with me." He laughed and then sucked air through his teeth as if preparing for a swift kick in the balls. "I asked her to marry me."

"You're nineteen," I said.

"So?"

When Tanner found something he loved he flung himself at it headfirst until it became his life. Music. Drugs. Our uncle's truck. Maybe he should've gotten married. I knew plenty of girls who were looking to become someone's obsession.

"She said no," Tanner said.

No one said anything for a while and we could hear Les whacking something outside.

"Seriously though, what's going on with your face?" Tanner said.

"She won't go to the doctor," Jonathan said.

"Wait'll Mom sees it." Tanner came over to examine me. I was in direct sunlight and could imagine the caked and peeling mess under natural conditions. He squatted and leaned forward. He'd let his beard grow in a little and it made him look more like our father. Up close he appeared healthy, vibrant even. He'd had a haircut somewhat recently and his curls fell near his eyes. I couldn't always tell if he was well or happy, but I could tell if he was using. He wasn't. I felt tired for the first time in days and I lay down on my back and closed my eyes into the sun. I could feel Tanner hovering over me.

"It looks contagious," he said. Then he touched the top of my head and I opened my eyes and squinted up at him. "Sorry you thought you had to come," he said. "Hi."

"Hi," I said.

We grabbed lunch at a diner in Marquette. Our waitress was a blonde college girl who took it upon herself to make sure all of Tanner's needs were met. She refilled our water each time we drank. Jonathan and Tanner talked about the album he was working on and I listened, drowsy with the comfort of watching my brother eat.

I'd left my mother a voicemail earlier, letting her know I'd found Tanner, and she called during her layover in Minneapolis while we were eating lunch. Her message was breathless and joyful. "I'm still coming," she said. "The whole thing feels off."

After lunch, Tanner drove us around in his truck and pointed out landmarks from our parents' former life. The restaurant Mom waited tables at in college, the park where our father played pick-up basketball, the hospital where Tanner had been born. I rode up front and Jonathan squeezed in the raised back between the two of us. It looked like he was in a car seat.

"I found our old house," Tanner said. "A lady lives there now. She fed me lunch." He lit another cigarette and turned down the music. "She let me hang out in the garage where Dad did

woodworking. I stayed out there for a while. Her dead husband's tools were still in there and I think maybe some of them were Dad's." He had a coughing fit and ash fell into his lap. "The lady remembered Mom and Mom always said she left a bunch of Dad's things behind." He looked at me. "I stole an old planer."

I shrugged.

We swerved a little as he dug around under his seat. "Do you think it's Dad's?" he said, brandishing the metal tool at me.

"Sure," I said.

He turned the planer over in his hands and then shoved it back under the seat. "This lady was weird, though. She had all these Easter decorations, pastel bunnies everywhere, and she said something."

I waited for a moment, then said, "Yeah?"

He shook his head like he'd changed his mind. After a while he said, "They cut the woods down where he died."

"Brown house, sideways on the lot, end of a gravel road?"

He looked stunned. "Good memory."

"We went there yesterday," Jonathan said.

"Did you go in?"

"No," I said.

Tanner didn't drink, so we had to fill the day with wholesome activities. This meant hiking through a frozen forest to witness icy rivers and small falls. My brother walked fast and talked faster, while Jonathan and I struggled to keep up. Tanner shouted over his shoulder that working on this solo album, just being up here, had made him excited about his next project, an experimental piece. A guy he knew near campus had a home recording studio and a theremin.

You could now get an electronic gamelan orchestra! I kept looking back at Jonathan to see if he seemed concerned, but he didn't.

We entered a thick grove and the trail thinned and steepened. The trees crowded out the sky. Here, snow was on the ground. We all fell silent. As we went on, the darkness increased and the scent of pine grew thick, almost medicinal. Beneath our feet, dead needles muted the snow's crunch. Tanner sprinted up a large hill like a prize fighter. I tried to keep pace but watched him disappear once he reached the top. Behind me, in the distance, his back to me, Jonathan had stopped to rest. I ran after my brother. The sores on my arms were itchy and tender, and even while jogging uphill, heart hammering, I couldn't shake a deep chill.

At the top, there was the clear sound of rushing water. The trees thinned out and the trail widened, and a little daylight streamed onto the path. I thought of yelling for Tanner, but instead, I followed the sound of the water, which guided me off the trail, over a fallen oak dusted in snow, down a small hill into a ravine, and to the edge of a fast river, where Tanner sat on a boulder, smoking. I stumbled over slippery rocks and sat beside him.

He didn't look at me. "Do you want to know what that lady in our old house said? She said-" he pointed his cigarette at me, inches from my face. His eyes were rimmed red. "She said that the neighbor wanted the woods gone, that he couldn't stand hearing the hunters shooting anymore, after he found Dad out there." The glow of Tanner's cigarette grew fainter and I watched the smoke twist and escape. "Why would Mom lie?"

"I don't know," I said.

The cigarette burned out.

He stared at me hard, then shoved the cigarette into his pocket. "How could you not know? You were there."

I pictured my father's mustache, his favorite old yellow sweatshirt Mom hated, the way his lips were always red and cold when he'd come in from outside. The day our mother told me

he'd died, the huddles of adults in dark clothing clogging our kitchen. The day of the funeral when I went to a neighbor's house, and from the window of her grown daughter's empty bedroom, watched cardinals fight. For weeks after, the women sleeping on our couch and in chairs, braiding my hair, packing my lunch, telling me my mother was sick, resting. The snowmobile, still parked in the garage, dry. Maybe I'd always known. "I'm not sure," I said.

"God, you have the worst memory." He stood and turned away from me.

"I'm sorry." I'd been apologizing for my memory for years, lying, telling Tanner I barely remembered our father. It was unfair for me to have what he'd always needed: years of kaleidoscopic, dizzying footage. But now, as I sat on the cold rock and conjured my happy memories, they felt like those dreams where you know one thing isn't quite right and so none of it can be real.

Tanner rocked on his heels. He looked up at the sky. "I'm just like him," he said. "Everyone's always saying that. Oh, you look just like your Dad. You remind me of your father. Mom says it all the time."

For a long while, I hugged him while he shook, and a steady terror rose in me. Water gushed and hurtled past.

When he saw Jonathan staggering toward us from upstream, Tanner let go. One of Jonathan's pant legs was soaked, and with each step, his shoe burped. "I slipped," he said.

On the way back, Tanner got us briefly lost, and when we reached the parking lot, the sun had set. We must have walked ten miles. At Tanner's duplex we scarfed sandwiches, before piling into my rental to pick up my mother. As I drove, I whispered to Tanner, asked if he was going to tell her that he knew about our father.

"No," he said. "I can't process all that right now."

I spotted my mother right away, illuminated under a streetlight; no one else had her gait: an elegant smoothness at too rapid a pace, as if she were exiting a store after shoplifting. She was

dressed for work, in flowy black pants, a blazer, and a dark silk scarf. She climbed in back with Jonathan and hugged him, then embraced Tanner from behind. “Hi sweetheart, how are you feeling?” she said.

“I’m good, Mom,” he said. He turned around and they looked at each other while I navigated the few cars at Arrivals.

My mother squeezed my shoulder a few times and I resisted the urge to shrug her off.

“Look at this,” she said, peering out the window. “When your father and I lived here we would have been buried under snow this time of year.”

“Fucking fascists, ruining the planet,” Tanner said.

“I always thought your generation used that word too casually.”

“Fuck?” Tanner said.

“Fascists,” our mother said. “But they’re making a comeback.”

The three of us nodded.

“You can’t become complacent,” she said, looking at us. “For your future children.”

“I’m definitely not having children,” Tanner said. “Who would be stupid enough to have children? It’s going to be a nightmare in twenty years.”

“I want grandbabies. Humans are adaptive, life will go on.”

“You’re pathologically optimistic,” Tanner said. He lit a cigarette and cracked a window.

“How’s Mick?” I said.

My mother glanced at her watch. “He’s probably speaking right about now.”

“What’s this?” Tanner said.

“Oh, just some work thing,” she said. “So, I hope you aren’t hiding out up here and all out of sorts over The Pole Vaulter. You know you’ll be back together next week.”

“I’m not out of sorts. And don’t call her that, her name’s Angela.”

“The Pole Vaulter?” Jonathan said.

“She was a pole vaulter in high school,” my mother said, shrugging. “Showed up on the college scene to vault my son’s pole and break his heart.”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” Tanner said.

We rode in silence for a few minutes. I watched in the rearview as my mother unwrapped her scarf. Since I’d last seen her she’d cut her hair short, almost shaved on the sides. I imagined her students telling her how dope it was. She removed her glasses and rubbed her eyes; she looked tired and older than I remembered, and I felt a little surge of love.

“I just have to say this,” Tanner said, then paused for a minute.

I tried to look at him in the rearview. I couldn’t get a deep breath.

“The suspense,” our mother said.

“I’m really sorry you all came all the way up here,” he said. His voice shook and I kept my eyes on the road. A man was walking along the side of the highway with his thumb out, and when we passed him he flicked us off.

“Oh, honey,” our mother said, and touched one of his curls.

Then it was quiet again for a while.

“Where am I going?” I finally said.

“I’m at the Holiday Inn,” my mother said. “But I’m starving. I suppose you already ate.”

“Yeah,” Jonathan said. “Right before we picked you up. We’re stuffed.”

“We can sit with you, Mom. Where do you want to go?” I said.

We ended up at the hotel and walked toward the restaurant. It had begun to snow lightly, and in the parking lot, under the halos of streetlights, a strong wind from off the lake carried the flakes sideways. A young father stood outside the door, jiggling a toddler having a meltdown. I locked eyes with her and she contorted her face into a grotesque, red mess and screamed.

“I remember that age,” our mother said. “Life is just too much for them to take in.” She leaned over and began talking to the wailing child. “It’s still hard for mine even now that they’re grown. Those are my babies,” she said, pointing to us.

The girl looked at us and shoved her hand in her mouth. The wailing ceased. Tanner and Jonathan went inside.

“It’s so hard being little, isn’t it?” my mother was saying.

The girl nodded and wiped snot from her mouth.

“I’ll bet if you sit nicely for your Daddy, the skies will bless us with a snow day.”

She looked at her father. She stretched a chubby finger to the snow.

“I fucking hope not,” he said. “I can’t afford it.”

“Is she a Cancer?” my mother said, and I cringed.

On the brim of the man’s baseball cap, snowflakes were collecting. “I have no idea,” he said, and went back inside.

As soon as she saw me in the light, my mother grabbed my jaw with one gloved hand. “My God,” she said. “It looks like something’s eating your face.”

The four of us clustered behind the hostess stand, waiting for someone to come over.

“I’m dealing with it.”

“Fake news. She’s smearing snake oil on it and won’t see a doctor,” Jonathan said.

“Actually, we’re leaving,” my mother said, waving away the ponytailed hostess.

The doctor at the walk-in clinic sent us to the ER once he saw the colony on my arms. I was running a fever. My mother insisted on driving. “I expect this sort of thing from Tanner, but not you,” she said.

“Thanks,” Tanner said.

She kept glancing at me in the passenger seat, although it was too dark to see.

"Why wouldn't you see a doctor?"

"I don't have insurance."

"Because you're floating, working for Mr. LaLa Land. You know you can pay me back for medical expenses. What if I hadn't come? You need to take care of yourselves. I can't always—" She shook her head and gripped the wheel. "What did I do wrong? Jonathan, do you torture your parents the way my children torture me?"

Jonathan started to speak but Tanner said, "You don't have to answer that."

Only when we entered the hospital could I see that she'd been crying.

They ran all sorts of tests and stuck me on a drip IV with an antibiotic cocktail. The doctor said they wanted to keep me on it for a few hours, just to get a head start, then they'd discharge me with pills. He had a southern lilt and a five o'clock shadow. The official diagnosis was impetigo with the complication of mild cellulitis.

"I thought I only had to worry about that when they were children," my mother said.

The doctor shook his head. "Adults can get it too."

They both looked at me as if I'd done something wrong.

Tanner fell asleep in his chair, his skinny legs splayed, his head on Jonathan's shoulder. I wanted to stay hooked up to the drip, in that warm bed, with my brother safe, forever. Out the window, it was snowing harder, in thick clumps.

After a while, the nurses and doctors left, Tanner woke up, and he and my mother and Jonathan dragged their chairs to my bed.

"Sorry," I said.

"I'm just glad it's not me for once," Tanner said.

"Honestly, what were you thinking?" my mother said.

Recently, I'd been thinking of my brother, age fifteen. He'd quit shaving, cutting his hair, trimming his nails, giving a shit. His blue eyes had seemed to take up the entirety of his face; he

looked like some astonished ascetic. I had come home for a visit and was applying mascara in our shared bathroom. He stood behind me and watched. “You care so much about your body,” he said. “Doesn’t that make you sad?” At the time I’d been frightened, told him he should care more for his; he was always leaping over bonfires, breaking bones. But lately, I’d been trying to relax my grip on my own body to see what it felt like to be more like him. I let my heels grow thick and callused. I recycled reminders for dental and preventative check-ups. I quit shaving. I quit flossing. There was no one around to notice, and I felt a kind of terrifying relief.

“I was thinking it sounded nice to convalesce in a mediocre hospital,” I said.

“When are you heading out, Mom?” Tanner said.

“Anxious to get rid of me?” She smiled at him but he was looking at the floor. “Maybe tomorrow, but I’d like to stop by your place first.”

“So you can search the premises?” Tanner said.

“It would make me feel better to see where you’ve been staying,” she said.

“It’s really clean,” Jonathan said. “And I checked the bathroom cabinets. All clear.”

Tanner glanced at him but didn’t say anything.

“No prescription changes or anything, right?” she said.

“Yeah, Mom.”

“Are you still seeing Alan weekly?”

“I told you I’d tell you if I switched doctors.”

She kissed his forehead and he let her.

“You can ride back to Detroit with me tomorrow,” I said to my mother.

“Oh, I have to get back. I’ll get a flight out tomorrow if you’re all leaving then.” She squeezed my hand. “I’ll see you both soon for Christmas?”

We looked to Tanner but he was staring past us, into the hallway, where a cart rolled by, pushed by a male nurse.

“Jonathan, will you drive the rental back?” I said. “So I can ride with Tanner?”

“I can’t drive, remember?” he said.

“It’s okay,” Tanner said. He ran a hand over his mouth. “I’m staying.” We all waited for him to keep talking. Down the hallway, a machine beeped. “I’m gonna take some time off from school, finish these songs.” He looked at our mother. “I feel good here, Mom.”

Though I wanted to, I couldn’t trust him. All I could think of was our father and a single gunshot ringing from the woods, of Tanner’s new fear that despair might run in his veins.

My mother observed my brother. She licked her lips and didn’t blink.

I’d suffered night terrors the year Tanner was born, the year our father died. Cloaked, faceless giants chased me into the basement, our house trembling. On the exterior walls they slashed blood-red symbols in some forgotten alphabet. I fled, cradling Tanner, knowing they wanted only him. I’d wake, screaming, and run into his room, and he’d be asleep on his back, light tinkles of music floating from a machine that cast fish shapes across the walls in peaceful blues and greens. I’d listen to his little puffs of breath. Sometimes, I’d wake up much later, cold, curled on the braided rug on his floor.

Now, my mother resisted asking about the logistics of a leave from school. She didn’t ask how he’d pay rent or find a new doctor. “We can talk about it,” she said. “Let’s sleep on it.”

Like so many times before, I’d have to decide if I should betray my brother by telling our mother what he wanted kept secret. The endless weighing of safety versus loyalty.

“I’ll ride back with you.” Jonathan nudged my arm, and I tried to smile.

The three of them rose to head to the cafeteria, so my mother could finally eat. Tanner’s news had filled her with an alert liveliness; her eyes sparkled with fear.

“Do you want anything?” she said, turning back to me.

What a ridiculous question.

After they left, I thought of the drive home with Jonathan, of the great lake that would this time be on our right, of the gray straits and miles of highway and the tiny, close room he'd return to. Maybe I would stay there with him for another night or two, maybe until they kicked me out. I thought of my brother in the sagging duplex, sprawled on the futon alone, his guitar resting on his stomach, his face washed white in that bright sunlight. My mother closing her tray table and returning her seat to its full upright position. My mother, eyes closed in meditation, face serene and hopeful, attempting to redirect all the useless, painful films of her mind. My efficiency apartment, with its azure walls and courtyard of cacti.

One day, when I was four or five, I asked my father how he built things. He took me out to the garage, to his workshop, and he pointed at tools, giving them names. The space smelled of sawdust and varnish and the air was humid and still. Outside the small window, summer greenery pressed against the glass. My father sat me on the floor on a blanket and placed a piece of wood in front of me. He kneeled, and with my hand on his, showed me how to use a saw. We worked together until the blade was almost through, then he watched as I finished and the smaller piece fell away. "Attagirl," he said. I did another slow cut before he turned his back for a moment, and that's when I took a long, thin slice off the pad of my thumb. It's the first time I can remember seeing my body bleed. I watched it pool up and over the cut before I began to cry.

"You're alright," my father said. He rushed me inside. When he dabbed the cut with tissue I thought of his face after he'd shaved, the little white scraps always dotting his jaw, bonded with blood. He washed out my wound, kissed it, sealed it with a bandage. My mother had been reading on the couch and they argued as I climbed under the blanket and onto her lap. Later, when my father came back inside, he found us still under the blanket, eating windmill cookies and watching cartoons. He brought the scent of wood shavings in with him.

“Look at you two.” He kissed my mother’s lips. “You know how to appreciate the simple things, creature comforts,” he said to me, wiggling his index finger under my chin. “You’re just like your mother.” Even then, that statement had filled me with a mix of revulsion and pride. He smiled and kissed the top of my head. “It’s a gift,” he said.

Shelby Drives

The first time I saw Kendra she was across the room at a crowded house party, standing on one leg; the other—bare, outstretched, and raised over her head like a cat cleaning itself—rested on the shoulder of a red-haired girl. Across from Kendra, the girl stood as if the naked ankle near her neck were the most natural thing in the world. I was there with Bruno, the guy I was dating at the time, but I tried to catch glimpses of the girls through the crowd, irritated by the circles of men that kept forming around them. Finally, Kendra brought her leg down in one elegant move, tugged at her shorts, and looked over at me. I glanced away, but throughout the night, I often felt the weight of her gaze. We didn't speak at the party, but I thought about her afterwards: her boy-short blond hair, her disproportionately large smile.

A month later, I saw her at a pool party. Reclined on a chair, she wore sunglasses, the same cutoff shorts, and a striped pastel bikini top, her small breasts covered by two tiny triangles. I felt formal and ridiculous as I stood sweating in a long sundress, nodding along to the stories around me, pretending to listen. Bruno noticed me watching her. He asked if we knew each other and I said no, just before she climbed off the chaise and walked over.

"You look familiar," she said to me, ignoring Bruno.

I told her my name was Layne and stuck my hand out for her to shake.

She stared down at it, stepped closer and said, "You party?"

"Yeah," I said.

Bruno snorted. We were college students, nineteen; neither of us did drugs or drank often, and during sex we stuck to missionary. I was a curious girl, just not a self-starter.

"Come on." She folded into the crowd, her blond head bouncing toward the house.

"I'm staying here," Bruno said.

I followed her inside to the kitchen where it was quiet and cool. She yanked a wad of paper towels from the roll and wiped sweat from her chest and stomach, then removed her sunglasses and dabbed at her face. Without the thick eyeliner she'd worn at the house party, she looked younger; raw and exposed. Her eyes, rimmed pink, brought to mind albino mice. "I'm a fucking mess," she said. "But everyone calls me Kendra." She stuck the wad down her shorts and wiggled it around her crotch. "Why do people want to sit around sweating?" She crumpled the paper towel into a ball and shot it at the wastebasket in the corner, missing by at least a foot.

"You could swim." I said.

"I have a raging UTI."

I didn't know what that was so I gave an exaggerated nod.

She leaned against the counter next to me, pulled a baggie from her pocket, and fingered pills through the plastic. "I don't have anything good." Hot orange polish flashed from her bitten nails and made her hands look tan. "Ooh, I forgot I had these." She selected blue pills from the bag and set them on the counter. "Sorry I only have three," she said, reaching across my chest to open the fridge. Our bare arms touched, and I could smell her, a sharp tang mixed with a sweet floral. The fridge released a whoosh of cold air and Kendra moaned and moved to stand in front of it. She clanked containers around inside and came back with two bottles of fruity vodka drinks. "I hate these," she said. She smashed the tops off against the edge of the counter, took a long drink, and swallowed two of the blue pills. She slid the third toward me.

"What is it?"

"Klonopin." She watched me, then added, "It's a benzo."

I blinked at her, and a smile bloomed over her whole face, making me suddenly bold, so when she handed me the vodka drink, I tilted my head back and swallowed the pill.

"Let's go upstairs," she said. She grabbed two more bottles from the fridge and led me to a bedroom filled with records, glass pipes, and an elaborate ant farm.

"Is this your room?"

She glanced back at me. "Do I look like someone who would pick out that maroon duvet? Thanks a lot. No, my boyfriend, Clyde, well, ex—he just moved out—he lives here now."

"Should we be in here?"

"It's fine. We're still, like, friends," she said, flopping onto the bed.

She told me to put on a record and it felt like a lot of pressure, but I settled on *Court and Spark*, and we listened, while Kendra tapped rhythmically on the glass to the ant farm, ransacked desk drawers, and snooped around in the nightstand. After she flipped the record, my bones began to discharge a glowing joy, and muscles slackened that must have been clenched since childhood. We drank, and watched the sky turn pink while Joni sang to us.

When we came downstairs, I realized that I'd left my phone in Bruno's car, and, tripping between the throngs of people hugging goodbye, I hoped I wouldn't find him. During the shuffle I'd lost Kendra, and as I was searching for her, a girl began following me, saying that Bruno had left. She seemed to suffer from some circuitry defect, her speed stuck on high. I kept thanking her and turning away, but she kept popping up again, tapping my shoulder and offering me a ride. I finally said, "Thank you, but I'm trying to politely decline," and then I heard Kendra's laugh just to my left.

"Did you just say *politely decline*?" She grabbed my hand and led me out to a side yard, where she pointed at a men's mountain bike. "We'll borrow it," she said, and jumped on an old blue cruiser and took off down the sidewalk.

It was dark now, but still so warm that the wind on my face and shoulders registered only as a pleasant rippling sensation. I pedaled, giddy, behind Kendra, wondering why I never biked anymore. I could go so fast! Turning was such fun! She still wasn't wearing a shirt, and I wondered if she often biked through Ann Arbor alone, in the dark, half-naked. When we reached

a wide city park, she slowed, I caught up, and we rode side by side over pitted asphalt. Every so often, Kendra stood on her bike and swerved in tight little zigzags.

She lived just on the other side of the park, in a basement studio with one sad window above the door. Inside, a trace of mildew wafted from the bathroom, and Kendra lit a tall novena candle inside a defunct fireplace and took two beers from the fridge. Nests of cords and electronic equipment covered a desk that had been cobbled together from plywood. “That’s Clyde’s DJ shit,” she said. “He took all the good stuff and left his garbage.” She swiped a small pile to the floor.

There was no couch, only a rumpled bed in the corner. There, we talked and drank and ate an entire box of Cheez-Its. She was from Kansas City, had moved to Ann Arbor with her family at fifteen, and had two brothers and divorced parents, both starving artists. She’d never been raped but had come close twice, her favorite color was yellow, and Clyde was the first guy she’d slept with, when she was seventeen. She was twenty now, studying nursing for practical reasons (stability and she didn’t mind blood and guts), but what she really loved was writing plays. From under the mattress she pulled a huge stack of notebooks filled with handwritten drafts. Her dream was to be a playwright in New York City. She hardly asked about my life, but I didn’t mind; I had no burning desire to disclose my boring suburban upbringing thirty miles away near cornfields.

One topic that seemed to interest her was my missing father, and when I told her I had no wish to meet him, she seemed disappointed. Except for a brief period when I was fourteen, I’d never pressed my mother, and I had no idea what sort of man he was.

The other thing that interested Kendra was that I was an artist, and she wanted to hear all about the fine arts degree I was pursuing in painting. She was the first person I’d met who spoke about being an artist as if it were rational, a possibility. Until I met Kendra, I had assumed I’d end up working at a gallery or eking out a living in graphic design.

She sat up straighter in bed and leaned toward me. “What’s your vision for your career? Like your dream representation?”

I didn’t say that I didn’t understand the last question, but I otherwise told her the truth: in my family, the arts were hobbies, and the only artist I knew was a friend’s mother. I idolized her, and imagined my future self like her: making my own soap, hanging clothes to dry outside in summer, painting in my garage on the weekends, giving my work away for free.

She laughed, and I felt childish. “You sound like my parents and their friends,” she said. They refused to pander to shallow definitions of success, or to toil away, lobotomized, in pursuit of 401Ks. They applied for residencies, did side gigs.

“That sounds like a dream,” I said.

“Yeah, if you like being poor,” she said. Her nursing degree was only to pay the bills, so she didn’t end up like her parents: bitter, with stacks of overdue electric bills. “If I’m not successful by the time I’m thirty, I’m giving up,” she said. “I know I’ll never be rich as a playwright, but I at least want an audience. Don’t you?”

I thought about the class critiques that left me anxious and confused, and occasionally, unable to paint. “I don’t know,” I said.

“You need to aim higher.”

Later, when she introduced me at parties, she said, “This is Layne. She’s an artist. A painter,” and I felt a frightening, thunderous sort of love.

At one point that night, it did occur to me to call Bruno and tell him where I had gone, but I was pretty sure he was still seeing his ex-girlfriend. I felt relaxed and sleepy. I didn’t want to bother. Just as I started to nod off from the Klonopin, Kendra jumped out of bed.

“Want to see something?” she said, jogging to the other end of the room. She knelt down and rummaged around in a large Ikea wardrobe. It was dim in the apartment, but I could tell she was pulling something onto her feet, and she came teetering back in red latex thigh-high boots.

"Whoa. Stripper boots," I said. I tried not to stare at the milky tops of her thighs.

She stopped in front of the bed, looking a million feet tall. "I'm a dancer. What do you think about that?"

I sat up. I'd never known a stripper before. "Sorry-"

"It's fine. Some girls are offended by the word stripper, but I'm not."

"I thought dancers had to have long hair," I said stupidly.

She sat down beside me on the bed and her boots crunched. "No, a lot of clients like that I look different. Small tits, short hair." She smacked her chest when she said tits. "If we're gonna be friends, you need to be cool with it." She turned to me. "So does it make you uncomfortable?"

"No," I said, unsure. "I think it's cool. I couldn't do it." I imagined myself on stage, naked, sweating under hot lights and the scrutiny of men. A nightmare in my body, but maybe not in hers. "Do you like it?"

"I'm an exhibitionist, so yeah, but it's not my life. I have school and another job. Well, I actually just quit because Clyde works there too, but I'm looking. The owner at the club gives me shit midday hours because I'm a new girl, and days are slow. And I don't want to dance more than a couple days a week. I mean, it's empowering, and the other girls are nice, but it's not something I could do all the time." She sighed. "I need a boring side job with guaranteed hours."

I thought of my part-time job as Assistant Manager at Yaba's Grill Shack. We needed a new hire, but I couldn't imagine Kendra in a hair net standing over vats of oil. "You'll get a job," I said. "Everyone would want you."

"You think?" She smiled the huge smile again and leaned in close to me.

I inhaled, about to speak, but she laughed then, and in her breath I could smell the lime she'd squeezed into her beer.

She sat back and looked at my face. “It’s late, so I assume you’re not trying to find that guy you were with? You can sleep here, if you want?” There was need in her voice that thrilled me. When I nodded, she said, “I was worried you might politely decline.”

We talked for a while longer in bed, and then Kendra pulled off her boots, wiggled out of her shorts, swallowed a round white pill, and curled up on her side. I was afraid if I moved she might ask me to sleep on the floor, and despite the benzo, I lay awake for a long while in the glow of a single strand of white string lights, listening to her quiet snore. After a while, she rolled onto her stomach and kicked the duvet off half her body. A few fine, light hairs were visible on her one exposed ass cheek, and I looked for too long, imagining what they would feel like to touch. I’d never been with a girl before.

I woke to Kendra making coffee. During the night, my sundress had twisted up around my body under the covers. I didn’t want to move. She was fully dressed in leggings and a tank top, and her short hair was slicked back after a shower. A single beam of sun blazed through the window above the door, and landed near the stove in a square at her feet.

“Sorry, I’m a morning person,” she said.

I wanted to ask how that worked with her schedule, but instead, I lied and said, “Me too.” In those days I slept until ten, or sometimes, noon. I wasn’t taking summer classes and my shifts at Yaba’s didn’t start until the afternoon or evening.

“I told a friend I’d stop by before work, but do you want to hang out now?” she said.

I got the sense that she didn’t want me to leave, but I also felt an illogical jealousy of the friend she’d rather spend time with. “The red-haired girl?” I said.

“Who?” Kendra bit into a cold slice of pizza from the fridge but didn’t offer me any.

“The friend you’re going to see.” I sat up in bed.

She tilted her head while she chewed like she didn’t know what I was talking about.

"I think I saw you at a house party last month, on Deacon. You were with a redhead."

"Oh, *Charlie*. She works at the club with me. No, I'm stopping by Clyde's." She put the half-eaten slice back in the fridge. "Why didn't you tell me you recognized me?"

I told her I didn't know and felt like she was looking right through me.

We ate pancakes at a diner downtown where Kendra knew two of the waiters, then I told her I had to stop by Bruno's to get my phone. I didn't want to see him. I even hated him a little. I'd thought about breaking things off a few times, but our relationship was so casual and my social life at the time so abysmal, that I continued to see him every few days. Once, after sex, he'd grabbed my love handles and said, "I bet you love working at Yaba's." I wanted Kendra to come with me so I could get my phone without a conversation about the previous night, and I told her this much. She said, "Allow me to be of service."

By the time we got to Bruno's we were sweaty, the sun was high, and it was after noon. I warned Kendra there had recently been bike thefts at the apartment, and she said, 'They aren't mine," before leaning the cruiser against a tree. I tried to camouflage the mountain bike by parking it between others sporting elaborate u-locks.

Bruno lived alone in a one-bedroom in an ugly building erected in the seventies. He didn't answer at first, and when he came to the door he looked like he'd just woken up. His curls were frizzy in front but matted in back, and his cheeks were flushed, and I wondered if his ex was inside so I'd finally have to stop seeing him. But he said, "Come on in, ladies." Kendra marched ahead and sat on the floor in front of the couch. Bruno and I sat in chairs. His apartment was neurotically tidy and always smelled of Febreeze.

"Nice painting," Kendra said from the floor, pointing at a colorful fish. "It's very sad."

"Yeah, my dead brother painted it in rehab."

I had never asked about that painting, had thought it crude and embarrassing and had

assumed it was Bruno's work. I'd been sleeping with him for four months and had never heard of his dead brother.

"Shit, I'm sorry," Kendra said, and the two of them locked eyes and shared a moment.

I interrupted their gaze to ask about my phone, and Bruno went into his bedroom to get it. While he was gone, Kendra moved into the splits, and when he returned, she was still in position, her face planted in the carpet near her knee.

"I've never actually known anyone who could do that," Bruno said, sitting back down. "Here," he said, and handed me my phone without taking his eyes off Kendra.

She sat up, and while holding eye contact with Bruno, eased her left leg behind her shoulder and straightened it, her toes pointed. "Mmmmmm that feels so good," she said. "Do you stretch Bruno?"

"Absolutely not," he said.

"That's too bad. It releases trauma, emotions, anything that's been stored up." She lowered her leg back down and then repeated the behind-the-head move with her other leg. Through her leggings, you could see every indent and curve of hamstring, calf, pelvis. I couldn't look away. I simultaneously wanted her to keep going—my own thrill compounding as Bruno squirmed—and wished she'd stop and sit on the couch like a normal person. "What are you storing up Bruno?" she said.

"Nothing. I do martial arts, you know, for release." He looked down and blushed a little. I'd never seen him so uncomfortable, and in that moment, I admired and envied Kendra's efficiency.

"Ah, a warrior." She appraised him and moved into lotus position.

He tried to hide it, but he almost smiled. He didn't realize she was making fun of him.

After about ten minutes, Kendra became bored and bailed. I knew this because she said, "I'm bored. I'm gonna go."

As soon as she left the apartment, Bruno exhaled. “That girl is messed up,” he said. “I feel sorry for her.”

I told him he was a misogynist, a prude, a puritan, and quite likely a fascist. I said he was intimidated by and therefore trying to suppress female sexuality. I liked the way these words sounded coming out of my mouth. But I also worried that he could see something that I couldn’t.

He put his hands up, said, “Whoa, I’m just saying she makes me kinda uncomfortable.”

Later, I realized this was the allure; I craved the continual discomfort she unleashed, the power in it. I wanted to be a part of her disruptive force, to ride in her wake. I did not feel sorry for her. I felt the opposite: awe.

“Plus, didn’t you just meet this chick yesterday?”

“So?” I said.

I left Bruno’s apartment that day and never saw him again. Neither of us bothered to call.

A week passed, and then Kendra showed up at my apartment. When I asked how she’d found my address, she said she’d stopped by to see Bruno. I didn’t ask questions. She took a shit in my bathroom and then stretched out on my couch with her shoes on and said she was having trouble finding work. “Remember how I was telling you I need a side gig? Well, the problem is I only need ten hours because of school. Everyone wants too much from me.”

“Have you ever worked in the food service industry?” I said.

By September, we were hanging out almost every day—usually at my place—and Kendra was working short evening shifts at Yaba’s three days a week. She’d come straight from class and change into her uniform in the break room. The guys didn’t seem to mind, but I could tell it made the girls uncomfortable, especially when she didn’t wear a bra. If they complained, I told them they should examine their internalized misogyny and work through their body and/or sexuality issues. In private, I told Kendra I’d have to write her up if she kept changing in front of

everyone. I told her to do it in the bathroom. I felt like her public nakedness cheapened our intimacy. She invited me to stop by the club a few times, but I never went. I tried to pretend she didn't work there.

She slept at my apartment most weekends, and I liked that my place was consumed by her clothes, my doorway clogged with her shoes, the shelf above the sink cluttered with her cosmetics, and my fridge full of her leftovers. We went to parties thrown by my art school friends; Kendra found her nursing classmates boring. When I wasn't on campus, I was in my apartment—an attic conversion in an old Victorian—painting in the sunny nook off the kitchen. Kendra wrote or studied at the kitchen table, and we'd work side by side, in silence. I was working on a series of oil paintings from the perspective of lying outside on a sunny day, with a blanket covering your head, and your eyes wide open. The paintings were in muted shades of reds and pinks and oranges, depicting differing fabric folds and varying light.

I'd given Kendra a key, and one autumn day, she waltzed in while I was working, unshouldered her backpack, and dropped it near my easel. I had headphones in, but I could feel the thud when her books hit the floor. I'd asked her at least three times not to drop things; my landlord lived on the level below. While I painted and tried to ignore her, she stared at the canvases for a long time, until finally, I ripped out an earbud and asked what she thought. I still remember what she said. "They look like organs."

Kendra was a writer, yes, but she was an autodidact, had never studied art academically. I explained that the viewer should feel warmth, closeness, the thin veil between one's own physical body and the wider natural and spiritual world.

"Hm," she said. "I don't feel that at all. They look cold and slimy. Are these for that critique coming up?" When I nodded, she said, "Maybe you should go with the organ thing and make something up, like how the paintings are a narrative about mortality, female exposure, and

the transcendence of humans via transplants and technology."

I should have listened. At that time, a crater existed between the lush vines of my mind and the parched, lifeless renderings in my work. Kendra often pointed out this gap, urged me to work longer hours, to throw my entire being into my vocation. Now, I can see that the paintings weren't good, but that week, I chose to ignore her, and I barely survived the mauling. The nicest thing my teacher said was, "It's vaguely womb-like."

The next week, Kendra received news that she'd won a prize for a play she'd written over the summer. A local company, Wild Trillium Theatre, would produce it within the next year. She'd never asked me to read it. We invited friends to my apartment and drank cheap champagne from plastic cups. Kendra floated around the party, sparkling in a shimmery gold dress, and I watched, worried; now that she thought she was a better artist than I was, I feared I had nothing to offer. Over the following week, I kept looking for signs that she was leaving me behind.

The play was called *Shelby Drives*, and the synopsis on the company's website read: "The story of Shelby, a young naif, who, while flipping burgers at the local diner, overhears that her biological father is living in Montana and leading a cult. With the company of her plucky friend, Dakota, Shelby sets out on a road trip, uncovering a complex web of identity, longing and transformation."

I'd seen manuscripts of Kendra's play lying around, and the next time we were at her apartment, I stole one from under a stack of magazines. It had copyediting marks and clearly wasn't the final product, but it was enough. Shelby the naïve. Shelby the fry cook. Shelby the bastard. Shelby the frumpy, the chubby, the unambitious dabbler who, "painted with a childish joy, inoffensive, pretty things."

I read the play a handful of times and then threw it away in the parking lot dumpster. Over the next week, I avoided Kendra, not so much out of anger as out of shame. I scheduled us for opposite shifts and told her I was sick. Half of my closet also went in the dumpster, and I

spent more than I could afford on new clothes: trendy jeans and vintage-style t-shirts that Shelby would never wear. Whenever I reached for another cookie, I thought of Shelby and put it back. I'd needed to hear it, I told myself. It was for my own good. For the first time, I painted what frightened me, and I found I was less hesitant, experimenting with bold brush strokes. I painted my imagined father's face. A small grisaille: a self-portrait titled *Shelby*.

After the fourth or fifth day, Kendra showed up at my apartment and handed me a takeout container of soup. "For the invalid," she said. I hid the new paintings, then let her in.

She flipped through channels while filling me in on what had happened at Yaba's that day, and though I thought our conversation felt natural, she must have sensed some reticence on my part, because she laughed, walked over to where I sat on the couch, and lowered herself onto my lap. She threw her arms around my neck. "Layney," she said. "You'll be a brilliant artist. But you need to work harder and focus on your own project, not measure your success against that of your contemporaries."

Her misunderstanding was a relief. I let her think I was jealous of her work.

One night, a few weeks later, after we finished closing, we went outside to smoke. It was still warm. Crickets chirped, and revelry from neighborhood bars swam across the streets. We brushed crispy leaves aside, and sat on the little side deck made for al fresco dining, and drank rum mixed with Dr. Pepper. Kendra pulled a joint from her bra and we smoked it lying side by side on top of a picnic table. Clouds moved fast over the moon and stars; the sky kept changing. At one point she looked over at me as if she were about to say something serious, and I held my breath. She said, "Should I grow my hair out?" I told her definitely not. "You should try a short style," she said, and combed my hair back with her fingers. I knew this would only make me look chubbier. "You have such a pretty face," she said, and I reached over and put my hand on her bare thigh. It was smooth and cool. I sat up and leaned toward her, but she kept her face to

the sky. When I slid my hand under her khaki uniform shorts, she tilted her pelvis and inhaled. She closed her eyes. I inched my hand up until I felt rough lace and warm dampness, and something took root in me in that moment, a power and a desire that I would retain for the rest of my life. But at the time, I felt conflicted. With men, I was turned on by veins, arm muscles and beards, by the humiliating, yet erotic relief found in my own feeble submission. But with Kendra, I felt compelled to exercise my power. My instinct was to climb on top of her, pin her down. I wanted to make her mine. As I pressed my fingers against her, I imagined her in front of my bed, dancing in those red boots, only for me. I struggled to pull her underwear to the side, as she moaned softly and said what sounded like *please*. I pulled my hand out, and began to rip open the buttons on her shorts.

She looked at me then, brushed my hands from her waist. “Do you think because I’m a stripper I’m attracted to everyone?”

“No,” I said.

She sat up. “Do you think it automatically makes me bi?”

“No,” I said.

“Do you think if I was, I’d want you?”

Of course Dakota would never want Shelby. “No,” I said. “I’m drunk.”

She buttoned her shorts and left on foot.

I didn’t see her until her shift the following Monday. We avoided each other, speaking only when we needed to communicate vital information. No one asked if we’d had a fight; it must have been obvious. On Tuesday, a coworker named Samantha told me that Kendra had started seeing Clyde again. Samantha dropped cryptic hints that Clyde might be a criminal or in some sort of trouble, so when Kendra came in, I told her to stop seeing him. I said I was worried,

and offered her extra hours so she could quit the club, where he sometimes stopped in to see her. I held out wads of cash from my savings, which she refused to take.

"You're just like a guy," she said, and dropped the mop on the floor, leaving the job half done. While I did the books, water leaked from the mophead and trickled down the drain.

I came in on Thursday, and Ron, the owner, handed me an envelope. Inside was a ripped piece of ruled paper that said, "I quit," in red ink. Near the bottom, she'd appended, in blue ink, "Sorry. L, K." What did the L mean? Love?

At first I convinced myself Clyde had kidnapped her, until Samantha admitted that Kendra had told her she was moving away with him. "Poor thing, she'll probably end up in jail or dead," Samantha said, but I didn't believe it, though all the stories I'd been told about girls like Kendra never ended well. I was sure I'd hear from her soon; I could see the crisp fall afternoon in New York City, a few years in the future, when we'd walk from our apartment to the theater for her opening night.

I left work early that day, drove to her apartment, and stood on the brick ledge of the stairs to see down into the single window, but it looked dark and empty inside. Every other day I returned, and it was the same, until two weeks later, when two college girls sat in camp chairs, slathered in suntan oil at the entrance, guarding it like sphynx. I called and messaged Kendra online, but she never responded, and after a month, she changed her profile to living in Phoenix.

I thought of her too often. I spent my early twenties trying to eradicate all traces of Shelby. I never heard from Kendra again.

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A few months ago, I had a solo show, my first. It was in Ann Arbor; they liked that I'd grown up nearby but now lived in Brooklyn; they wanted local artists but not *too* local. This was in November, and I had recently turned twenty-eight. I had lunch with the gallery owner, and then I drove to my eighty-year-old grandmother's house, the same midcentury ranch my mother

had been raised in, outside of Ypsilanti. She was the only family member still living in the area. I watched for the signs my mother had mentioned, but at first I only noticed my grandmother's shrunken shoulders and a new, horizontal line bisecting her philtrum that appeared whenever she smiled. Later, while we had tea and cookies, she spoke about the rise of stay-at-home fathers, which mystified and delighted her. She kept repeating, "They strap babies to their stomachs and carry them around while their wives are at work! I never thought I'd live to see the day. Can you believe it?" I told her I couldn't believe it countless times. I dreaded calling my mother in Florida to tell her something needed to be done.

Earlier in the day, at lunch, the gallery owner had invited me to a party that night hosted by a local collector couple, and when I told her I couldn't come, that I was staying with my grandmother, she said, "Bring Grandma, no excuses. It's Guy Fawkes Night and the husband is British. You can't miss it." As we parted, she added, "Their collector friends will be there," implying I should show up to kiss ass, to help her sell my paintings.

I couldn't remember what Guy Fawkes Night was all about, so I was surprised when we arrived later that night and heard fireworks exploding. The house was a modern mansion perched on the river, with walls of glass, and an art-filled interior. In the foyer, glowing from a custom shelf, was a small Tracey Snelling installation: a miniature hotel with flickering lit windows and peeling paint. My grandmother wandered toward the living room while teenagers who looked like models tried to take her coat. "Oh my, Layne," she kept saying. "Oh my."

We made our way to the backyard. Groups of people in casually fine attire stood in wide circles, and children ran loops around the perimeters, occasionally shoving their way into the centers. It was so cold and dark, I could see my breath, but the number of bodies and a few well-placed Italian-looking heat lamps created a false warmth. Above our heads, strands of twinkling lights lent a soft glow, and in the center of the yard, in a stone fire pit, a huge scarecrow waited, tied to a stake, wearing a Donald Trump wig.

A man came by and offered us wine, and my grandmother and I hovered near a food table, chatting with a couple. The husband worked with the host in tech and the wife was an architect and also a British expat. Their children kept running up and interrupting, saying things like, “Mummy, I’m cold,” and “Mummy, when are we going to burn the bloke?”

“What are we teaching our children?” the woman said to me. “Did you write your lists of bad things to burn?” she asked the kids.

The girl pulled a slip of paper from her pocket that said *bullying* in a childish script.

“Very nice Bea,” the woman said, and the children ran off.

“What’s all this?” I asked.

The woman pointed to a small table, where sharpies and tiny slips of paper were spread out. “You’re supposed to write down whatever you want to burn with the effigy. Or what you want to let go of. I wrote ‘My fat arse,’” the woman said, and showed me her slip of paper.

“What did you write?” I said loudly, turning to her husband, trying to show the gallery owner that I was mingling with the patrons.

“I’d rather not say,” he said, and excused himself to talk to a man in a suit.

I chatted with the woman for a while longer before I realized my grandmother was gone.

“She’s right over there,” the woman said, pointing near the fire pit, where a group of men were trying to look useful but were mostly just squirting lighter fluid. “She’s talking to the woman of the house.”

“Oh, God,” I said.

“It’s fine. She’s his third wife,” the woman said. “Almost thirty years younger.”

I waved my grandmother over, but she either ignored me or couldn’t see with her cataracts. I excused myself and moved closer to my grandmother, trying to get her attention without interrupting. I didn’t feel like schmoozing with the homeowner, the wife whose blond hair and back were to me. As I got closer, I could hear my grandmother sharing the memory that

had recently taken up residence in her mind. She spoke of it daily, as if it had just occurred. When she was a new bride, my grandmother often stayed at her in-laws' house to cook and clean for them. As thanks, her mother-in-law gathered rainwater in buckets, and while the men were at work and her three grandsons napped, she eased my young grandmother into a kitchen chair, tucked a towel under her neck, massaged her temples, washed her hair, told her stories about the old country, and rinsed her scalp with cool, clean water. "My hair was never so soft again," my grandmother said now, touching her white head. I was about to cut in, when I heard Kendra's voice. Unchanged after a decade.

"That's so loving," Kendra said.

"She was very loving," my grandmother said. "I was so overwhelmed at the time. We had three boys and no money. It felt so good just to be touched gently by another woman, to cry."

Just then, the men around the fire began shouting, children cheered, and flames shot from the ground up to the knees of the effigy, then licked up the torso and burst across the arms. The blond wig ignited, hissed and popped.

Kendra turned around, and I could see her face in the firelight, a bit leaner, still beautiful. Her hair was the same sandy blonde, but shoulder length. She was smiling. "Come closer," she said, and waved both me and another woman to an open space behind her. When I reached the spot, her eyes hung on me for a moment before she turned back around. It was possible she didn't recognize me; I'd kept the weight off and had dyed my hair a lighter brown, but I thought I saw something in her hesitate, some flash of recognition. A minute later, I tapped her shoulder, and before I could say anything, she turned around and said, "I wasn't sure it was you." She offered a quick hug. She smelled of lemons. After noticing my empty wine glass, she invited me inside for a fresh drink.

I asked my grandmother if she would be okay for a few minutes, and she glanced at Kendra and winked at me. She found it titillating that I dated both men and women, and liked to let me know as often as possible how okay with it she was.

The kitchen was off the back of the house, and from inside, through a wall of windows, I could see the fire and the crowd, and behind that, a vast darkness that I knew was the river. Kendra fumbled with bottles on a built-in bar, then knocked over a tall mixing glass and swizzle stick. The metal clanged against the marble countertop. We hadn't yet spoken and we were alone. As I watched her mix up what looked like gin and tonics with lime, her hand shaking, at first I thought she was drunk, then I realized she was nervous.

She handed me my drink and we clinked glasses. "To surprises," she said, which struck me as odd, possibly hostile.

Kendra told me she'd left Clyde and Arizona after less than a year. Last she'd heard, he was living on a boat in Key West. She followed a man to Vermont, and after that ended, she'd moved back to Michigan and gotten a nursing job at St. Joseph. When she asked what I'd been up to, I told her I was in town for my first solo show, then felt sickened by my desire for her approval. When I told her, she smiled her enormous smile and hugged me, tightly this time, sloshing a bit of her gin onto my pants. She pushed me back and held me by the shoulders, gazing at me. "I knew you were special, Layne. But I have to say, I'm surprised."

"Oh yeah?"

"I thought maybe you'd paint in private forever. You never *wanted* anything." She stepped back and took a drink.

"Like Shelby," I said.

"What?"

"I read your play about me. I stole a copy from your apartment and read it."

She laughed. "I can barely remember what that was about, but about you? No."

“The character was a young fatherless girl who worked in fast food,” I said. Kendra nodded as I spoke, but didn’t say anything, so I kept going. “She was naïve and chubby and unambitious—she didn’t want anything.”

“It’s not about you,” Kendra said, a coolness entering her voice.

“She was a painter.”

“Shelby was mostly based on a friend of mine from high-school.” Kendra gave me a sad smile. “But I can see why you might think it was about you. You had the daddy issues.”

“I met him, like you wanted. My father. He lives in Indiana and his hobbies are hunting and alcohol.”

“Are you still in touch?”

“No,” I said.

She looked into her glass and swirled the liquid, as if it were wine. “All the things you said about Shelby, well, she’s also funny and loyal and smart. She rises to the occasion. Audiences liked Shelby.” She glanced up at me. “She’s a likable character.” Kendra took a drink, then set her cup down too forcefully. “Oh, we absolutely need to own one of your paintings,” she said. I told her I’d like that.

Over the years, I’d looked Kendra up a few times, trying to see if she’d become a playwright, but it appeared she hadn’t. “Are you still writing?” I said.

She laughed, a tight giggle that sounded nothing like her. “Oh no, none of that self-sacrifice is for me. The last play I wrote I finished six years ago, and I realized that I didn’t actually like agonizing over dialogue and my precious little feelings, putting fake people through the motions. It’s all so boring and narcissistic, you know? And thankless. Very little recognition. Very little money. Well, you know.”

As I was contemplating what to say, a sliding door opened and two toddlers stumbled in from outside, being herded from behind by a young woman with glossy curls. “Mummy,

Mummy," the little boy cried, running to Kendra, who touched his nose and squeezed his shoulder. He looked about three, and clung to the folds of her dress. The little girl, smaller and wearing a tutu, plopped onto the floor and tried to yank off her shoe.

"Sorry, Kendra," the young woman said. "They're getting so fast." She hoisted the girl into her arms and coaxed the boy into taking her hand, and they disappeared back to the fire.

"You have kids," I said, touching her arm for a moment. "They're cute." They were adorable, particularly the little girl, who looked just like Kendra.

"Yes, you have kids, and everything changes. You'll see. Things you think are massively important just, well, aren't." She smiled at me in a pitying way.

A few years back, I'd had a boyfriend who loved to tell the story of my friend, The Stripper. I'd never told him about my attraction to her; my relationship with him didn't last long. At parties, he'd find ways to casually mention that I'd been best friends with a stripper. I think he liked that it made me seem open-minded and it made him, in turn, seem cool—he was an accountant. Inevitably, someone would ask whatever happened to her, and I would say I didn't know, and then a somber mood would spill over the group, people muttering things like, *poor girl*. It was at this point that my boyfriend would say that I took creative advice from this girl, that she was formative to my artistic development. He said it like a punchline, and everyone would laugh and resume talking, the room rinsed and lightened. I always felt ill and treasonous.

Now, here she was, living a life nothing like the one I'd invented for her. "Are you still a nurse?" I said.

"Oh, no," she said, waving a hand through the air. On her ring finger was a massive diamond, flanked by smaller, but still large diamonds. "That's how I met James, but I quit after my youngest was born." She rattled the ice in her glass and tipped the last of her drink into her mouth. We were quiet for a moment, smiling at each other.

I studied her face, searching for a physical manifestation of what it was that was

different. Her upper lip looked larger, as if she'd had injections, but she otherwise looked the same as she had almost ten years earlier.

When I was sixteen, I'd driven four hours to the neighborhood I lived in as a small child, and walked a path through tall woods to a pond I still pined for. I'd thought often of the darting minnows, the spiders dancing on the surface, the gentle trees along the shoreline that reached toward the water. Of course, when I arrived, the pond was mostly dry, and blanketed in a murky maroon algae. Nothing swam or flashed. Whatever animating lifeforce it once had had been drained.

"Listen Layne," she said, then didn't finish. She gestured to my empty glass and I handed it over. She mixed up two more drinks. Her hands had stopped shaking. As she worked, she asked, without looking at me, if I was married or dating.

I told her I lived with my girlfriend, Theresa, a lawyer for the ACLU.

She stopped what she was doing and glanced up at me, then continued working. "Oh wow," she said. "Good for you." When she finished, she handed me the fresh drink. "Should we?" She gestured to the fire, and I followed her outside.

Her face glowing in the orange light, a young girl in her mother's arms whined, in an English accent, "The fireworks were rubbish this year."

My grandmother, who had been talking to a young woman, saw me and walked over. "I thought you'd left me with these awful people," she said loudly. My mother and I often joked that, to strangers, we blamed the Alzheimer's for my grandmother's lack of a filter, but truthfully, she'd always been that way.

Before they lit the effigy, the men forgot to remind everyone to stuff their slips of paper into it, and now people ran up close to the fire and threw tiny balls of paper into the flames.

"Do you want to write down something to burn?" I asked my grandmother.

"Oh, I don't know what I'd write," she said. "But I'll accompany you."

At the table, the slips were gone. My grandmother saw my disappointment, and she pulled a prescription note from her purse and neatly ripped two small pieces from its edges. “Here, doll,” she said. She set the other slip in front of her and said, “I changed my mind.” She bent over the table, squinting, and wrote in her neat penmanship. When she finished, she held it up. It said *Expectations*. She laughed and made her way back to the fire after I told her I’d catch up. I thought about what to write. I tried to take a long look at myself.

Kendra came up behind me with her daughter asleep against her chest, and I scribbled on the slip and then shoved it in my coat pocket. “I’m heading in. I have to get this one down,” she said. She asked when my opening was and I told her it was the following Friday. “I’ll be sure to stop in,” Kendra said, giving me a quick hug, though that proved not to be true. I haven’t seen or spoken to her since.

A few days ago, about three months after my show, the gallery owner called to say I’d sold a painting. I’d been working and her call went to voicemail. It was my first big sale and the money would be nice, but after an initial rush, I felt a vague disappointment in how anticlimactic the moment actually was. I cracked a celebratory beer and went back to work.

Late that evening, I called the gallery owner back, and she told me the buyers were the party hosts. When I hung up my phone in my studio space, paint on my hands and face, in my hair, I thought of Kendra hanging my painting in her cavernous house, and for the first time, I felt sorry for her.

I had the pulsing satisfaction, the electricity, of having put in a good day’s work, and I thought of calling Theresa at her office and asking if she wanted to go out for drinks later. I sat down on a stool. Across from me, taped to the wall, was the little scrap of paper on which I’d written *Shelby*. A slant of light washed over a stack of art books on the floor and illuminated the leaves of my spider plant above the radiator. The smell of walnut oil and turpentine, cotton and linen fibers, wooden stretchers, glue. All around me, new work was drying.

Reservoir

As a small child, Lacey escaped with Luke into nearby lowlands teeming with tall cattails. There, they netted tadpoles, and built sinking rafts from rotten, fallen trees. They both grew tall and lean, and as bigger children, adults mistook them for siblings. Lacey packed cheese sandwiches and they met beside a canal. Sweet smell of swamp algae. She read while Luke fished, until one day, he showed her how to bait a hook. He expertly stabbed the worm five times and handed the pole to her, and when he registered the horror on her face and muttered "sorry," Lacey felt something like attraction.

Around the start of middle school they drifted apart, after girls in class said it was weird to have a boy best friend. In the hallways, Luke and Lacey smiled shyly and kept walking. They stole time together, though; occasionally he walked her home from the school bus or they found each other in the street joining the same game of kick-the-can. Once, they sat on park swings until after dark, slapping mosquitoes and burying their dirty toes in the still-warm summer sand. Luke pulled up his shirt to reveal sunsets of bruises along his ribs. He told her he hated his dad. When she asked questions, he swung higher. He said, "You're a babe now, you know," before leaping off at the highest point. She'd felt a pull, but when they parted in front of her house that night, he'd slapped her hand, said, "See ya," and she'd watched as he pulled his baseball hat back onto his head and disappeared into the woods.

After that, it seemed each time Lacey saw Luke he was a new person. When they returned to school after Christmas, he suddenly towered over her. A few weeks later and she didn't recognize his deep voice. He got a girlfriend named Samantha who went by Sam, had shiny bangs and was smart and kind. Lacey hated her.

When they were fourteen, they'd taken to fishing together by the canal again. They smoked cigarettes and called it "fishing" ironically, but one of them always showed up with a

pole. One sunny day, Lacey was sneaking up on Luke, and just as she was about to run and pounce, he whipped back his line to cast. The hook lodged into Lacey's cheek. Instinctually, she ripped it out herself, while she and Luke stared at each other, wide-eyed. She tasted iron, felt blood running down her face; the hook was slick with it. With Lacey on the handlebars, Luke sped to a gas station, and bought rubbing alcohol and Band-Aids while she waited outside. To avoid the stares of adults, they raced back to the canal, and he said shit, and she asked what, and he said he forgot cotton balls, as he peeled off his shirt and soaked the sleeve in alcohol. He had fewer bruises now, just one large oval on his back. His chest had widened. A stream of dark hair ran from his navel into his pants. Lacey sat on a stump, tilted her head to the darkening sky, and watched him squint in concentration, as he stood over her and dabbed her face with his shirt, wincing whenever she jerked away. A small pimple bloomed between his eyebrows, and he kept shaking his head when his hair fell in his eyes. He stuck a Band-Aid on the wound, smoothed it with his thumb, and kissed her. She still has the small vertical scar between her cheek and chin.

They found their way back to each other, and by high school everyone just called them L&L. People said they were obsessive and annoying. Not long after the fish hook incident, they started sleeping together, and every time Luke entered a room, Lacey had a physical reaction. Even after months, years; she'd see him and her torso from groin to stomach would ignite. They talked about what their children would look like. His dark hair, her soft skin; his height, her ugly, flat feet. Hopefully not his huge ears, he would say, touching hers. Lacey had always been a straight-A student and intellectually curious, but she found herself fogged out and thinking only of sex. Later, she would see that she could have given Luke instruction, been more demanding and attuned to her own body, but at the time, the origin of her desire was Luke's desire for her. Most nights he'd sneak out and climb in her window and they'd struggle together to be quiet. After, they'd set the alarm for four and fall asleep in her twin bed, his feet hanging off the end. Nights when he couldn't come over, Lacey slept with his Cub Scout shirt wadded next to her

head. She'd mentioned how cute he must have been in a tiny uniform, and the next day he brought the shirt to her, wrapped in newspaper, like a fish. He never introduced her to his parents, said his mother was crazy and his father was the Antichrist. He couldn't wait to get the fuck out of there. Together.

Lacey's mother had been seeing a man from a small town outside of Eau Claire, and during Lacey's junior year of high school, she posed for her mother's wedding photos, unsmiling, wearing a wrinkled dress inside an evangelical church that smelled of mold. After the wedding, Lacey and her mother moved into the man's small brick ranch, across from a farming supply store. Sanderson was far from cosmopolitan, but this new town, Larkley, was out of her teenage nightmares. No movie theater. No shops. Consolidated schools. Corn and cattle for miles. Neither Luke nor Lacey had a car, but they vowed to see each other every other weekend, by bus, by train, by begging friends for rides. It was only two years. Two years and then they could be together forever.

For the first few months, their plan worked. Luke took Greyhounds and Lacey's stepdad picked him up at the station, made him sleep in the basement on a cot. If her stepfather had only known the depravity that took place on said cot. During sex, Lacey felt that she and Luke were outside of polite society, that what they were doing with their bodies must be unprecedented, illegal, holy. The smell of his neck and sweat.

The kids at Lacey's new school called her Sister Lacey. Her stepfather forbade her from makeup, tight clothes, skirts above the calf, and social events. She spent most of her time in her bedroom sleeping. She grew chubby and depressed. That's when her stepfather began refusing to pick up Luke at the station and forced Lacey to attend youth Bible study. He said what she needed was discipline. Less moping around and making messes in his house. He always called it his. Months passed without seeing Luke, and it felt like physical pain. They spoke less on the

phone; it was hard for Lacey to explain how her life had changed. He ranted about killing his dad, joining the Marines, and running away together. He didn't ask her many questions.

The youth pastor was a young thirty-two and handsome. He listened to Lacey's problems, and had read her favorite books. He invited her to dinner with his family: a pretty wife and a baby son. He asked girls from their church and neighboring congregations to introduce themselves, and almost overnight, Lacey had friends. They were into Jesus, so she couldn't tell them she'd had sex a thousand times, but they were nice, and got her out of the house. When she was with them, she pretended she was an actress, playing the part of a pious, wholesome girl. She told none of this to Luke over the phone. Instead, at night, she cried into his uniform.

She began working part-time for the pastor, doing administrative tasks and organizing volunteer trips. Twice weekly, he held private conferences with her that felt the way she imagined psychotherapy might, or Catholic confession. He listened, smiling. He didn't judge when she admitted she was sexually active, but he gave her books that made her feel used up and doomed. He urged her to break up with Luke. Said what they did was sinful, had nothing to do with love. Luke only wanted one thing. He said it so often she began to wonder if it were true.

One day, after a Bible study, Lacey was suffocating leftover cookies under plastic wrap, when Pastor Erkolt came up behind her and said he was happy she didn't wear makeup like other girls her age, she didn't need it, she was beautiful the way God made her and he hoped she knew that. He touched her hair and she burned with shame. Lacey stayed away for a week, but she began thinking about him: the way he listened to her and smelled like pine needles, his thick, dark hair that he kept short—she could always tell he'd just had it cut by the faint rash on the back of his neck—and the soothing evenness of his speech, nothing like Luke's. When she returned, he asked to speak to her after class. He said he hadn't meant to make her

uncomfortable, he hoped she could forgive him. She lied and said she hadn't been at all uncomfortable, and he cried, told her he was in love with her, dropped to his knees.

When, over the next few months, he began asking if he could touch her here, there, here, she said yes, yes, yes. She wanted him, or the familiar weight of a body on hers. She tried to undress once, in the cool dark of his office, but he expertly clasped her bra back on and said that was for her husband only.

Lacey stopped returning Luke's calls. Her guilt was all-encompassing. Luke called her parents, begged them to put her on the phone. After a few months, he took a bus and walked to her doorstep, but she refused to come downstairs. She didn't even look out the window. Lacey felt like another person entirely; she'd become a girl Luke no longer knew, couldn't possibly love. And maybe he never had loved her. Maybe Pastor Erkolt was right, and it had only been about sex. Maybe the calm she felt from the pastor's certainty and routine was what love actually was, and one wasn't supposed to feel obsessive and sick and miserable, the way she felt for Luke.

After she refused to come downstairs to see him that day, Luke stopped calling, and a few weeks later, Pastor Erkolt told her he was divorcing his wife. Lacey felt terribly powerful and afraid. He asked Lacey to stop calling him Pastor. Call him Alec. He said God had told him Lacey was born to be his wife. She felt chosen and as if she had no choice. In another year, she had planned to leave her stepfather's house as soon as she threw her cap into the air, and to get on a bus for whichever college was closest to Luke. But now, suddenly, Alec's wife had moved back in with her parents and was saying she wanted full custody. Luke had disappeared. It seemed easiest to go along with getting married; Lacey didn't think she could back out now. She still slept with Luke's Cub Scout shirt near her neck.

To prepare for marriage, Alec explained that Lacey needed to become a virgin again. Together, they knelt and asked God for her to be purified. When Alec told Lacey's parents of his

intentions, her stepfather shook Alec's hand, said he was glad someone was making an honest woman out of her. Her mother kept asking about Luke, and, over the next few weeks, Lacey heard her crying in the locked laundry room.

The divorce and new marriage caused a minor scandal in town, but at the age of seventeen, Lacey moved with Alec to the suburbs of Chicago, where she finished her senior year of high school barely speaking to her peers. She had her parents deliver the news to Luke.

She began college at the University of Illinois at Chicago alongside her husband, who needed a new vocation and wanted to become a financial planner, wanted to throw off the heavy robes of their past.

In the years after she married Alec, Lacey tried to hunt Luke down online, but it seemed he'd disappeared. She'd lost touch with all the kids from Sanderson, until, one day, she received an email from a girl she'd been close with in middle school. The girl said Luke's dad had died. Luke was staying with his mother for a while, hanging out most nights at a bar in town. Lacey sent a curt reply stating that she was married now, and the girl had responded, "I just thought you'd want to know." Lacey read the email again and again, and in the following days, woke up excited each morning, ahead of her alarm, before she could remember why. That weekend, she packed a bag. It was the first time she ever lied to Alec about something big; she told him she was going to visit a college girlfriend in the city, and she drove, instead, in the opposite direction.

It was July, nearly ninety degrees, and Lacey parked, like a crazy woman, across the street from Luke's childhood home. She was twenty-one, and hadn't seen him in over four years. After three hours, he came outside. The late afternoon sun shot straight into his face, and his dark hair, which was buzzed short now, seemed transparent, his scalp visible in the white light. His upper body, which used to be ropy and lean, was now thick with muscle, and his height, which

he'd always minimized by slouching, he'd grown into. His gait now was confident, perhaps even a little cocky, and he wore a t-shirt, shorts, and flip flops. Tattoos covered his arms, part of his calf. Lacey became nervous, unsure if she knew him anymore. He held a cooler and walked toward her, then opened the trunk of his car. She waved and he stopped and squinted at her, stuck the cooler in the trunk, got in the car, and drove away. She followed. After eight miles down a gravel road, he pulled over where it dead-ended into a lake. A handful of other cars were parked there, and shirtless guys and girls in bikinis waded in the water, holding cans of beer. Lacey panicked and started to turn around, but Luke had noticed he'd been followed. He was already outside, approaching her car. She rolled down the window, and when he stuck his head in, Lacey saw on his face a look she'd remember years later, saw the subtlety of true shock, nothing like in the movies. He backed a few feet away and stood in the gravel, looking at her. She got out of the car. She tried to approach slowly, as if he were a feral cat, but when she opened her arms to him, he backed away, shaking his head no, his hands two stop signs. "Not here," he said, and got into his car and drove. She followed him to a small reservoir and they parked next to a picnic pavilion, empty except for a little girl's birthday party. A strip of sandy beach was uninhabited, and Luke walked ahead of her and sat down in the sand. When she caught up with him, he patted the spot next to him. She sat.

At the time, she'd felt like she had to apologize. She said she was sorry, and he asked her why she married Alec, and she cried and said she didn't know, and they lay around for hours, their heads on a faded blue towel, orange sun burning above. He spooned her from behind, kissed her neck. He smelled the same. He'd been working construction in North Dakota, but was joining the Marines. She said, "Please don't." He said, "You really fucked me up." She said, "I'm sorry about your dad," and he said, "Don't be." He had whispers of lines in his forehead and his cheeks were leaner, but his face otherwise looked unchanged. A family with two toddlers came and sat near them. Luke stood, pulled her up, kissed her on the mouth, and she kissed back.

He nodded toward a path through trees and they went, slapping mosquitoes and holding hands. The path ended at a small wooden dock and a section of lake so narrow it looked like a river. A duck floated by. Lacey sat on the dock while Luke pulled the car around to a closer spot, then reappeared a few minutes later with the cooler. They drank beer and stopped talking, made love on the blue towel, first urgently, then again, a while later, more slowly, and Lacey could tell she was no longer the only girl he'd been with. The thought filled her with despair and a raging desire. After, she waded into the water and swam in the fading golden daylight. She dove under and felt Luke leaking out from between her legs and disappearing into water almost the same warm temperature. When she surfaced, he was in up to his calves, naked, eating an orange popsicle. He had another tattoo she hadn't noticed, on his right rib, and it almost made her cry how she no longer knew, felt like she owned, every inch of his body. "Come in," she said. "I'd rather watch you," he said, orange popsicle drips falling toward his feet into water.

They picked up burgers and ate them in the motel bed. They drank too much and explored each other's bodies, cataloging the scars, tattoos, moles, changes that had appeared in the last four years. They took a shower. At some point, late in the night, naked and on top of her, Luke said, "Marry me." When Lacey hesitated, he slapped the pillow and said, "What the *fuck*, Lacey." He was resting on his elbows, his face red and inches from hers. He jumped up, and shouting, sobbing, asked why she wouldn't let him help her. "He's a pedophile," he said, and it was the first time she'd heard anyone use that word to describe Alec. She let the word and its faint heartbeat enter her body, where it grew for years, hardening into a dull thud, like the drumbeat to some sad, forgotten march.

Luke fell asleep on her chest, his cheeks wet. Lacey imagined their life together, decided she'd tell Alec she was leaving, but in the morning, when she woke to the sound of the shower and tried to get in with Luke, he said, "I'm done," and stepped out. She tried to kiss him and he backed away, said, "I'm not sure what you want from me." In the parking lot he kissed her cheek

and drove away, and she cried the entire way home, slept so much over the next week that Alec asked if she might have mono. She left six voicemails. Luke never called back.

Lacey still thinks about what might have happened had she tried harder to explain, had she been more forceful that morning. Had Luke been patient and steady, let her join him in the shower. Why did she hesitate at his proposal? She still can't articulate that part. She keeps thinking about it, keeps circling back to a moment.

Five weeks later, Lacey peed on a stick and panicked. Alec didn't believe in birth control, but insisted they use condoms until he finished school and could support another child. That night, she told him she was ready; she'd graduated, he was almost done, could they start trying?

On a snowy, inert day, just after the new year, Luke began calling and leaving long, rambling voicemails. Six months had passed. He'd been forcing himself not to call, but he couldn't take it. Please call back. Forgive him. Please. He was leaving soon for training. He sounded desperate and unstable. Lacey replayed his messages for hours each day, listened to them on her lunch breaks. Her belly was huge. She was scared. She made secret calculations, and discovered, when she broke down her internship salary, that she barely made minimum wage. Luke would be stationed somewhere, or off being shot at, and she'd be giving birth alone. She told herself she had to stay until after the baby was born, and, fearful of being caught by Alec, she blocked Luke's calls.

Almost a year later, after the first snowfall, she called him, but he'd changed his number, and then, right around Christmas, Lacey received another email from the middle school friend, this time telling her Luke had gotten married. She felt like she'd been hollowed out. She didn't reply to the email. She made herself stop searching for him. She stayed with Alec for eight more years.

Alec was a more engaged and patient parent than Lacey, a gentle husband, and the years passed quickly, in quiet contentment, though Lacey often thought and dreamed of Luke. Alaska, their daughter, grew into a bright and mercurial eight-year-old, prone to bursts of both fury and affection. Whenever Lacey was the target of Alaska's disgust, Lacey took it personally, and Alec would gently tease her for allowing herself to be bullied by a second-grader.

After she turned thirty, Lacey felt herself solidifying, settling into her body, and as she neared the age Alec had been when they'd met, the thudding of Luke's word became deafening, until it was all Lacey could hear. She found herself lying to colleagues and friends about how and at what age she'd met Alec. She still wasn't sure that what he'd done was immoral or evil, just that the situation looked different now, like a large painting you have to back away from before you can see it clearly.

They divorced amicably in autumn. Alec, it seemed, had always known it was coming. Lacey kept the house in the suburb and continued to commute to her job at an advertising agency downtown. They shared custody. For the first time in her adult life, Lacey was living without a man.

Her dreams of Luke weren't new. In high school and college, the dreams were usually sexual, and Lacey would awaken next to Alec, ashamed of her arousal and annoyed that she couldn't finish. After Alaska, the dreams became less frequent, until, over the past couple of years, Lacey couldn't remember having any at all. But now, post-divorce, Luke had returned to her, and the dreams were all a variation of the same scene. Lacey was in a field, and in the distance: a hazy glow of stadium lights. It was not raining, but a fine mist fell. On the ground, dense clover and blades of grass bent under heavy dew. A few feet from her, a bunny chewed anxiously, looked at Lacey, then hopped away. She followed, and when they came to an outdoor music festival, the rabbit disappeared. As she moved toward the stage, a boy in the front row

glanced back. She yelled his name and tried to hug him, but he told her he was someone else and turned around. He had the same dark, gold-streaked hair as Luke, in the style he'd worn in the nineties: middle part, bangs falling at his cheekbones. The same pinprick mole beneath his left eye. Lacey would gaze at his face, and begin to see that perhaps something wasn't quite right, perhaps his features were just a millimeter off and she'd been sent some strange surrogate. Then she'd wake up.

The dreams returned in October, while the weather was still warm and dry, the days painfully short. That same week, as Lacey held a ladder, Alaska dropped a shirt down from the attic and descended like a spider monkey. The shirt landed on Lacey's feet. Four diamond-shaped patches depicting wild animal heads stared at her, and a handful of delicate silver pins gleamed from yellow and red epaulettes. Clutching the Cub Scout uniform she'd been hiding for over a decade, Lacey explained to Alaska that it was not a costume, and gave a brief lecture on ladder safety. She often relied on boring her daughter into submission, and after Alaska stomped off to her room, Lacey hid the shirt in her closet under a stack of sweaters. Every few years, she'd snuck up to the attic and sat alone with the faded navy shirt for a while, then returned it to the wooden box she kept it in.

For the first time in years, Lacey fell off the wagon and searched the name Luke Benso, scrolling quickly, scanning for news articles about dead soldiers, for obituaries. Flooded with relief, she tried every social media platform she used and a few she'd only heard on Alaska's lips. It seemed he was still unfindable.

She searched for Luke's mother's name, Annaliese Benso, and the results appeared: seventy-two years old, the same familiar zip code of their hometown of Sanderson, a small city about an hour outside of Rockford. Lacey saved the address in her phone, and for the first time in a long while, her body pulsed with lightness.

That Friday, Lacey took a vacation day and left Alaska with Alec. It was overcast and cold, but when Lacey pulled up in front of Luke's childhood home, two women were outside, seated on a porch swing. Both appeared to be in their seventies. Harriet was skinny and sported a blond perm, and Annaliese, who vaguely resembled Luke, had shoulder-length silver hair, a healthy roundness, and was wrapped in a rust-colored afghan. As Lacey climbed the steps to the porch and introduced herself as Luke's high school girlfriend, her heart clanged around when she saw, on his mother's face, Luke's dark eyes. Annaliese stood, pulled Lacey into an embrace, and said, "I always wanted to meet you."

Inside, a cloying candle smell mixed with notes of damp fireplace. Burgundy carpet stretched over all visible floors. In the room straight ahead, bins of rumpled clothing and moving boxes were piled in the center of the room, beneath a brass light fixture that was meant to hang above a table. To the right, the living room held a mahogany sofa, two matching maroon and gold striped chairs near the window, and beside the fireplace, a ceramic family of deer.

From the kitchen, Annaliese brought a tray loaded with small cups and a cherry flavored liqueur, and Lacey soon found herself sandwiched between the two women, seated on a couch, tipsy at midday. Lacey told them about her dreams, the synchronicity of her daughter finding Luke's Cub Scout shirt. She explained that she hadn't been able to locate him online. Perhaps Annaliese could at least put her in touch by phone, though she didn't expect to see Luke, Lacey clarified, unless he wanted to see her. Lacey wasn't sure how much Annaliese knew.

"Is this rabbit in your dream a hare? Or a domesticated creature?" Harriet wanted to know. Lacey told her she couldn't be sure, and Harriet said, "Hares are a strong sign of fertility."

Annaliese smiled and asked about Lacey's daughter, and when Lacey mentioned Alaska's age and name, Harriet said, "Sounds like a boy's name."

It was a lovely name, Annaliese insisted, and she asked if the girl had been born there.

Lacey felt heat rise in her cheeks. "Conceived," Lacey said.

“I would’ve had to name my daughter Hoboken,” Harriet said.

Luke might still be married, or he might be unemployed, out of shape, Republican. But Lacey didn’t believe that; she knew he’d look the same, only older, gray near his temples, and they’d look at each other and see their younger selves, be transported to sipping stolen whiskey on summer rooftops after sex so urgent it felt reflexive and necessary, like a sneeze. Or he might hang up on her. “I’m hoping to return his shirt,” Lacey said, though she was hoping to keep it.

A hesitancy. “Lucas got married a while ago, you know,” Annaliese said, and Lacey said that yes, she’d heard that, and she’d also been married, but was recently divorced. “Lucas also went through a divorce, last year.” Lacey said she was very sorry to hear that, but she was not at all sorry. She felt a soaring. “Lacey, you’re a sweet girl,” Annaliese said, looking down at her lap. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you right away. Lucas died, honey. Hung himself a few months back. Right in his wife’s closet, if you can believe it. Well, she was his ex-wife by then.”

When she recalls it now, Lacey thinks she just said, “Oh.” She remembers Harriet getting up to use the bathroom, a dark silhouette disappearing down the hall. The overhead light buzzed. Lacey is really not sure if she said anything at all.

Annaliese glanced up, the veins in her eyes red, and said that for a split second, she’d felt relief. “When your kid is ill like that, it takes over your whole life. All you do is worry.” She closed her eyes. She said it felt like she’d been running and running for years with a horrible future chasing her, and when Luke finally did it, she could stop running. “Of course, I would’ve kept running forever.”

“I loved your son,” Lacey said. Her love for Luke had felt so excruciating and exhausting, that as an adult, she’d often questioned what it meant that the love, or whatever she’d had for thirteen years with Alec, by comparison felt mild and easy. Do you ever love again the way you loved when you were fourteen?

Lacey pictured Luke standing up on his BMX bike, spinning in wide circles spanning the street, waving up at her bedroom window, popping wheelies to show off. She felt a wave of despair, and turned around for privacy. Annaliese remained quiet, and after a few minutes, Lacey turned around with a hopeful thought. “Does he have kids?”

No. His wife wanted them, but after two tours in Afghanistan, he’d come back hypervigilant and rigid. Lacey saw the Marines posters in his locker, saw him at fifteen doing push-ups in her bedroom when her parents weren’t home, his forehead wrinkling as he smiled up at her while she stood above him, counting each time he clapped before he lowered himself down again. No son to ever look like him. Maybe he’d knocked someone up before marrying, and there was a boy out there, maybe a teenager, who looked just like Luke had when she’d known him. Lacey imagined sleeping with Luke’s son, then felt ashamed. “He would have been a great dad.”

“No. I don’t think so, but that’s nice of you to say,” Annaliese said.

Why, Lacey wanted to know, hadn’t his obituary come up online, and Annaliese explained it had been Luke’s request before each tour. No funeral. No obit. His ex-wife had protested, but Annaliese had seen to his wishes.

When Lacey asked, “Why did he do it?” Annaliese said, “Oh, honey.”

If Annaliese had told her Luke had never gotten over her, had been depressed ever since she’d married Alec, Lacey didn’t know if the guilt of that would be worse or better than if he’d forgotten her completely, and in the days or weeks or minutes before his death, he hadn’t thought of her at all.

With a hand on Lacey’s shoulder, Annaliese said, “Have you felt Lucas’s presence over the past months? It seems serendipitous that you’d contact me after moving away over a decade ago.” It felt like only a few years. Lacey thought of her grandmother at eighty-five, laughing at herself in the mirror, *Who is that old lady?* “No,” Lacey lied, though she had the crazy,

frightening thought that maybe Luke was trying to contact her. She feared if she spoke of it, he'd stop returning to her at night. She feared she was losing her mind.

In the driveway, Lacey and Annaliese made plans to meet again within the month, and Lacey cried into Annaliese's shoulder under a pale sun. Despite the early hour, Lacey, too tired to drive home, wheeled into the same motel she and Luke had stayed in nine years earlier. It wasn't the same room, but the layout was familiar, the curtains identical. She stuck a coaster in her purse for Alaska. *Motel Alaska*, it said, with a mountain in the middle.

Lacey called to check in, and Alec answered on the first ring. Alaska yelled, "Hi Mom!" in the background, and her voice made Lacey weep. They were eating popcorn and playing some board game Lacey had never heard of. Alaska never wanted to play games with Lacey, and for a moment, she wished she and Alec were still married so she could unburden and he could soothe. She was alone now.

Annaliese calls often, but it's been weeks, and Lacey hasn't been back to see her yet. They chat about the weather. They tell each other stories about Luke. Maybe Lacey will tell Annaliese that she's been dreaming of Luke, that he still comes many nights. Maybe Lacey will visit the first Sunday of every month, take Annaliese and Harriet to lunch. Maybe she'll introduce Annaliese to her granddaughter. And although she's afraid of losing it, Lacey reminds Annaliese of Luke's shirt, but Annaliese tells her she can keep it.

On Halloween night, Lacey helps Alaska dress as a Cub Scout. They tuck her hair into a cap and button Luke's shirt. It fits her. He spared her his ears, but she has his strong chin and crooked toes and pointy incisors and long legs. She has his confidence. She leads Lacey down the block, and occasionally, from porches, while Lacey waits in the driveway, she can hear her daughter's voice rising out of the chorus of children's voices, saying trick or treat, her laugh like Luke's: often running away from her, climbing and free and wild.

Lacey has always told herself that she didn't have a choice. Her stepfather came between them, Alec came between them, her pregnancy came between them, Luke's enlistment, his marriage. But lately she wonders if perhaps her life has been nothing but a series of choices, stacked one after the other. Perhaps all lives are.

Lacey keeps coming back to that day at the reservoir. She replays a moment after they'd finished swimming, after they'd emptied their beers, and the sun had begun to set, and they'd walked back to the car on a path sparked with fireflies. A fence blocked the way, and Luke leapt over it and offered his hand. As she climbed up, he held fast to her forearm and said something that had scared her a little. "Do you ever think about how you can just do whatever you want with your body? We could just stay out here. No one is stopping us. We could stay in the woods here in a tent forever and everything else would keep on going. We could decide to do that right now. Do you see what I'm saying? Right now. We could just stop here." She watched his face as she struggled to get her other leg over the fence, and she said, "But I'm hungry," and he'd pretended to laugh.

Rooftop Pool, Los Angeles

I'd been friends with Max and Rawan since we were teenagers, and had helped them raise their son, so when they'd divorced, it had felt a little like my own family splitting apart. Now I was in LA for Henry's sixteenth birthday, but I was also there for moral support: Rawan had herself convinced that the party was a cover, that Max had marshaled us there to tell her in person that his fiancé was pregnant.

I scanned the hotel rooftop for Max. It was only June, but almost ninety degrees. Groups of fit twenty-somethings stood in waist-deep water, their frozen drinks lining the edge of the pool. The men were lean, with tattoos, thick beards, and dark sunglasses. The women were more interesting: mismatched bikinis and BDSM-style one pieces, shocking-orange lipstick and long black braids. Caftans, blonde ringlets, cellulite. Sandals coated in glitter. I was hungover from drinking on the plane, and as I stepped into the shade of an umbrella, I saw Henry, shirtless, sitting at the bar. He was talking to a much older woman, who wore a low-cut top and a giant yellow sun hat.

When I approached, he stood and hugged me, said, "Hi Auntie, thanks for coming." He'd called me that since he learned to talk, and until he was twelve, hadn't put it together that we weren't related. Rawan had gotten pregnant during our junior year of college, and in our tiny attic apartment, Max had built a mobile and furnished it with colorful guitar picks, and the three of us had learned to change diapers, to sleep through diabolical wails. After graduation, Rawan took a job offer in San Francisco, and I postponed applying to vet school. I moved with them, tended bar at night, and spent my days managing Max's music career and babysitting Henry, answering to his baby babble and nuzzling his fat cheeks.

The sun hat woman jumped up and lurched toward me, and I had to duck under her massive brim. She pulled me into a hug. “I’m Sonya,” she said. She moved her purse and cocktail down and motioned for me to sit on the middle stool.

“I’m friends with Henry’s parents,” I said. “He’s only sixteen.” I turned to Henry. “Happy almost birthday, kid. Where’s your dad? Your mom told me to meet him here.”

“He’s still at the studio and Mom’s flight was delayed,” Henry said. “He was gonna pick her up, but now we have to.”

When he wasn’t touring, Max, like Rawan and I, lived in San Francisco, but lately he had to be in LA for rehearsals. For the past few weeks, Henry had been staying with him in the hotel.

“Rehearsals are taking longer than he thought. Big surprise,” Sonya said. “I’m Max’s fiancé,” she added. Now I remembered the name, noticed the accent. Max had told me his girlfriend had been born in Saint Petersburg, but she was older than I’d expected, at least five years older than Max and Rawan and I—early forties, I’d guess. I’d pictured a nubile model-type, and felt guilty for not giving Max more credit. This woman had fine lines and lacked the artificially inflated cheeks and lips that most LA women had succumbed to.

I apologized, introduced myself. “I’m just here as a buffer,” I said. Though it had been five years since the divorce, Rawan and Max still spoke almost daily, but since the engagement, Rawan had been trying to give Max space, and for over six months she’d been putting off meeting Sonya.

Henry smirked at me. “Auntie Buffer,” he said. He’d grown stubble on his face and wider shoulders. Since he’d gotten his license, I didn’t see him as often. “It’ll be fine,” he said to Sonya. “My mom’s just—she’s not like you.”

“So I’ve heard,” Sonya said, pulling a cigarette from her purse. “What about you?” She lit up and waved fingers near my face. “What is your life’s work?”

I noted that she must not be pregnant. “I’m at a property management company.”

"Max still feels bad about that," she said.

After college, I'd overseen Max's PR and basically served as his tour manager, until a few years ago, when he'd gotten too big and had to hire a professional.

"But I mean what is your *passion*." She exhaled near my face and smiled, leaning closer.

A cloud rolled across the sun, casting a shadow over the pool. Heads turned up to the sky.

"I'm not creative," I said. I knew from Max that Sonya had gone to Berkeley, and had recently sold her gourmet popsicle company for a hefty sum. I wondered if she considered popsicles her passion.

She turned to Henry, who was watching a black-haired girl in a yellow bikini struggle to pull herself from the pool. "Go. Don't sit here with the old ladies." Something about Sonya reminded me of Rawan, the oddness of her beauty. With Rawan, it was hard to pin down what was so striking, though she'd been told, more than once, that she looked like a young Anjelica Huston; she had her strong jaw. With Sonya, it was her eyes. They were huge, and set so far apart that she looked like some gorgeous, sleepy alien.

"Just come get me when you're ready to go," Henry said, and touched Sonya's shoulder before walking toward the pool. He was more polite to her than he was to his mother, and it annoyed me on Rawan's behalf. Henry truly looked like the product of Rawan and Max making a baby: Rawan's olive skin and dark hair, pronounced chin and willowy build, and Max's thick eyebrows and pale blue eyes. I glanced at my phone, but Rawan hadn't texted.

A waitress approached Sonya and said there was no smoking on the roof. Sonya apologized and put her cigarette under the bar, but as soon as the waitress turned around, Sonya resumed smoking. "I joined a new gym this month, and I'm going to have to quit. It is like this." She nodded at the pool. A blond guy with abdominal muscles so carved I could only imagine the pain required to obtain and maintain them, squatted down to hand beers to friends. "I am on the

elliptical and find myself staring. They're all ridiculously attractive. I bet they're all fucking one another." She sighed. "Henry loves this hotel, but I'm too old."

"Henry's only sixteen," I said. "I doubt he's fucking everyone."

"Oh, I'm quite sure he is. He's had a busy few weeks with us." I decided not to report this to Rawan. "What? Have I shocked you?" Sonya laughed. "I was fucking when I was twelve." She stubbed out her cigarette and, even after I declined, ordered us beers. She sipped hers and told me that when she was a girl, she was told she was leaving for a job as a maid, but when they got to New York, she was locked in a basement, and for two years, forced into prostitution. For a moment, the thought crossed my mind that she might be lying. "Some nights, there were more than thirty men." She met my eyes. "You can imagine."

I was having trouble imagining in our current surroundings. A woman next to us was stabbing her pina colada with an oversized straw and telling her friend that she still hadn't seen her boyfriend's apartment. The friend said that he might be homeless or married. I stupidly asked Sonya if she'd been able to press charges after she escaped.

She tapped her nails against her beer can and laughed. "Did you think I was serious? Would you have believed it if I was not Russian?" When I didn't answer, she said, "No, no, though something like this did happen to a childhood friend of mine." She rubbed her nose, watching the pool, and at that moment, I was certain it had happened to her. "Life is full of shitty surprises," she said, waving at Henry, who was hovering in the shallow end near Yellow Bikini. He gave a covert nod back. "So Max says you've been friends since college."

"Yes, and I've known Rawan since middle school." My family had just moved to town, and the neighborhood girls told me not to speak to Rawan because she'd murdered her father. She was a homely, clingy girl, and spoke in a tentative whisper, but I was a self-righteous child, and I probably befriended her because I liked what it would say about me. Two years earlier, when Rawan was eleven, a man had let himself in through the unlocked front door, and shot her

father, a postman, in the chest. Rawan had been home, but too afraid to leave her bedroom. When her mother returned from the supermarket, she found him on the living room floor, dead. The gunman told police that he'd chosen their house at random; he'd liked the bright blue shutters.

"But Max you met at the diner," Sonya said, smiling.

"We were newbies together. It was one of those twenty-four-hour places, and the first time I saw him he was wearing a hairnet and working a deep fryer and singing so loudly, customers were watching. Some Flaming Lips song, I think. But they were smiling—the customers—because he sounded so good, and you know, because he's cute." I told her that he did everything slowly, the same way he does now, where it kind of looks like he's dancing. I told her he almost got fired for chopping olives one at a time. "Oh, and he used to wear this shirt with a hole in the chest almost every day—I don't think he washed it—and you could see his nipple from certain angles. And he wore this weird necklace that his sister had given him, some chunk of meteor." When I looked up, Sonya was watching me in a way that made me uncomfortable. "Rawan came to visit me, that's how they met," I said. "She transferred the next year."

Back when we first met, I'd had a secret crush on Max for months, and whenever he invited me to hang out alone, I felt a humiliating sense of surprised gratitude. Even now I sometimes felt that way, whenever he called from some damp hotel room in Berlin or Barcelona.

When Rawan had visited that first time, the three of us went to a concert, and at one point I held their drinks while they went to pee. It was taking a while, but finally I saw Max waiting outside the bathrooms. He'd never waited for me. At that moment, I gave up on dating him, but some chamber in my shabby little heart wanted him all to myself, and after Rawan left, I told him about her father. Rather than scaring him off, his interest intensified, and he wrote a song about a beautiful girl who witnesses her father being shot. It was the song on his first EP that got him noticed by a small record label, and it solidified Rawan's love.

Sonya smiled. “You were the matchmaker. Do you have a partner or kids of your own?”

“No, and at this point, I’m pretty sure my eggs smell like sulfur.”

“Do you prefer to fuck men or women?”

“Men, unfortunately,” I said.

She laughed. “You sure? I have a friend, a woman. Newly single and really brilliant.”

“I’m pretty sure. Thanks, though.” I asked when Rawan’s flight was getting in.

“It’s under control.” She waved a hand through the air. “Have you tried microdosing? I was feeling quite stuck after my last relationship ended. He was a real motherfucker, one of those short little guys who needs constant validation. Blake. What kind of name is that?”

She waited for an answer, so I said, “It brings to mind lacrosse. Or a soap opera?”

“Maybe. Anyway, he had me so anxious and depressed by the end, I couldn’t get out of my own head. I wasn’t meeting anyone, and when I did, I wasn’t able to connect. You know?” She locked eyes with me in a way that felt aggressive. “*Really* connect?” She drew circles near my face with her hands, freshly manicured in a garish red. “Your energy feels a bit like this.”

I worried she was picking up on the fact that I was drinking too much and hadn’t been in a real relationship in years. Three weeks ago, I’d woken up before sunrise in the apartment of a twenty-six-year-old alleged landscape architect, unable to recall how I’d gotten there. “I’m not sure what’s going on with my energy, but I’ve taken acid quite a few times,” I said. Though I wanted to look away, I refused; I needed to prove something about my energy, and eye contact seemed important. “I still have nightmares where I’m tripping and I run into a friend’s mother or a coworker and I can’t understand a word of what they’re saying. But I’ve heard of this—you take mini trips? You must need to time it for the weekend?”

“Oh no, you can go to work, whatever. I am microdosing right now,” she said.

“You’re on acid right now?”

She smiled. “Only a little.”

Henry approached, shorts sopping. From the bar, he grabbed a fistful of nuts, then plopped down next to me. He barely chewed before taking another handful, emptying the bowl.

"We should probably leave soon to get your mom," I said. "If your dad's still busy."

"Chill, Auntie. They don't seem too worried about us." Henry leaned over, and shook his wet hair out over Sonya's lap. She laughed and squealed and told him to stop, and for a moment, he did, but then he started pinching her ribs, and the two of them thrashed around, giggling. After satisfying his urge, Henry abruptly stopped and gulped some water.

"He tortures me," Sonya said.

"Can I bum a smoke?" Henry flashed Sonya a cutesy frown. "Please? Don't say no yet, it's for a friend in the pool."

Sonya glanced at me.

"I don't care," I said.

"I used not to care, but now Max has forbidden it," Sonya said.

"He won't know," Henry said.

"Oh, like last time?"

"Just give it to him," I said. "Blame me."

Henry set his head on my shoulder for a moment, and I patted his hair. "You're the coolest, Auntie," he said, and I swelled with guilt and love.

"Don't fuck it up and get me in trouble." Sonya set three cigarettes in front of Henry. "Yes, we should probably leave soon." She stretched her arms over her head, and her shirt rode up, exposing her stomach. I noticed Henry noticing. "I'm excited to finally meet the queen," she said. "Max talks about her so often, I feel like I know her."

"Dad is so dumb," Henry said.

Sonya offered to drive on acid, but I insisted. Henry declined to come. He'd gotten Yellow Bikini to talk to him, and they were standing around in the shallow end, splashing and touching each other's arms. After I failed to talk Sonya out of coming, I texted Rawan with a simple, *I'm sorry*, and now Sonya and I sat in my rental car, stuck in traffic, sweating on the leather seats.

"I meant to tell you not to take the 405 this time of day," she said.

"That would have been helpful."

She lit a cigarette without asking, and I cracked my window. "Listen," she said, "I know you didn't want me to come, but I've been curious for so long. The great love of Max's life."

"Does it bother you?"

Sonya punched up the AC. "At this age, my expectations are different. We each do what we want." She put on Max's new album, a spacey, sad project, clearly about the divorce. As a couple, Rawan and Max had been a heat source everyone wanted to crowd around, but their marriage had been a continuous cycle of wounding and returning to each other.

"I think this is his best work, no?" Sonya said.

I agreed, and as trucks roared in the opposite direction, we listened to Max's rangy guitar and forlorn howls.

"And Rawan? She no longer plays?" Sonya said.

"No," I said. The first time Rawan and Max sang together, I sat on Rawan's bed and listened, their voices like a flock of birds rising from a field, fluidly dropping in altitude, shifting direction mid-flight. "Not anymore."

After a while, traffic sped up, and I gunned it into the far left lane. A crow that had been picking at something on the shoulder flapped up and smashed into the windshield.

Sonya screamed and looked back. "We killed it. Oh God, everyone is running it over."

"Quit looking," I said. "Sorry. It was unfortunate timing."

She turned back around. “It’s a bad omen.”

“Is that some Russian thing?”

“Fuck you,” she shouted. I was trying to concentrate on traffic, but I glanced over, and her eyes were filling. “Have you ever seen that before? A crow hit a windshield?”

“I guess not,” I said.

“Right. Because it is a bad fucking omen. Do you know what happened the last time a crow hit a window? My father died. A crow flew into a window of my grandmother’s house, and a week later my father was dead.”

“I’m sure that was a coincidence,” I said, but she was freaking me out. “How did he die?”

She wiped her eyes and turned down the AC. “Oh, God, I know it is a bad sign.”

I merged back into the far right lane and slowed down behind a white pickup. “The crow is random,” I said. She was trembling, and I didn’t know if her reaction was some kind of disorder. I reached over and patted her hand and she grasped mine. We rode in silence the rest of the way to the airport, listening to Max wail, holding hands.

I spotted Rawan as soon as I walked into Arrivals. She looked tired, but beautiful, her long black hair in a ponytail. She had on a white linen jumpsuit, the crotch severely wrinkled from the flight. She’d been in Rwanda for weeks, but had come now from DC, from some important meeting. She worked in public health, with a specialization in genocide and women refugees. I didn’t really understand what she did, just that it was important and depressing and required a PhD. She gave me a long hug. “Where’s Max? Sorry, I could have grabbed a cab.”

I could tell she was disappointed, but I tried not to take it personally; they hadn’t seen each other in months. Although we all lived in San Francisco (I lived in San Leandro because I could no longer afford the city), I also hadn’t seen her in a while. “They’re running behind.”

“He loves to have people waiting for him,” she said, and asked me to watch for her bag while she went to pee. When she returned, she said, “I just got your text. Sorry for what?”

I told her Sonya was in the car, waiting in the cell phone lot.

"Fuck's sake, are you kidding?"

I told her I was not and apologized again, then felt irritated that she wasn't apologizing for leaving me alone all day with Sonya.

"So? What's she like? Max has told me all about her, but you know how he is."

"She's interesting," I said carefully. "We hit a crow, and she's sure it was an evil omen."

We both laughed, and I felt like I was betraying Sonya. Only then did I realize that I liked her. It didn't stop me, though. I'd missed Rawan, and making her laugh felt like the warmth of a strong drink. "She's older than I thought," I said.

"Yeah, they must've done IVF."

"I'm not sure your theory holds," I said. "She's chain smoking."

Rawan looked thoughtful for a moment, then said, "She's Russian," and elbowed her way to the luggage carousel. She always lost weight when she traveled, and now her shoulder blades formed two small peaks against the fabric of her jumpsuit. When she returned, lugging her suitcase, she said, "I wish he'd have just told me on the phone. Now I have to feign excitement and arrange my face in a convincing way."

"Oh, one more thing you should know about Sonya," I said. "She's on acid."

"What?"

"But only a little bit," I said, as we stepped outside. Right where we came out, Sonya somehow had the car pulled up to the curb. She was flirting with a traffic cop who was blowing a whistle and telling everyone else to loop around. "His grandmother is a Muscovite!" she said, getting out of the car. She tried to go in for a hug, but Rawan stuck out her hand, threw her luggage in the trunk, and got in the passenger side. Sonya climbed into the backseat.

Rawan pushed the off button on the stereo. "You like the new album?" When I nodded, she snorted. "It's a little much, don't you think?" she said.

"Max said you were in Rwanda," Sonya said. "Weren't you scared?"

"No. Rwanda is one of the safest countries in Africa now," Rawan said. She turned to me and rolled her eyes, as I pulled into the stream of traffic. "These World Bank assholes," Rawan said, tilting her head back and dripping rewetting drops onto her contacts. "They think they know what's best for adolescent African girls." Her eyes leaked artificial tears. "Is my mascara fucked?" she asked. I merged onto the highway and said no, and she continued. "They're obsessed with birth control. They frame it as all about education for girls, but really, it's about population control, and I told them that, and this one guy, he has it in for me now. *Hates* me."

"Sorry," I said.

She shrugged. "It's no different from here, just a bunch of old white guys making decisions about reproductive health. It went as I expected." Rawan was Lebanese, and often said she felt white in most countries, but decidedly Other in the US. The three of us had just started our freshman year of college when 9/11 happened, and even on her liberal campus, someone had stuck a note to her dorm door that said *Islam=Hate*. "I don't know why I bother," Rawan said. "The entire planet's dying anyway."

Sonya lit a cigarette in the backseat, and Rawan made a big show of rolling down her window and coughing. For most of the drive, Sonya said nothing, but as we neared the hotel, she leaned between the front seats. "I have to say, Rawan, you are even more intimidating in person. Of course I stalked you on the internet, but you are more beautiful and frightening in real life." She sat back to avoid blowing smoke up front. "Max warned me."

"He tells me I intimidate people unintentionally," Rawan said. "He assumes I have zero self-awareness."

"He does that to me, too!" Sonya said. "He says I'm too honest. Too familiar with people we don't know."

"He's crazy," I said to Sonya. "It's who you are, I like it."

“The thing about Max is,” Rawan leaned back and closed her eyes, “he’s usually right.”

At the hotel, Rawan hugged Henry in the lobby and then excused herself to drop off her things. She didn’t ask me to come, and I knew that it probably meant nothing, that after traveling she perhaps only wanted a moment to herself, but I wondered if she was punishing me for being kind to Sonya.

While Rawan went upstairs, the three of us headed back to the roof, and as soon as Henry spotted Yellow Bikini, he split.

Sonya tapped at her phone. “Max says he’s here. Twenty minutes ago.”

The pool was more crowded now, the sun so hot it stung. Max was under an umbrella, sprawled on a lounge chair, fully clothed in navy pants and a black t-shirt. His hair and beard were longer than I’d seen them since college, and he’d draped towels on chairs to either side of him, saving us seats.

As we got closer, Sonya looked worried. “He’s asleep again,” she said.

She roused him with a quick kiss and Max took off his sunglasses, stood, and pulled me into a long hug. He smelled the way he always did, of sweat and dandruff shampoo. He stepped back, grasped the lengths of my hair near both shoulders, and said, “Hi, you.” We hadn’t seen each other in five months, though we spoke on the phone often. His face looked puffy and haggard; the constant touring had finally caught up with him. He no longer had his hungry, sharp glow. “I’d introduce you, but knowing Sonya, you’ve already become acquainted.”

“I accompanied her to the airport,” Sonya said.

“Sorry,” he said to me. “I’m sure Raw loved that. Where is she?”

I said she was dropping off her things, and he sat back down, moved towels from the seat next to him, and told me to sit. He didn’t move anything for Sonya, but she didn’t seem

offended, the way Rawan would have been. She claimed the chair on the other side of him. "How did it go?" she said.

"Oh, you know. Ricky had another panic attack, but other than that, fine." Ricky was the only band member who'd stuck around since college and put up with Max's exacting standards, his demands that they practice constantly, and his inability to understand why anyone would ever want to do anything else. Ricky had agoraphobic tendencies, and Max was protective of him.

Sonya made a *tsking* sound and said, "Poor little thing."

Max winced. "Tours stress him out, that's normal."

"It is not normal," Sonya said. "But you are sweet." She leaned back, and a slice of sunlight fell over her shoulders and face. She pulled her shirt off and covered her head with it. She wore a green bikini featuring a large foliage print, and her breasts bulged out in tanned little half-circles. Her body struck me as that of a much younger woman's. At her neck, a gold cross dangled, and from under the shirt, she murmured something that sounded like, "My sweet man."

Max leaned close to me and whispered. "I know she's not Rawan."

"How many times do I have to tell you I'm not judging you?"

"I know. You're right. Sorry." He exhaled. "She's just not what she seems. She's not some blond Russian."

"Actually, she's exactly that."

He laughed. "I'm saying she doesn't just make me happy all the time. She has a complicated history."

I thought of the supposed lie she'd told me, and of Rawan's murdered father. "Even if she was whatever you're saying she's not, I wouldn't care." I hesitated. "Honestly though?"

He pulled back and looked at me.

"I love her."

He smiled. "I knew it. I knew you'd *get* her."

"Just don't tell Rawan," I said, and he laughed.

At this point he would usually ask about my love life, and I would tell him about the young landscape architect, embellishing the story to make him laugh and cringe, but today, he leaned back in his chair.

"You look tired," I said.

"Yeah, well, it's a lot of responsibility now, an entire crew relying on me for income. They have families. I feel like I have to just keep going and going, to the next city and the next song and the next album, it's like I can't ever stop." He squinted but didn't put on his sunglasses. "Like you said: I'm so tired." He sang the last part like the Beatles song.

I couldn't imagine being responsible for the well-being of anyone other than myself, and it made me feel childish.

Max touched my shoulder. "Thanks for coming. Sorry I haven't been around lately."

"You're around when it's important," I said. A year earlier, he'd flown back from Australia when my mother had died. "And I'll never miss Henry's birthday. Until he turns eighteen and we're dead to him."

Max's eyes roamed away, over my head, and I turned and saw Rawan in a chic black cover-up, accepting a towel from an attendant. "We're family," Max said.

Before looking for us, Rawan went to the shallow end, where Henry was chatting with a group of teenagers and Yellow Bikini. Rawan crouched down and reached out to touch Henry's head, but he ducked and turned away. I cringed at her lack of restraint. She knew she embarrassed him, but couldn't stop herself. It was like an addiction. She walked over and she and Max embraced. "Our little asshole," Max said.

I began moving my things so Rawan could sit next to Max, but she sat down beside me.

Sonya pulled the shirt from her head, sat up looking dazed, then lit a cigarette.

"Should she be smoking?" Rawan said to Max.

“She doesn’t care about health codes,” he said.

I could tell Rawan was finally rethinking her theory. During her pregnancy, Max had been so worried about prenatal guidelines, that she’d had to show up at the diner alone and sit at the counter, where I’d secretly serve her the forbidden runny eggs that she craved.

Henry approached with Yellow Bikini standing behind him. “Dad, come take a selfie with us. Maddy’s a fan.” Max stood, Yellow Bikini extended a bony arm, and the three of them posed, squinting into the sun, Max doing his weird new closed-mouth smile. Yellow Bikini whispered something to Henry, and his face fell. He moved out of the frame, and she continued clicking, pressing her cheek to Max.

Rawan pinched my forearm, hard. “Who is this girl?” She gestured for Henry to get back in the photo, and he scowled.

“Don’t,” I said. “You’re making it worse.”

She dropped her hand. Now Yellow Bikini was having Max sign something. “Do you believe this?” Rawan said. “It’s still too fucking weird. It’s all a man needs: women telling him how great he is every day, what a sexy genius. And what, is he too cool for a swimsuit now?” She lowered her voice. “I don’t know how Sonya does it. I wouldn’t wish it upon anyone. It makes everything between you unequal. I don’t know, I guess I’m not as confident as I thought, I couldn’t stand even the small venue attention. Remember that girl who stalked me? How could any woman stand it? And then, on top of everything, with an Italian mother, he’s been told since birth that he’s God’s gift.” She spoke faster and faster, and by the end of this speech, looked spent.

“Maybe that’s what’s needed,” I said. “I mean, to do what he’s done, to not give up. A sort of delusional self-confidence.”

“Well, he certainly has that.” She snatched a baseball hat from her beach tote and pulled it low onto her forehead. “You can tell he’s been working out. Gross.”

I glanced over at Sonya. She smiled at me and picked up a travel magazine. Henry and Yellow Bikini disappeared back into the pool crowds, and Max wandered to his chair. Just as he was sitting down, an older Boomer couple approached him, and he tripped on something, tumbled forward, and fell to his knees at their feet. The woman cried out, but Max, still on his knees, took a bow, and asked what he could do for them. As he stood, the woman apologized and brushed off his shoulders. "I'm so sorry to interrupt, but are you Harry Styles?" She had a large perm, a kind face, and looked about eighty. Her husband wore a white shirt tucked into tan high-waisted trousers, and stood behind her, sheepish. Max looked nothing like Harry Styles, but he had longish hair and tattoos.

He laughed. "No, I'm afraid not."

"Oh, that's too bad." She put a notepad back in her purse.

"Indeed," Max said.

"Our granddaughter just loves him. We thought we saw you signing autographs for a young lady. Are you someone our granddaughter might know?"

"Probably not," Max said, in his usual humble way. Rawan thought it an affectation, but I thought Max seemed truly bewildered by the newfound attention. He'd recently recorded a song with a country artist, and that song had been used in some big-budget movie marketed to teens. Now Max had legions of new fans all under the age of eighteen, and, for the first time, was selling out large venues.

"She's heard of him," Rawan said to the woman, marching over. "Do you have a phone?"

After much digging, the woman extracted a phone from her purse, and Rawan snapped shots of Max sandwiched between the couple, who stood away from him at an awkward distance.

"Thank you, my dear. You're a beautiful couple," the woman said.

Rawan and Max shared a smile.

While Max continued talking to the couple, Sonya got up and joined them, and Rawan returned to me. “Why does this annoy me so much?” Rawan said. “I know it sounds terrible, but what kind of fresh hell is this where we’re together for over a decade, and only after we finally break up, does he become rich and happy?”

“First of all, he’s far from rich, you know that, and I’m not sure he’s happy. Plus you just said you couldn’t handle being married to someone famous.”

“You’re right. I did just say that.” She laughed maniacally. “Still. It’s fucked up. It’s all I ever wanted for him and yet I’m such a shitty person that now I’m not happy for him. I mean, I am happy for him.” She paused and smiled. “I really, really am.”

“I know,” I said.

“But I’m also furious.”

The older couple had wandered off, and now Max and Sonya faced the hotel, watching something, their hands shielding their eyes. They walked away from us, past the pool, to where a small group of people had gathered near the hotel entrance. A chartreuse bird flung itself against the wall of glass windows, then shot upward in a dizzying, crazed flight, like a moth to a porch light, before smacking the glass again. Even from a distance, I thought I heard the awful thunk. The bird soared down to the attendant’s table, and the man ducked and waved a towel in the air. People in the pool turned to watch.

“What’s going on?” Rawan said.

“I think a parrot or something escaped.”

Sonya flew toward us, her loose pants flowing. She stopped in front of Rawan’s chair, breathless. “Someone’s bird got out, this pretty little parakeet. No one can catch it, but the towel guy called, and someone from the hotel is coming up with a cage.”

Rawan stood and made her way through streams of people, over to Max. He put his arm around her, and she rested her head on his shoulder. Their backs were to us. He whispered

something in her ear, and she lifted her head and looked into his face, and the two of them went inside the hotel.

Sonya sat down on my chair, near my feet. “They might be in there for a while.”

I said I was pretty sure they’d finally gotten it out of their systems.

“Not that. Jesus.” She looked at a callus on my heel and frowned. “Do you really think you’re here for Henry’s birthday?”

“Rawan thinks you’re pregnant. And that Max wants to tell her in person.”

She laughed. “I’m forty-three and smoke like a chimney.” We watched the bird rise again, climb the wall of windows. It bashed against a pane, then descended into a cluster of potted palms. “It is true that he wants to tell her in person, but he is telling her that he has MS.” She paused. “Don’t say anything. He doesn’t want Henry or anyone to find out yet, until we know more. I shouldn’t be telling you, but Max knows I cannot keep a secret, so really, it is his fault.”

I decided she was lying. “Max has MS?”

She lit another cigarette. “There have been symptoms. He falls. We don’t know if he will be able to do this tour. He’s often tired, and some days, his hands—he has trouble playing.” She coughed smoke, cleared her throat. “It is honestly more than I think I can handle.”

“He’s telling Rawan now?”

“I believe so. He got the diagnosis alone, and he called her before me. Not a surprise. But during the call, he lost his nerve. Decided to do it in person, when she was back in the states. Please don’t cry. It is no longer a death sentence.”

I waited for her to say she was joking, as she had earlier. “They don’t want me to know?”

“I’m sure they will tell you this weekend, but the way they are, it’s only natural.” She poked the callus on my heel and I let her. “Have you ever been married?”

I told her I hadn’t.

"It is like two fish in a fishbowl. At first, they are so fascinated by the other. Then some crazy fighting over territory. Then one fish chases the other, and in a little while, it switches, and the other one is doing the chasing. And then if you can stand it long enough, you both are endlessly swishing around, orbiting each other, and everywhere you look it is glass, just reflecting yourself back at you." She paused. "Ha, listen to me!"

"I didn't know you were married before."

"For fifteen years, but I don't know what I'm saying. I was young and it ended foully." She was quiet for a long time. The crowd near the bird had thinned out, and I closed my eyes. I heard an airplane, a woman laughing, a loud splash from the pool.

"Do I look like a martyr? Some nurse?"

I opened my eyes to Sonya watching me. "Definitely not," I said.

"Yes, I am not like you," she said.

"Like me?"

"Giving up your life for Max and Rawan and Henry."

"I didn't give up my life," I said. "They're family."

"Okay," she said, and it was quiet for a while.

"You know," she said after a minute, "Max says Rawan can do anything."

"I think he believes that, but I also think he flatters her to make up for his bad behavior."

She looked thoughtful. "I wonder if one gets a pass for bad behavior if one has enough talent. And Rawan was not perfect either."

"He was worse."

"The men are always worse," she said.

I wasn't sure I agreed with such a blanket statement, but I liked her for saying it.

She moved into a cross-legged position facing me. A piece of hair had become stuck in her lip gloss. It was nude-colored, but glittery in the sunlight. “Do you know my favorite Rawan story? Arlo, you understand, had some bowel issues?”

I nodded. Arlo was the ancient cat they’d had forever, until he died a year ago. When they divorced, Rawan had gotten child and kitty custody because of Max’s tour schedule, but Rawan handed both of the little guys over whenever Max was home.

“For months Rawan had been cleaning up the shit while Max was on tour. This was, of course, while they were still married. When Max comes home, he still does not clean up the shit. He still will say he didn’t see it, but it doesn’t matter, the point is, the shit was lying around even after he got back. So one day, while Henry was home with her and Max was rehearsing, Rawan says to Henry they are done cleaning up cat shit. She grabs an Exacto-knife and slices a big square around the shit, right out of the living room carpet. They couldn’t afford new floors, and even not so long ago, when I moved in, the big hole was still there. Max says it was about money, but I think he was oddly attached to it.”

“To the missing chunk?”

“Yes,” Sonya said.

I’d seen the big sliced-out section of carpet and never bothered to ask what had happened. “I’ve never heard that story,” I said.

A waitress passed and Sonya hid her cigarette under her chair. “He tells it all the time.”

I noticed Rawan standing on the perimeter of the small crowd. A moment later, Max reemerged through the door, and Rawan disappeared into the group. He didn’t look sick, only tired. “What other stories does he tell?” I said.

“You want to know about you,” she said. “He loves to tell about your college boyfriend, Jeremy. How he kept brass knuckles in your apartment and stole Max’s weed and Rawan’s wallet when you broke up.” She laughed.

I started to get up. I felt a migraine coming on.

"Sit down, I'm sorry. Max thinks it's funny." The sun moved behind a building, and immediately it felt cooler.

I was tired of her. I reached into my bag and popped a migraine pill. After swallowing, I looked down at the container. "I just took a fucking sleeping pill," I said.

"Why?"

"Not on purpose. What do I do?"

"I would take a long nap," Sonya said.

I jumped up, and jogged to the pool restrooms. When I got inside, Sonya was behind me, and a girl in a purple bikini stood at the mirror, dunking her wet hair into a hand dryer. I went into a stall and stuck my finger down my throat.

Between my retches, from right outside the stall door, Sonya kept talking. "He also tells of a trip you all took before Rawan got pregnant. Some festival in Tennessee? He still talks about these peaches."

The gig was unpaid, but after Max's show we ate a cake frosted with mushrooms the color of a bruise, and we danced, out of our minds, to a Cajun band that played all night. As the sun rose, the three of us curled up in a two-person tent, and I drove us home that afternoon, a sunny Sunday in August. The earth was dry and straw-colored, and Rawan's car choked up mountains and squeaked as we rolled back down. In a town not far from the Kentucky border, the brakes gave out, and we walked back half a mile to a farm stand. Next to a roadside tent, a guy our age sat atop a huge black horse. Its muscles gleamed in the sun, and with its shiny tail, it flicked flies from its hindquarters. The guy offered us peaches, refused to let us pay. He must have called a tow truck or told us where to go, but I've never been able to remember the logistics of that day, only the guy on his horse, and the orchard that stretched behind him; the sweetest fruit I'd ever tasted, the three of us grinning, leaning forward so the juice wouldn't fall on our

soiled clothes but onto the dry earth; and the horse, stamping his massive front hoof, sending up clouds of sand-colored smoke that would hover for a moment, then disappear.

"That was maybe the best weekend of my life," I said.

"This strikes me as not a good thing?" Sonya said.

With some bile and beer, I finally threw up the pill, and while I washed my hands at the sink, I could see Sonya watching me in the mirror.

"This trip, it was sixteen years ago, no?" she said.

I rinsed my mouth with water and went outside. Sixteen years.

Back at our seats, Sonya pushed her lounge chair so close to mine that the metal sides clanked together. "I find you interesting," she said. Her face was inches from mine. "I know you say they are family, blah, blah, blah, but why work for Max for almost nothing? Why babysit Henry for almost nothing? Why fly out here at their beacon call?"

"Beck and call," I said.

"Whatever."

"They need me," I said.

She lit a fresh cigarette and nodded. "Max says you need to feel needed."

I sat up. "I don't need to feel needed, they couldn't have done any of what they did without me. I practically raised Henry."

"But now Henry is a man. Sixteen." She exhaled, and the smoke found a couple reclining with cocktails. "Also, Rawan and Max: they don't need anyone."

A waitress made eye contact and we waved her away.

Sixteen years. "I can't believe Max said that," I said.

"Something like this, don't quote me. Oh, don't look so upset, Max knows nothing. He also says you're very intelligent."

I could tell she was withholding. "But?"

“But unfocused. You don’t stick with things.”

I had thought Max and I shared a deeper connection; it had never occurred to me that he’d been cataloguing and assessing my failures, turning them over with his partners, maybe even with Rawan.

A small cheer rose up from the little crowd dealing with the bird, and I felt like it marked the end of something.

This turned out to be true. After that weekend, I never saw Sonya again. A few months later, she left Max, and not long after that, Rawan and Max left San Francisco for good. I returned to school and sat with fresh-faced undergrads in prerequisites for vet school. In LA, Max and Rawan settled into the same area of Eagle Rock, and during my first visit, over dinner in Rawan’s bungalow, they told me the news about Max. Later, Henry took me upstairs, and we stood together in a clawfoot tub while he pointed out the window to distant mountains, and, a block away, to his father’s front porch.

That day at the pool, after the cheer, Max had walked toward us, smiling. “Rawan caught the parakeet,” he shouted, his voice full of sticky pride. When he drew near, he asked me what was wrong.

“I just can’t believe it,” I said.

“I know. She’s just waiting on the hotel now to locate a cage.” He bounced on his heels.

A group of young people were undressing in front of their chairs, and as a girl bent over to remove a shoe, Rawan appeared. She walked toward us with her right arm tucked near her neck, a neon spark flashing in her hand. She stopped next to Max. Popping from her fist, between her thumb and index finger, was the parakeet’s head. Below, its tail stuck out like a dagger. Rawan raised it near my face, and I met her eyes across bright plumage. She looked triumphant and stunned.

Later, after Max and Rawan disappeared to deal with the bird, Sonya stubbed out her cigarette on a side table. She kissed me chastely on the lips. “Think about what I said,” she said, and I had no idea what she was referring to.

Practice

Rikesh, Gwen's fiancé, wanted her to shut up. When you survive a mass shooting, at first, everyone wants to talk to you about it. People love to rub elbows with trauma, to be able to say they had drinks with tragedy. But after three or four days, Gwen found, people had had enough. They only wanted to hear the story once. Twice made them squirm. Three times and they wanted you to shut up.

Gwen's coworkers also wanted her to shut up, as did her neighbors, and her mother, whenever she called from Florida. A month after, the only people who still wanted to talk about it were other survivors—the shaken ones, like Gwen, not the infuriatingly detached ones, like Rikesh. And no one wanted to talk about it more than Klayr, the little neighbor girl.

The survivors had formed a group on social media, and Gwen went there to lurk. She never posted, but she took comfort in and wept over the testimonials. Tonight, as she waited out in the treehouse for Rikesh to come to bed, she checked for new posts. NoahsMom70: *My fifteen-year-old son died on the way to the hospital. Can't stop wishing it was me.* Lucylovessmoothies: *My girlfriend was shot twice in the stomach and they had to remove portions of her colon. Now she's verbally abusive and depressed. Advice for caregivers?*

But the trite, inspirational posts Gwen found disconcerting. *Fellow survivors, God has a plan for us. We are destined to go forth and do great things.* Gwen knew she should be grateful, and she was, but she also felt that maybe she'd been fated to die that night, that her survival was a mistake. She did not feel that she was doing great things; in fact, she feared she might never be capable of doing even average things ever again. And she could not go forth. She had panic attacks whenever she tried to leave the house.

Gwen worked from home now, after the kind woman in HR ordered her to. Normally Gwen commuted from Oakland to a tastefully decorated office in SoMa, where she was an

executive assistant—a glorified secretary—at an analytics startup, but she'd found herself distracted and exhausted, suspicious of every customer that walked in, her eyes glued to their hands. Sometimes she'd suddenly be unable to take a deep breath, and would have to sit in a bathroom stall until she stopped shaking.

After Rikesh left for the office each day, instead of working from home, Gwen would wander the still, quiet house; hours like desert horizons; years before the sun dipped and she'd hear his key in the front door. If he was ten minutes late coming home, she was certain he was dead, and she'd dial until he answered in an embarrassed whisper from BART. She knew what she sounded like to him and she hated herself. Nights, her body felt taut and restless, and when sleep finally took her, she'd awaken, startled, her heart in her throat; it felt like those dreams of tripping and falling, except it happened again and again, night after night, and in the dreams, always, she was being shot.

Rikesh made two appointments for her with two different therapists, and they both made Gwen feel worse, even a little crazy. A red-bearded man suggested that she was too focused on the event. He said that talking about it "compulsively" was making it worse. After that, Gwen refused to go back.

Now, she startled at the slam of the back door. She'd asked Rikesh to close it gently, but he always forgot. Gwen set a flashlight on end, and a soft lamplight spread across the treehouse, illuminating the only decorations she allowed out there: a handful of rocks on the windowsill, and above those, tacked to the wall, a frenetic black-and-white drawing of a cat grinning from the eye of a tornado. These were artifacts left behind by the landlord's daughter.

Gwen could no longer fall asleep in their bedroom, surrounded by things she and Rikesh had collected. Humans decorated their dwellings in order to feel more like themselves, to define their style and personality, the goal being to surround oneself with oneself. But she wanted to get

away from herself. This was why they'd been sleeping in the treehouse for the past two weeks. Here, she could enter a dark realm of cold, windy rest.

Rikesh ducked inside. "Why are you looking at that again?" He closed Gwen's computer and lifted it from her lap, then crawled over her and into his mummy bag, setting the laptop on the floor beside him. Gwen had suggested they zip their mummy bags together into one large bag, but Rikesh had said they would lose warmth that way, and if she really wanted to sleep together, they had a perfectly fine bed inside. "You're all just feeding off one another on that site. It's morbid," he said.

"Do you have to go?" Gwen said.

"Do you think I want to fly to Texas right now? I almost died, too, I'm not exactly feeling chipper." He rolled onto his side to face her. For weeks he hadn't shaved, but now his face was smooth except for his thick eyebrows. "I've already missed so much work and I can't just never travel again." Rikesh had an MBA in supply chain management, and if Gwen asked him about his day, he'd speak of reverse logistics and lateral integration. It was boring, but she loved that if she told him to back up, explain something, he'd give a brief definition and move on; he had complete confidence in her intelligence.

"What do you want me to do? Do you want me to tell my boss I can't go?"

Gwen hesitated.

"If you want me to, I will."

"No," she said. "No, I know you have to go."

"Then please stop asking. You're making me feel guilty."

"Sorry." Gwen leaned in and kissed him, but he kept his lips closed, as if he were kissing his mother.

"You'll only be alone for two days," he said. "Your mom gets here Wednesday, right?"

"Jesus, I'll be fine." After a moment, Gwen said, "Do you remember the guy with the tan carpenter pants? The guy crawling? With blood all over his hands and mouth?"

"Unlike you, I try not to think about it all the time." Rikesh stared blankly at the ceiling, as if a movie were being projected there.

"I was so scared when I saw him." Gwen took a modulating breath and waited for Rikesh to touch her, though she knew he wouldn't. "That was when I knew for sure they were shots."

Rikesh yawned. "Baby, stop thinking about this before bed. Think about something else."

Earlier that week, while Gwen was in the sweaty throes of a panic attack in bed, Rikesh had said, "Take off your bra! You can't breathe because you're sleeping in a bra." When she finally ripped it off and was still unable to breathe, he'd seemed genuinely stunned that it hadn't solved the problem. She'd yelled, "Are you happy now, genius?" Since the concert, the other woman lurking inside her had taken over: the woman who yelled.

"I hate it when you say that," Gwen said. "Like I enjoy lying awake and thinking about bloody, dying people? I'm sorry I'm not capable of mind control, like you. You know what? You have zero emotional intelligence."

Rikesh threw his arm over her shoulder, and in only a few seconds he was breathing rhythmically, struggling to stay awake. Gwen wanted to poke him in his half-open eye.

Three days later, Gwen was awakened mid-morning—she found it easiest now to sleep during the day—by her eight-year-old neighbor, Klayr. The girl's fascination with shootings seemed borderline phobic, and ever since the concert, she treated Gwen and Rikesh like celebrities. She materialized from bushes and hedgerows, and Rikesh had started referring to her as the paparazzi. *The paparazzi was staked out earlier, looking for you. The paparazzi left her sock on our porch.*

Klayr's parents worked long hours and kept to themselves. In their first year as neighbors, they'd turned down Gwen's invitations to drinks and dinners, but more recently, they'd become shamelessly friendly whenever they asked favors of Gwen and Rikesh, which was often. Gwen babysat at least a few times a month, and welcomed Klayr's random pop-ins. Her parents never seemed to have time for her, didn't seem to appreciate her precociousness or shrewd sense of humor. If Gwen was outside when Klayr came home from school, the girl would rush to Gwen and leap into her arms. She and Rikesh often said that if they ever had a child, they hoped she would be like Klayr.

For the past couple of weeks, Klayr had been coming over while Rikesh was at work, and she and Gwen performed what Klayr called exposure therapy. She'd looked it up on the internet, and told Gwen she thought the technique might help her. Though she'd abandoned her practice, Gwen shared what she'd learned from a meditation workshop. She knew these sessions with Klayr were inappropriate, and dreaded what might happen if Klayr blabbed to anyone, but days when Klayr didn't come, Gwen felt like an overripe plum about to split. She'd tried the jogging and the therapy and the meditation, but Klayr's visits were the only thing that reduced the pressure.

Now, the girl cowered in the corner of the treehouse, and Gwen aimed her fingers like a gun. "You have to let go of your clinging," Gwen said.

Klayr's arms formed an x over her head. "This is what they told us to do in the drills." She looked scrawny crouched on the floor, and Gwen fought a maternal urge to pat her dark hair and scoop her up. Beside the girl was a small window, hazy light filtering in. It was July, and a thick blanket of fog hung over the city, feathering out over the bay and into their neighborhood in Oakland, usually burning off around noon.

“But you’re still scared.” Gwen stepped closer and let her arms fall to her sides. “Think about it, if there’s an active shooter in your classroom, covering your head won’t do shit. Close your eyes.”

Klayr did as she was told.

“Okay, now focus on your breath.” Gwen inhaled. “Pay attention to the way your legs feel against the floor.” She again arranged her hands into the shape of a gun, and stood over Klayr, aiming at her head.

“I can’t do it,” Klayr said, opening her eyes.

Gwen lowered her arms again. “This was your idea.”

“Sort of,” Klayr said. She had a habit of pinching the bridge of her nose and squinting whenever she was nervous. “What did the bad guy look like again?”

“I told you, we couldn’t see him. He was up in a building.”

A woodpecker rattled the treehouse, and Klayr and Gwen both jumped. “But a person next to you got shot?”

“Two people. A man and a woman,” Gwen said.

“Was there blood everywhere? Like on her face?” Klayr stretched her legs out in front of her. Across the knees of her jeans, purple embroidered stars twinkled. “In the bad man drills at school, they say to pretend you’re dead.”

“That’s probably good advice.”

“How long until this works?” Klayr asked.

“You tell me,” Gwen said.

“Well, the idea is, if you’re exposed to something enough times, it will stop being so scary. So, what seems logical?” The girl blinked up at Gwen. “A month?”

“That sounds reasonable,” Gwen said.

Klayr looked pleased, and she stood, walked outside onto the deck surrounding the treehouse, and stuck her head in the window. “Do you want to do yours now?”

“Sure,” Gwen said, moving into position. She closed her eyes and began visualizing that evening: strobing lights from the stage at dusk; wide lines crowding the bar; Rikesh smiling back at her, his five o’clock shadow in honor of the weekend; neon bands flashing on wrists; airplanes blinking overhead; the faint scent of good weed; a crack of fireworks; screams. “Give me thirty seconds,” she said to Klayr. Rikesh’s blue jacket; the white sheet thrown over the front of the bar like a dust ruffle, that she later, while on the ground, closed her eyes into.

“POPOPOPOPOPOPOP.” Klayr’s sound effects had improved.

Gwen, eyes closed, glanced at a woman to her right, saw her crumple like something dropped from the sky. Bloodied neck. Stunned eyes. Gwen turned to Rikesh, ahead on her left. He’d just finished paying and held two overflowing cups of amber-colored beer. As he registered the injured woman, his mouth opened as if he were about to speak. Then he dropped the beers, and Gwen felt his hands on her shoulders, pushing her forward. Life around them was swimming, the lines for bars and bathrooms like rivers in both directions. Faces and bodies streamed past. A man in tan carpenter pants was on the ground, crawling, blood on his hands and face. Rikesh shoved Gwen over the top of the bar, and she gouged a hip on something metal before she hit grass. She smelled chemical fertilizer. Rikesh was on top of her back now, breathing into her ear. He was telling her they were safe, the police would come. This was true, but first, twenty people would die. Gwen tried to ground herself back in the treehouse, to breathe with intention. Someone was screaming next to the bar. It was unlike any scream Gwen had ever heard. More shots exploded and they felt closer this time. Bodies landed on top of Rikesh, and Gwen was afraid she would suffocate. She tried to breathe into that white sheet. It was all she could see. White linen, puffing away from her, with each exhalation.

“Did it work?” Klayr asked, somewhere above Gwen.

From the blankets on the floor where she'd flung herself facedown, Gwen tried to calm her heart rate. She rolled over. "You gotta go little lady, my mom will be here soon."

Hurt flickered across Klayr's face and she gave a wave before turning away.

Inside, Gwen assessed herself in the bathroom. A wrinkled sundress from the day before skimmed her ankles. Could be worse. At least it wasn't short and didn't show cleavage. Her mother would approve. Layla's brand of feminism wasn't even second wave, it was more like BC feminism. Gwen smeared on deodorant, brushed her teeth, and splashed her face with water.

Out front, above Craftsman bungalows and tall palms, the sun was emerging from the fog. Across the street, a gardener started a mower, and with the motor's pops, shock waves of panic shot through Gwen. She sat on the curb and took deep breaths until she saw her mother's camper van chugging up the road.

As she flagged her mother into a street parking space, Gwen tried to look competent. They hadn't seen each other in six months.

Her mother rolled down her window. "You look like a bored construction worker."

Gwen tried to smile. "It's a tight spot."

The grind of metal on asphalt came just before the van reared up onto the curb. Layla readjusted, parked, and stepped out, holding a suitcase and a cooler. In the middle of the sunny street, they hugged, and Gwen breathed in her mother's familiar, floral perfume.

After a few seconds, Layla pulled away. She stepped back, scanning Gwen, then fingered a blond curl near her ear. "That's quite a statement," she said. "You look glamorous, like a flapper."

"I hate it," Gwen said. "How was the maiden voyage?"

“Fabulous. I stopped in New Orleans on the way out, and I’m thinking of seeing Santa Fe on my way back. You should come.” Layla unleashed her customary smile that always looked more like a grimace.

“Maybe.” As they walked toward the house, Klayr’s father waved from the front porch next door.

“Where’s Vera?” Layla said.

“What do you think?”

“I was sure I’d kick the bucket before Vera,” Layla said.

Gwen struggled with the front door lock. “Jesus, Mom.”

“You millennials have no sense of humor about death.”

“She’s not dead. The landlord raised her rent until she had to move out, then they sold the house. Years ago. She’s living with her son in Redwood City.”

“It hasn’t been that long since I visited,” Layla said.

“Three years ago, for your birthday.”

Inside, the house smelled of mildew. Gwen hadn’t bothered to put away the piles of laundry overtaking the sofa, the stack of Amazon boxes and festering takeout containers near the front door. “Sorry it’s a little messy,” Gwen said.

“It’s not messy,” Layla said.

A sweet relief streamed through Gwen, a hope that this visit might be different.

“Squalid maybe. Unsanitary?” Layla set her suitcase down and removed her loafers. “Will you be able to afford to stay here? Now that you’re apparently working from home?”

“We’re good,” Gwen said, though her mother had a point. They lived in the lower level of a cedar shake bungalow in an increasingly desirable neighborhood. Now, everyone on the block had dual incomes.

“Have you met the new neighbor?”

Gwen grabbed Layla's suitcase. "I told you, they aren't new. It's some Silicon Valley dude. And his wife's a corporate lawyer, so I guess they're rich."

"Well, not everyone can be as morally pure as you, Gwyneth."

"Their kid's alright," Gwen said, and headed down the hall to the bedroom.

Layla followed, carrying her cooler, and stood in the doorway while Gwen plowed piles of clothing, books, and papers from the bed into trash bags. Gwen could feel her mother watching. After flinging the bags into the closet and slamming the door before they could tumble out, Gwen said, "There." She heaved Layla's suitcase onto the bed.

"I'm staying out in the van. It has a bed, everything I need. How have you two been sleeping in here?"

"Whatever you want," Gwen said. She lugged Layla's cooler into the kitchen and set it next to the refrigerator. The tiny galley was a dark shadow; only one of two overhead bulbs flared to life. Stacks of plates and an odor of decomposition rose from the sink. On the small table, the tops of the salt and pepper shakers, and a pile of mail had collected a thin layer of dust. Layla leafed through bills to see if they'd been opened. They hadn't. "Working from home is pretty standard nowadays," Gwen said. "We're paying our bills. You don't need to snoop."

"I didn't say anything," Layla said. "I want to, but I won't."

"What do you want to say, Mom?" Gwen began handing Layla the contents from the cooler, and Layla placed them in the refrigerator. This had been their grocery routine when Gwen was a child.

"No, I've learned my lesson."

Gwen snorted. "Let me guess. I need to get a grip? Buck up? Well, this is me, trying to do those things. Not everyone is like you and Rikesh." Gwen could feel herself losing control. She shook water from a celery bunch.

“See? I didn’t even say anything and you’re angry. It’s like I’m walking on glass. Sometimes I wonder.” Layla shoved a jar of olives inside the door. “Do other women also fear their daughters?”

Her mother loved to play the assailant and the victim. Gwen shut the fridge. “I was thinking you could help me with the garden today and I could maybe cook dinner later?”

“You need to get out of the house. Let’s go to the city for the day and eat before we come back.” Layla gestured to the window. “It’s beautiful out.”

“I’d rather relax here.” On the phone last week, Gwen had already told her mother that she was still having trouble in public spaces. “Did I tell you about the girl I met online who was also at the concert? She was closer to the stage-”

“You’re dwelling,” Layla interrupted. “And Rikesh says you’re becoming a shut-in.”

“I hate that you guys talk. It’s abnormal.”

“Tomorrow we can stay in. Have a cleaning party, like old times,” Layla said.

“Rikesh just cleaned last week. Plus, cleaning just feels like-” Gwen leaned against the counter and fake yawned. “Like a futile assault against the inevitable decay of things. Like people really into cleaning can’t accept the reality of impermanence or death.”

Layla rolled her eyes. “I was pretty goddamn aware of reality. Your father left, I had an infant, and later a dying mother to care for, and I somehow managed to keep the house clean.”

“You’re a saint.”

“That’s just a lazy person’s excuse.”

“Am I the lazy person?” Gwen said.

Before Layla had retired, she’d been in pharmaceutical research, and had worked long hours at a job she hated. “Can we at least go outside instead of talking in this stuffy kitchen?” Layla waved Gwen down the hall and onto the front porch.

Outside, it was bright now; all the fog had burned off. On the front steps sat Klayr, fondling the leaves on a potted dieffenbachia. She jumped up, revealing muddy shorts.

"I think you have the wrong house," Layla said. "Are you looking for your friend?"

"No," Klayr said.

"An enemy then?"

The girl looked at Layla as if she were a silly child. "Gwen," she said, pointing.

"Oh, do you live next door? I'm Gwen's mother."

"Bonjour," Klayr said to Layla.

Gwen settled onto the porch swing. Her mother was speaking in the high-pitched kid voice she used to try to get them to like her. It always had the opposite effect.

"I told you my mom was coming," Gwen said, eyeing the girl.

Klayr looked at her feet.

"She's perfectly fine," Layla said, in her crazy voice. A large palm cast a wide slash of shade across the center of the porch, and Layla dragged a chair there and sat.

"Do you live in there?" Klayr asked, pointing to the van.

"Of course not," Layla said. "I live in Florida. Why, would you like a tour?"

"Not really," Klayr said.

Gwen laughed. "Mom, this is Klayr."

"Pleased to meet you. You have great freckles. And I love that name." Layla shielded her eyes with a hand. "Classic."

"It's not classic," Klayr said.

"Oh, well, I'm sorry." Layla shot Gwen a look.

"It would be, but my mom is neurotic," Klayr said.

"Pardon?"

"She decided it would be unique if my name was spelled K-L-A-Y-R."

“Oh dear,” Layla said.

“I know,” Klayr said, opening her eyes wide. In a display of solidarity, she sat on the floor next to Layla’s feet and sighed, picking at a scabby knee. “She’s a boring lawyer, so she tries to be cool by giving me a dumb spelling and making art.” She used air quotes when she said the word art. “Well, not really. My friend Jack’s mom is a real artist. Like, she went to school and has her paintings in galleries. My mom just makes these little blobs on the weekends.” Klayr looked at Layla and, with disgust, mimed what looked like packing a snowball. “They’re supposed to be mountains that you open up and can see inside. She calls them vessels.”

“That sounds interesting,” Layla said.

“Except mountains aren’t hollow. Even I know that. It’s embarrassing.”

“Sorry kiddo,” Gwen said. “Can’t choose your parents.”

“That’s nice, Gwyneth,” Layla said. She turned to Klayr. “I’m sure your parents are wonderful people.”

Gwen laughed. “Yeah, they hog all the street parking and destroy the planet with their *three* luxury, supposedly green cars and they displace elderly residents. Wonderful, indeed.”

“What is wrong with you?” Layla said.

Klayr picked at her scab.

“We’ve already talked about this,” Gwen said, waving her hand at Klayr, knowing she’d gone too far.

“My cousin Max says my dad works for the man,” Klayr said.

“He doesn’t even know what that means,” Layla said, holding her head at an odd angle; the sun had moved and was frying half of her face.

“He’s in high school,” Klayr said, as if that proved Max an expert. “He says my family will probably have our heads cut off soon, like in the French Revolution.” She said it in a

monotone, while still working on her knee. She'd succeeded in severing a small chunk of the scab, and near the edge hovered a fine line of blood.

"Your dad's bosses will probably be first," Gwen said. "You'll have time to flee."

"Will you flee too?" Klayr looked up at Gwen hopefully.

"Nah, I'm a pleb. Viva la revolución!"

"Can I talk to you inside?" Layla said.

"I know she's joking." Klayr gave a limp wave to her mother, who was approaching from the sidewalk, wearing loose linen trousers and a black baseball hat. She paused ten feet from the porch. Like Klayr, she had messy dark hair.

Gwen didn't feel like chatting, but Layla invited Klayr's mother onto the porch.

"Thank you, but we actually have to get going. Klayr, what did I tell you about bugging Gwen and Rikesh?"

"She's fine," Gwen said. "Rikesh is traveling."

"I don't want to go," Klayr whined.

"Now." Turning to Gwen and Layla, Klayr's mother said, "She's had a low-grade fever and a headache all morning."

"Any rash?" Layla asked.

"She has a few bumps on the back of her neck, but I think it's from the tag on her shirt."

"Let me see," Layla said, yanking Klayr's shirt down at the neck.

"She can't help herself," Gwen said.

"You should take her to the ER, just to be safe. Meningitis."

"Don't listen," Gwen said. "She's an alarmist."

"Thank you so much," Klayr's mother said to Layla, ignoring Gwen. She marched onto the porch and grabbed Klayr by the arm. "Say thank you, Klayr."

"Merci," Klayr said, and they loaded into a Tesla and drove away.

“I like her,” Layla said. “Parents in California are much too lenient.”

An hour later, Layla and Gwen were in the van, barreling across the Bay Bridge, the bed and bathroom door rattling with every bump. Layla had insisted that it would be good for Gwen to get out into the city, “to be among the living,” but she’d also insisted on driving and had refused to take BART. “I hate this bridge part.” Layla said. “I’m always afraid there’ll be an earthquake.”

“We could have taken BART.”

“And be one-hundred feet under water when it hits?”

“It’s not going to hit, Mom.” Gwen closed her eyes.

“You’re overdue.”

“What?”

“For an earthquake.”

“I look forward to it. People will stop moving here and rent will be affordable again.”

“You need not be so blithe.”

“You need not talk incessantly.” Gwen opened her eyes and pretended to glance around. “Do you see anyone else talking?”

Layla looked over at her. “Are you this nasty to Rikesh?”

“Yes, Mom. Yes, I am.” Out Gwen’s window, sun sparkled off the bay. Tired-looking cargo ships rose from the water like ugly islands. “You know you’re not going to be able to park this thing,” she said.

“I’m an excellent driver. I parked her in downtown New Orleans,” Layla said. “Let’s eat in Hayes Valley and then see where the afternoon takes us.”

“You’re delusional,” Gwen said.

Despite being on the foggy side of the bay, sun now splashed over the tops of skyscrapers. Gwen gave directions to Layla, who was hunched forward, navigating the narrow streets. As they rolled into Hayes Valley, streams of people crossed intersections and clogged the sidewalks, and groups of friends lolled on blankets in the park.

"Why didn't you tell me it would be so crowded?" Layla said, attempting to back up on a side street. Someone pulling out of a driveway honked and threw up their hands.

"It's a sunny afternoon in July," Gwen said.

"Well you could have told me parking would be impossible."

"I'm as shocked as you are," Gwen said.

Layla made a three-point turn and nicked a garbage can. "How do we get to that neighborhood with the pasta and strip joints?" She smiled with her teeth, a rare occurrence, and at her outer eyes there appeared faint fans of wrinkles.

They rattled through the Tenderloin and Chinatown and somehow found a parking spot in front of a focaccia bakery. In the street, Gwen shook off her jacket and watched as her mother closed her eyes into the sun. Though her face was smooth, there was a slack quality to it, and her eyes had begun a downward descent. She looked older than she had six months ago. Her mother's aging was something Gwen tried not to think about. Three years ago, at the end of Layla's visit, Gwen had cried when her mother disappeared through the revolving doors at the airport, her little carry-on scurrying behind her.

Now, at a counter in North Beach, they ordered steaming bowls of bucatini, and afterward, they drank wine at a sunny sidewalk café and watched people teeter by in high heels. Gwen explained that if a person was wearing heels, there was a pretty good chance they were a visitor; most locals gave up on anything but flats due to the hills.

Halfway through the bottle, Layla wanted a photo, so they foolishly left their things at the table and ran across Columbus, dodging oncoming traffic, to Layla's preferred backdrop: a large

green awning. On the crowded street corner, Layla took photos with her phone. The sun was still high, and they could see all the way down the street to glowing marquee signs, the great pyramid of the Transamerica building, and the spires of a cathedral lit white. Layla shouted for Gwen to turn around and smile, and while Gwen stood under the green shop awning, a little drunk, and watched her mother, bathed in golden sunlight, slowly back into a young tourist couple, apologize, and throw her head back in laughter, for a moment, perhaps even a few seconds, Gwen smiled at the camera and forgot that she was unhappy.

Later, after they'd finished the bottle, Layla got up to pee, and through the open windows, Gwen could hear her mother in line for the restroom, laughing with the man next to her and speaking Spanish. Gwen thought of asking her mother to stay longer, imagined the two of them organizing Gwen's closet, staying in their pajamas until noon, the way they had the week she'd moved into her first apartment.

Approaching on the sidewalk was a young couple wearing matching Hawaiian shirts, followed a minute later by a man in tan carpenter pants. As she watched him walk toward her, Gwen saw the man crawling on the ground, the blood at the corner of his mouth, and she felt the percussive rumble of bodies running past, the heat of her own breath while she blinked into white linen. She stood, and her metal chair tipped back and clattered onto the sidewalk, and as the man jogged toward her, she backed up until she hit the restaurant window. Cold needles of sweat at the nape of her neck. The certainty that she was having a heart attack, dying on this sunny street with her mother now squeezing her shoulders.

"Gwyneth, sit down," Layla said.

The man in the carpenter pants was gripping the back of the chair, which was now upright. He had hairy hands and wore a thick gold wedding band. All around the table, people had stopped to watch. A young tourist carrying a pink shopping bag asked if Gwen wanted her unopened ice tea. Gwen shook her head and sat down and tried to breathe.

"She's fine," Layla said to the crowd. She waved the onlookers away and turned to Gwen. "People are staring," she said.

Gwen looked into her mother's eyes and couldn't read them. She knew she must be a disappointment. And then the worst happened: she began to cry.

The tan pants man departed, and Gwen wiped at her face with her sleeves. She tried to focus on her breathing, and she closed her eyes and imagined Rikesh counting to thirty. When she opened her eyes, she saw on her mother's face the familiar expression she always wore whenever Gwen cried. Some stew of bewilderment and rage. Gwen had never seen Layla cry.

"Why do you always look at me like that?" Gwen said.

"I'm sorry. Next time should I run it by you first? You can let me know if you approve of my facial expressions?"

"Why can't you be like a normal mom?"

Layla signaled the waiter for the check.

"Why can't you ever comfort me or tell me it's going to be okay?"

"Because it's not." Layla leaned forward across the table. "It's not all going to be okay. I'm sorry you and Rikesh had to go through such an awful ordeal. And it *was* truly awful. But do you want me to lie to you? Do you want me to say life will get easier?"

"Yes! Yes, that's exactly what I want."

"Well, it won't. What you've been through was terrible, but guess what? In the coming decades, things will happen that will be much more terrible, and you'll look back on this terrible year when you were young and you'll wish you'd enjoyed it. Save your energy, you'll need it. Because life doesn't get easier, Gwyneth; it tends, generally, to get harder." Layla's expression softened. "You don't have kids, you can't understand. You've always been like your father: too sensitive. Do you know what happens to sensitive people?" She cleared her throat and managed a bleary smile when the waiter handed her the check. As she spoke, she opened the bill and began

calculating a tip in the margins. “When your father left, I was beside myself. I gave birth alone, changed diapers alone, and you just screamed and screamed, day and night. I wasn’t eating, I wasn’t sleeping. My mother came to help. She stayed for two weeks.”

“Grandma Jo?”

“Yes, I *said* my mother. She cooked and cleaned and cared for you, and when the two weeks were up, she put her suitcase by the door and told me she was leaving. Well, I begged her to stay, I practically kissed her shoes, but she told me, ‘Layla, you need to put one foot in front of the other.’ And I did.” Layla snapped the bill shut and pushed it to the edge of the table.

“How could she just leave you?” Gwen said. “That’s so cruel.”

Layla shrugged and leaned down to readjust her shoe. “Maybe it was. What do I know? None of us knows what we’re doing.” She looked up, her lips tight, her eyes pooling. “What I’m trying to say is that I wish you didn’t have to carry anything, I wish that more than you could ever understand.” She tugged down her pant leg and stood up. “Ready?”

On the way home, as they were sitting in bridge traffic, a notification popped up on Gwen’s phone, and she felt the prickles of panic again, the sour swirl in her gut that arrived every few days with every new headline. A fifteen-year-old boy. A summer camp in Missouri. Three dead. Nine wounded. The youngest: eight. She must have made a sound, because Layla, from the driver’s seat, glanced over and asked what had happened. “Nothing,” Gwen said.

Later, after they’d snacked on cheese and crackers and split another bottle of wine, and after Layla was safely asleep in her van and the dishwasher had begun its mechanical grinding, Gwen, feeling wide awake, adrenaline thrumming as if she were gearing up for a marathon, slipped through the back door, walked barefoot through the backyard—dewy bits of grass adhering to her ankles and toes—and climbed the ladder to the treehouse. In a neighboring yard, two cats screeched and hissed. Gwen checked her mummy bag for bugs, then, from the container

she kept behind a stack of books, shook out two sleeping pills. She swallowed them with only a passing thought of the wine, and how she might feel in the morning. The moment she succumbed to the heavy pharmaceutical grip was the moment she looked forward to all day.

As she waited for sleep to take her and tried to keep warm in her bag, Gwen scrolled through new postings in the survivor's group. The post with the most comments that day was *Our Children Live In Fear!* She pulled up the article from earlier and read all about the camp shooting. That's what they were calling it in the news. Gwen pictured a sign: Welcome to Camp Shooting, where no child is safe.

A metallic clacking entered Gwen's dream. She opened her eyes to Klayr standing at the treehouse window, tapping two stones together.

"Bonjour," Klayr said. The girl had been waiting, creepily, maybe for an hour, for Gwen to open her eyes.

Gwen rubbed her face. Her brain felt swollen and heavy.

"Why did you sleep here?" Klayr set the stones on the windowsill.

"My mom's staying with me."

"But she sleeps in her van."

Gwen sighed. "I forgot," she said.

Klayr sat at Gwen's feet and peered at her. "You look different right now."

"I don't have any makeup on."

"Oh," Klayr said. "It makes your eyes look weirdlike." She stood and walked over to the drawing of the grinning cat in a tornado. "Did I draw this?"

"No. The girl who lived here before me."

"Did she get shot and die?"

"What? No."

Klayr eyed her. “Are you thirty-five?” She picked up a book, and paged through it, pretending to speed read.

“No. I’m twenty-nine, why?” Gwen was offended.

“The doctor said I’m young and probably don’t need to go to the doctor again until I’m thirty-five.” Klayr continued turning pages at a rapid pace.

“I’m sure he was joking.”

“It was a girl doctor,” Klayr said, and tossed the book to the floor.

“Right.” Gwen felt herself flush. “Was everything okay?”

“We went to the ER because of your mom, but I just have a virus or something.” Klayr slipped on one of Gwen’s flip flops, hiked up her dirty dress over her scabby knee, and stamped her leg around at pointy angles, like a fashion model.

“I’m glad you’re fine,” Gwen said.

A breeze came through the doorway and blew around pages of magazines and newspapers near Gwen’s feet. Klayr picked up a waterlogged magazine with her thumb and forefinger and dangled it out in front of her. “Aren’t you too old to have a messy house?”

Gwen rolled over and pretended to sleep. She could hear Klayr rattling stones at the window and breathing through her mouth.

“How come your mom’s driving you crazy?”

“Did she say that?” Gwen said, forgetting she was supposed to be asleep.

“Yep. She just made me toast. She said to come wake you up out here.”

“She knows I’m out here? What time is it?”

Klayr pulled out a cell phone. “Eight twenty-six! I told her we had to practice.”

Gwen sat up. “What? What did you tell her, Klayr?”

“Just how we sometimes practice.”

“What did she say?”

"Your mom? She mostly just asked questions."

"What's she doing now?"

"Talking on the phone to Rikesh."

"Jesus, why would you do that?" Gwen's voice came out louder than she'd intended, and Klayr flinched.

Her back to Gwen, Klayr rose onto her toes and placed a pebble on the top ledge of the window frame. "Your mom's going to Santa Fe."

"I know," Gwen said, and lay down on her back. In a patch of light above her head, a spider web gleamed. She closed her eyes and thought of how lately, she always shouted when she wanted to cry. This was one thing Rikesh understood about her.

Once, Gwen and Rikesh had passed by Santa Fe, and when they'd pulled off for gas, they ended up on a two-lane road in Navajo Nation behind a slow white pickup truck. Two Navajo men sat in the bed of the truck, and one of the men lifted his middle finger and held it out at her. He kept it raised even when they pulled in for gas.

"Do you believe this?" Gwen had said.

"What do you expect? We're on his land." Rikesh unbuckled his seat belt and looked at her. "Are you really mad at him? Maybe you feel complicit? Or sad?"

Gwen pictured Layla driving through the scorching red rocks of Arizona, toward the warm adobe dwellings of Santa Fe. When she and Rikesh had driven through New Mexico, they hadn't stopped in Santa Fe, but Rikesh had an aunt there and he'd shown Gwen photos of ochre sunsets above green mountains, orange rock pillars that, at their tops, gradated to gold. She'd watched a documentary about a pueblo in New Mexico with cave paintings that were almost a thousand years old. It had been a bustling town. Now it was owned by the park service. The cliffs were abandoned, its caves filled with tourists by day, empty and soundless by night.

Gwen was thinking about red cliffs and clay earth and fingers brushing paint upon rock so many hundreds of years ago, when she heard the crackling of paper underfoot. Klayr snatched a sheet of paper from the floor near the door and came over and handed it to Gwen. The page had been torn from that morning's newspaper. *Summer Camp Shooter*, read the headline. Underneath was a photo of the boy who had killed three children. He looked young and frightened, like any other adolescent boy. "I heard," Gwen said, handing back the article. After a glance, Klayr let go, and the two of them watched the page slice through the air at an angle, then race across the floor.

Klayr sat back down near Gwen's feet. The girl's ponytail was too tight, and at her forehead, a fuzz of fine hairs had freed themselves. "School starts in three weeks. Can we practice?" There was a hopeful terror in her eyes.

"Come here," Gwen said, sitting up and patting the blanket next to her.

Klayr scooched back until they were sitting side by side against the wall.

"Did you read that entire article?"

Klayr nodded.

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

"The girl, Laetitia, she was eight," Klayr said. "Like me. And she just liked to draw and have friends and-" She looked down at her hands and sobbed. "And I don't know why he wanted to kill her." She looked up at Gwen. "Why would he want to kill her?"

Do you know what happens to sensitive people?

At first, at the girl's display of emotion, Gwen felt an instinctive, cool repulsion. She thought of Grandma Jo leaving Layla in the doorway, of all the ways we teach each other to be strong. Then, Gwen put her arm around Klayr's shoulder, and when the girl collapsed, smearing warm tears across Gwen's lap and forearm, Gwen closed her eyes and patted Klayr's back, until, after a time, their breath synchronized, the girl's tremors seemed to enter and crash through

Gwen, and she listened to herself saying, “We won’t let anything bad happen to you. You’re safe. You don’t have to be afraid. You’re safe. Life will get easier. You’ll see.”

Penitentes

I had always hated Mila's boyfriend, but because she loved him and because she was dying, I tried to be polite. When he called, it was one in the morning Pacific Time and I'd already been asleep for hours. He said, "Mila's asking, do you have any bud?" as if we were twenty and I were still selling weed. I told him she should get a medical card—obviously it couldn't be shipped or flown—and he said, lowering his voice, "This is her asking you to come. Can't you drive it out here?" When I hesitated, he added, "I mean, you're not really working, right?" I had recently given birth to my second child and was struggling to set up a consulting business I could run from home, a goal that had recently become a necessity after my husband had informed me a few weeks earlier that he wanted a divorce, but yes, Josh was correct, I did not have employment from which I could be fired.

Two months before his call, Mila had phoned to tell me her diagnosis and I'd insisted on visiting that same week, forgetting our most recent argument, humiliating myself by sobbing while she listened silently on the other end. It was the first we'd spoken in over six months, since she'd said it was idiotic to quit my job to care for my kids, and I'd called her a narcissist with a meaningless life. I apologized, but Mila brushed off my requests to visit, promising she'd call with any new information. The cancer was thriving. I pictured it sprouting and blanketing, like the algal blooms in the spring swamps of Minnesota where we'd been girls together. Before hanging up she'd laughed and said, "When I die, at least I'll finally do something before you."

The week after Josh's call I loaded the freezer with bottles of breast milk, left my three-year-old and seven-month-old with my soon-to-be ex-husband, and set out across the West in our old car. Wads of weed gummies, red velvet cookies, and toffee lay buried in a full coffee tin under camping equipment in the trunk. The budtender at the dispensary had looked all of twelve

and had given me an exaggerated frown when I told him it was for a dying friend. “You want edibles,” he said, rubbing his sparse goatee, before asking if the client was elderly. I told him she was diagnosed the previous month, just after her thirtieth birthday, and he moaned, “Fuuuuck,” trying to be kind.

I wasn’t entirely sure what the laws were regarding state lines. Before I left, my husband said, “Why would you do something so risky just so she can pretend she doesn’t care about seeing you? She’s not even nice to you.” I prickled at his declaration and later wondered if it were true, but honestly, I wanted to be reckless and extravagant for her; it felt like the only appropriate thing I could do.

I also hoped a few days apart might change his mind about leaving me.

And although I hadn’t told Mila about the divorce, I wanted the comfort of her presence, of being near someone I’d known in childhood, someone who needed me.

I flew through the red moonscape of Nevada, across great salt flats, into barren fields demarcated by decaying fences. Throughout the trip my breasts ached and I pumped in filthy gas station bathrooms. After midnight I wheeled into a deserted campground outside of Rock Springs and set up camp for five hours, pumped and dumped again in the tent, slept hard, and the next day drove straight through to Minneapolis, presenting myself on Mila’s doorstep just after two in the morning. She was asleep but Josh hugged me for too long on their windy brownstone doorstep, crying into my clavicles as if we were friends.

When I woke in their guest room, I smelled coffee. I discovered doughnuts on the dining table, a modern monstrosity that was, just like everything in their apartment, excessive for two people. Mila came in just as I was stuffing a Boston cream in my mouth. I hadn’t eaten since a Subway in South Dakota. She leaned against the doorway and said, “Your boobs are huge.”

We hadn’t seen each other since before I’d given birth and I was aware of her appraising my body the same way she always had, like when we were sixteen and a boy I loved fucked

another girl and she'd told me, over a shared cigarette, "If we were in different times, guys would be attracted to your body type." She blew smoke over my shoulder. "You know, plowing fields and famine and shit."

She was so very skinny. Her thighs and ass had filled out in her twenties, but now her pajama bottoms hung off her hips again like they had when we were children. I resisted the urge to cry; tears had always annoyed her.

After Josh left for work, Mila and I spent the morning in our pajamas, talking in the sunny living room. The conversation was forced, but I didn't fear we'd lost our easy way together; I knew Mila was trying to make me squirm, a skill she'd acquired in law school. I politely answered her questions about the weather, the wildfires, refused to snap at her like she wanted me to.

Later, we walked to a cafeteria-style lunch spot with overpriced gourmet food and Mila ordered a cup of soup, lifting spoonfuls while she spoke, as if she were about to eat, then lowering the spoon back down. I counted three bites. I didn't know what to say about her appetite, so I pretended not to notice. She'd been anorexic in college and I kept thinking of this as I watched her not eat.

Other than the thinness, she looked well. Her hair was freshly colored a new, flaxen hue and loose curls trailed over her shoulders. A healthy pink glow flushed her cheeks and I leaned closer, trying to see if it was blush. I watched tiny wrinkles appear above her lips as she spoke, barely hearing what she was saying, thinking only of how she still covered her mouth with a hand while eating in the same way she had when she was twelve. The lights in the restaurant were too bright and I despised communal tables. A woman on the bench next to me kept drinking from my water cup.

Eventually Mila lost patience with small talk and said, "They have me on some clinical trials," but when I asked about her treatment plan, she spoke at length of how she'd contracted

the cancer, as if it were dysentery or ringworm. The old paint in those shitty houses we'd grown up in. The plastic water bottles which had rolled around on the floor of her car in college. The makeup, the lotion, the food dye, the stress. She explained she'd gone vegan and drank goldenseal tea daily. A man twice weekly adjusted her vibrations with singing bowls. A woman took a large brushlike tool to Mila's naked body until all dead skin was scraped off.

The familiar lump formed in my throat and I looked away, pretending to be interested in an ugly acrylic painting.

"I'm fine," Mila said. "My worst fear is needing a colostomy bag."

"I think that's everyone's worst fear."

She grabbed my plate, stuck her thumb in a leftover blob of dijon and sucked. This was the girl who had always accused me of chewing too noisily, drooling in my sleep, showing too much cleavage, wanting too much.

As we exited the restaurant she said, "So I'm in this volunteer thing and there's a meeting now and I should probably go. You can come." She smirked when I gave her an approving nod, knowing I was recalling her lost weekends at Delta Gamma while I'd been protesting the invasion of Iraq. For well over a decade I had tried and failed to politicize her. "Don't get too excited," she said. "The counselor forced me to pick a cause until I go back to work." She pointed and we took a right onto a residential street. "It's supposed to make you less depressed about dying."

"Does it work?"

"Sometimes. Temporarily."

She began digging for a slip of paper with the address while loading my hands with contents from her purse.

A beautiful woman with shiny black hair opened her door to us, and we joined about fifteen people seated in a circle in a sun-drenched living room filled with mid-century furniture. I

was immediately aware I was back in Minnesota; almost every person looked like the spawn of a long line of Olsons, Andersons or Ericksons; their white hair gleamed in the light. The trainer, a freckled woman with frizzy curls, announced we'd be picking up where we'd left off at the last meeting, with role-playing scenarios. Mila glanced at me. She knew audience participation gave me hives.

"As a reminder," the trainer said, "Cameraperson 1 is not for the faint of heart." This person would face the most aggression. Possibly be subject to physical pain, verbal abuse, intimidation, arrest. This person needed to be mentally and physically prepared. Mila raised her hand. Her bony limbs formed sharp angles as she rose and walked into the circle.

I would never tell her this, but I'd always thought of her as weak. It was why we'd been able to remain friends. Despite her mood swings and cutting words, I'd always known I was the vital one. She of knobby knees and weak appetites. Afraid of heights, childbirth, pain, blood. Life's physical demands overwhelmed her.

One summer when we were twelve, I'd purposely left her behind on a long bike ride through deep woods bordering a lake. A large hill covered in long grasses loomed ahead. I pedaled toward it and looked over my shoulder as Mila became farther away.

I waited at the top a long while before she appeared, dragging her bike up the last ten yards, nearly crying. I was satisfied. I ran to her and sprinted the bike up, but when she said a breathless thank you at the top, I felt ashamed.

"Are we almost home?" she'd asked, picking at a cut near her ankle.

"We have to go back down." The feeling was not what I'd imagined.

I went first, whooping and swearing, flying fast over bumps, occasionally airborne. At the bottom, I squinted up at Mila, my heart thundering. She looked small and scared, like a little

child. After a long while she mounted and leaned forward. She must have squeezed the brakes the entire way down because it took forever for her to descend. Near the bottom there was a steep dip, and here she released the brakes, picked up speed, and looked up at me, her mouth open in surprised laughter. A moment later she fell and broke her arm in two places.

A balding man raised his hand for Cameraperson 2 and Mila forced me to the front as Note Taker. The beautiful hostess would be the ICE agent. The bald man and I stood in the ring behind Mila, like sidekicks.

The hostess put on a puffy jacket and made herself look four times her size. She hovered over Mila, all breath and aggression. Her voice was startlingly loud and gruff.

"Why are you here?"

Mila practiced the de-escalation techniques and began filming.

"I am here as a peaceful witness."

"Stand back!" the ICE officer screamed. A couple of people jumped in their seats. Mila moved backward quickly and we moved with her, but the ICE agent spread her arms like an ugly bird and flew at her. "Stop recording!"

Mila stood her ground, her skinny forearms shaking as she continued to film, holding her phone out with both hands, like a priest blessing a wafer. As the ICE officer advanced, Mila took another tiny step backward, onto my toes. When the agent swiped for her phone, Mila dodged her and handed it to me, and I continued filming, as instructed.

"This is your final warning!" The officer shoved Mila, sent her reeling into me.

"I have a right to be here," Mila said, much too loudly. She walked slowly back to the agent and slapped her pen out of her hand. It rolled under a chair occupied by a muscular guy wearing an Antifa t-shirt. Two women next to me exchanged side eyes.

“Okay, I know things can get heated,” the trainer said, clapping slowly. “Good job overall, Mila, but remember, we don’t want escalations. It needs to be clear to judges that we’re not interfering with the officers’ work.”

“Are you kidding?” Mila said. “Do these people look like they’d interfere with anything?” She laughed. “They can’t even decide what to do at a four-way stop they’re so afraid of bad behavior. You think they’re going to risk jail for people they’ve never met?”

The hostess tried to herd Mila into the kitchen, a smile plastered on her face that I worried might provoke Mila to violence.

“No one gives a shit about anyone but themselves.” Mila walked out the front door.

I listened to the rest of the lecture, my breasts swollen and painful, before politely excusing myself. Before I left the house, I pumped in a cold, marble bathroom and dumped it down the toilet.

At the end of the block, Mila hung away from a stop sign, her hands wrapped around the pole, her body diagonal, head to the sky, a juvenile pose. The sun was strong; I had forgotten how hot summers could be in Minneapolis. I stood behind her until she opened her eyes and looked at me upside down.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” She stood and leaned against the pole.

I wanted to say I felt like we were both in the same bad dream, that over the past month, late at night, after putting my children to bed, I often pictured her getting home from chemo, walking alone on a darkened street up to their silent home, where Josh would be jerking off on the couch while a golf tournament on television flashed green across the room onto the opposite windows. I wanted to tell her I was sorry her mother was dead. I wanted to tell her to talk to me.

We stood sweating in silence on the sidewalk.

“Do those people know you’re sick?” I finally said.

Mila fished around in her purse and shoved two pieces of gum into her mouth. “Why would they?”

“Why aren’t you doing legal stuff pro bono instead?”

“I am, but I wanted something different. I don’t feel like explaining it to you.”

“I like your hair blond,” I said.

“It’s a wig.”

I winced, tried again. “That woman is intense, but it’s cool she hosts this stuff.”

“Randa? Who played the ICE agent?” Mila snorted. “Last year her husband got fired for sexually harassing his assistant and then Randa got loaded and crashed her car with her kids in it into the neighbor’s garage. Now she’s sober and bored.”

“I pictured her as a CFO,” I said honestly.

“No. She sells skincare online. Don’t give her your email or she’ll spam you with pyramid scheme shit.” She flipped her hair and looked straight at me; in the bright sun her brown eyes flashed flecks of golden topaz. She smiled brilliantly. “Josh said you brought me medical weed.”

I made pasta puttanesca with, at Mila’s request, brown rice noodles and tomatoes jarred in glass. When Josh got home the three of us slurped it while seated on the sofa, watching *Cleo From 5 to 7*. Josh announced it was their fourth screening.

“No it’s not,” Mila said.

He shrugged and looked at me in a way that meant it was.

I’d given Mila the bag of gummy worms before dinner, but when she’d insisted upon eating an entire worm, despite having never taken edibles before, I snatched it from her and hacked it in two on the cutting board next to some olives, handing her half. I swallowed its tail.

Everyone died, I told myself while trying to focus on the film. I would just have to deal with it. I thought at least it wasn't one of my children who had cancer, then worried Mila would be able to read my mind.

She stared at the screen, eyes glazed. She looked really stoned. Josh and I watched as she shoved forkfuls of pasta into her mouth before swallowing the previous bites. He smiled and I felt like I had done one small, good thing. I wanted to feed her until she ballooned with healthy, vital fat, until she looked more like me. My brain buzzed and I couldn't follow the film, so once Mila finished, I cleaned the kitchen.

When I returned, the credits were rolling. Mila lowered herself from the couch to the floor and landed in a hard thud. She crawled to the rug, then rolled onto her back.

Josh glared at me. "Okay, wow, how much did you give her?"

"Half a worm."

"Is that what you took?"

I nodded.

"Me too," he said. He mumbled that he guessed she was smaller than us, then asked if she wanted to go for a walk.

"You can't walk off edibles, Josh," I said.

"You've always been the expert on illegal substances." His gelled hair levitated inches above his forehead. He was so unworthy of Mila. I wanted to be alone with her. Then, I was sure, we could talk in the way best friends were supposed to. It sickened me that Josh had been the first to know, the one to comfort her, the one who would care for her and possibly help her die.

"She's fine," I said.

I sank into an armchair near Mila, who was still flat on her back with one hand on her heart. Josh moved to sit behind her on the floor and he aggressively stroked her hair in the way a

woman never would. Mila turned her face up to him and he leaned down as she said something close to his ear I couldn't hear.

"Let's go for a walk," he said again.

"You can't fucking walk it off," I said.

Mila looked at me with huge eyes. "My heart is going too fast," she said.

"You're just really high."

Josh snorted and shook his head.

"What, you think she's having a cardiac event?"

"You don't have to be so mean," he mumbled.

"Fuck off Josh. You're literally the meanest person I know."

Mila stared at the ceiling and blinked. I got up and wandered through the kitchen. Inside the guest room I yanked my backpack from the closet. I'd eat another gummy, count to sixty, then go back in. But when I pulled the baggy out it looked depleted. There had been eleven worms; the goatee boy had thrown in one free. I re-counted.

"Did you eat three entire gummies?" I yelled at Mila, shaking the baggy in the air.

She clenched her jaw and nodded.

"Why?"

"It wasn't doing anything at first."

"Of course your heart is racing," I said.

"It's not that," she whispered.

Josh rubbed her shoulders, a bit roughly.

"You ate way too much," I said.

"Lay off," Josh said. "There's nothing we can do now. You're scaring her."

Mila removed Josh's hands from her shoulders, squeezed her legs together as if preparing for a pencil dive, and criss-crossed her arms over her chest.

“Babe, let’s go outside.”

“Jesus, Josh. She doesn’t want to walk right now.”

“I’m dying,” Mila said.

We both stood and then knelt beside her. Her eyes were closed. She was breathing rapidly.

“You’re not,” I said.

“I am. I can tell. My insides feel-” she trailed off and gentle tears leaked down her cheeks.

“Baby, stop.” Now Josh was worried, his eyes red. “What do you feel?”

“My heart is going too fast. I can’t breathe. It’s happening. It’s going to happen now.”

Josh began silently weeping. He looked at me. “She gets anxious, but not like this.”

“Move,” I told him. He slumped against the couch, his head in his hands.

Mila’s face was calm. The lines that had recently begun to form on her forehead and near her mouth softened, and it made her look very young. I forced her to open her eyes. They were glassy, overflowing.

“You’re not dying.” I said it meanly.

“I really think I am.”

“Listen,” I said, “You’re way too high. Tomorrow you’ll be fine.”

“I’m so scared,” she said. She closed her eyes again.

Josh moved to get up but I swatted a hand at him and he sat back down.

“You’re going to be fine,” I said, but I didn’t believe it. Her scans were a death sentence.

“I want Josh.”

“Look at me,” I said.

She opened her eyes and glared.

“You’re not dying, okay?” I laughed at her and felt outside myself.

She watched me for slow seconds with an expression I still think of often. She called out for Josh.

"Why the fuck is he always here?" I said. I turned to Josh. "Why are you always there?"

He knelt and instructed Mila to take deep breaths. They took long inhalations, counting, and once Mila stopped crying and Josh began flipping through a fishing magazine, I had the sensation of my body having already left the room. I went and sat alone in the too-bright kitchen.

The day I first met Josh, in college, over a decade earlier, he'd been fishing in a lake near campus. I had a friend named Colt who wanted to date my friend Heidi. Colt had dirty long hair and lived off campus in a single story house made of concrete where he grew massive marijuana plants. He seemed much too old to be an undergraduate and made elaborate herbal concoctions which he siphoned into cleaning bottles and sprayed around the yard in paranoid frenzies, soaking the perimeter. It was to repel deer, animals that were, he said, a dead giveaway to authorities. After partying, I'd occasionally spend the night, and in the morning, while I drank coffee alone, I'd watch deer after deer emerge from the misty woods, like ghosts, their noses in the air, searching.

This day was Colt and Heidi's first time together. I'd arranged it. Colt was bringing a friend, an art major, and the four of us would drive out to a lake nearby to picnic. Josh, the art major friend, picked us up in an old truck. Heidi and I rode in the cramped backseat while Josh pushed eighty down curvy back roads. Occasionally one of us would ask where we were going and he'd turn the music louder. We'd gone to the cafeteria for supplies: a sub, brownies, two cups of soup which, after an hour of sharp turns, began to slosh and leak. I still associate that night with the smell of dorm chowder.

After we arrived, the boys spent the entire time fishing. Josh drove us home at the same reckless speeds and Heidi begged to pull over. Josh, swearing, peeled into a turnoff. Ahead, a small mountain filled the darkening sky. Heidi threw up on the side of the road.

If it weren't for Josh, I would think it never happened. A neon green splash in the sky that floated over the mountain for a moment, then vanished. Ethereal, like nothing I've seen since. He looked at me in the rearview, and asked if I'd seen it. I nodded. I hated him for seeing it too.

The internet had various weather explanations: heat, lightning, optical illusions, a copper-encrusted meteor. Every couple of years I tried to figure it out, then gave up, accepting I'd probably never know what we'd seen. It felt important though. I would have forgotten Josh completely if it weren't for the flash.

Years later, our paths crossed again. I hadn't seen him at all in the five years after graduation. Mila invited me on a backpacking trip to the Quinault rainforest because her new boyfriend was "into the outdoors," and she wanted a friend to help her cope. As we hugged in the airport, over her shoulder I saw him.

"This is Josh," she said.

"We've met." When she looked between us, trying to figure out if we'd slept together, I added, "At a picnic in college."

"Small world. I guess you went to the same school," she said, even though our university had fifty-thousand students.

"Good to see you again," he said.

We flew to Seattle and crammed into a car with three strangers, drove to the trailhead and hiked until after dark. It was early March and freezing, which no one had expected except Josh, who had packed wool sweaters and gaiters. We woke to snow. For two days we hiked through forests dripping with moss, freezing when the sun left us but warm and idyllic during the days. On the third day the path began to quickly steepen, then it turned into a mountainside dusted with

white, then an ascent barely visible beneath snow up to your thighs. We stood under an ancient tree, arguing about what to do. Everyone but Josh thought we should turn back. He wanted to see the top. He'd meet them back at camp later. Mila was the first to turn around. Everyone followed. I walked for a minute, fury building. I felt full of life and energy. I turned around, and after a few minutes, caught up. He was breathing heavily, in worse shape than his thin frame suggested. I passed him. He picked up his pace and for the next hour, no matter how hard I pushed, I heard him huffing and coughing, breathing down my neck.

The top of the mountain was the other most spectacular thing I've ever witnessed. Rolling mounds of perfectly-shaped snow. It was like being on another planet. There was absolutely no sound, except Josh's heavy breath. Symmetrical domes, dunes of white powder, like a desert of snow touched only by wind. We stood for a long while, just looking, until Josh said, "I have to pee," and disappeared. I looked up at the sky. I wondered why, once again, this man was here. A light wind picked up and misty dustings of snow rose from all the dunes and hovered, sparkling. Half of the mountaintop was dark in shadow and the other half was still so bright it hurt to look.

When Josh was finished, he began running full clip back down the mountain. Alone at the top, I spun in one slow circle, wishing Mila had been there instead, then I followed the sound of Josh's clanking pack.

"Do you remember the top of that mountain in Olympic?" I asked. They were still seated in the same positions I'd left them, and they smiled when I came back in the room, as if I were their child who had misbehaved but was forgiven.

Josh set the fishing literature down. "I'll never forget it."

"Are you feeling better yet?"

Mila nodded. "This will be funny once it stops."

“I tried to find out what the mounds were,” Josh said. “I even asked my geologist friend, who said maybe penitentes. So for years I went around telling people I’d seen penitentes. Until I researched and realized they’re only in the Andes or some shit. And look nothing like what we saw.” He laughed.

“What are penitentes?” I said.

Josh rubbed his eyes. “They look like huge jagged ice blades. Kind of like gigantic points of rock crystal made of ice. No one really knows why they form.”

“I remember too,” Mila said sleepily.

Josh and I looked at each other.

Mila opened her eyes. “Not the top, assholes. I’m saying I remember when you raced each other up there.”

They smiled at each other in a way that made me wish I was their child. I watched Josh and squinted, tried to see who he was now, how my friend might love him.

“I was so mad at myself when we got back home. I really wish I’d seen the top.” She sighed. “Just one more thing I’ll probably never see. Like needlefish and black sand. Add it to the list, Joshie.”

“You don’t need a list babe,” Josh said, but he grabbed a small notebook from the side table and jotted something.

Mila craned her neck to look at me. The tendons under her chin protruded, she was so thin. “Tell me about the top.”

“I’ve told you, it’s honestly indescribable,” Josh said. “You have to see it in person.”

“Shut up Josh,” Mila said, eyeing me.

“He’s right. You really just have to be there. We’ll go back once you’re done with all the rounds and feeling better.”

She lay back down and closed her eyes. “Thanks for visiting. You’re probably exhausted.”

I knew there was more I should say, but I *was* exhausted, so I said goodnight.

When Josh began to stand, Mila gripped his arm and said, “Stay.”

Back in my room I tried calling my husband but he didn’t answer. I pictured my toddler asleep with his sweaty, matted ringlets, my baby’s curled toes and milk hiccups. I crept back out to the kitchen to pour myself a glass of water. From the sink, I could hear Josh’s low voice. I walked to the doorway. Mila’s head rested in his lap and her eyes were open, looking up at him. I moved against the counter, out of sight, and listened over the metallic drone of the refrigerator.

He was telling her how silent it was. How you could measure all sound against its soundlessness. Like coffee beans for smell. He told her how, as soon as he’d reached the top, he’d wished it was her with him instead. He told her about the shapes of the dunes, how it was hard to describe because they didn’t look like dunes at all, no ridges or crescents, just completely new and unknown, but perfect, something that only could be created in nature. He paused a while and I thought maybe they were sleeping. The sun covered half of the mountaintop, he went on, but the other half was already in shadow, which gave an odd feeling of being in two places at once. He told her how he’d missed her up there, how beautiful and peaceful it was, and how truly sorry he was she hadn’t seen it.

I moved into the dark laundry room until I heard Josh flicking off lights and rousing Mila. Once it was quiet, I moved to the couch. I drank from my cup and read the first page of the little notebook there. It was messy and entirely in Josh’s handwriting.

Things to See:

Abbey Road

Aurora Borealis

Banff

Berlin

Black sand beach

Burning Man

Cormorants

Elephant in wild

Goya black paintings

Great Barrier Reef before it disappears

Desolation Wilderness

I hadn't seen Teo or Eve since I'd left California for Albuquerque five years ago, but now, from the second-story deck, I watched as they parked below, then slid from a Tesla. They looked childlike, the tops of their heads hazy in the diffuse evening sun, and as they walked toward the cabin, crossing from the sunlit drive into the shadow cast by the house, they came into sharper focus. Eve looked almost unrecognizable. Her décolletage was now tattooed; gone were her long blond locks. Chopped into an artfully messy, chin-length shag, her hair was dyed, her face framed with severe black bangs. Before, I would have said Joni Mitchell; now she looked like Joan Jett. Her high-waisted jeans and black crop top revealed one familiar feature: her pale, sunken stomach. She'd always been too thin, a dancer. Teo had grown a beard and now sported a man bun, and with his dark features, this made him appear brooding, which he was not. They climbed the stairs and Eve opened her arms to me. She held on for too long, and though I was creeping up on thirty, she whispered, "I miss you, baby sister." I pulled away for fear of crying. Behind Eve, through a spiky line of distant pines, Lake Tahoe hung from the sky, the water offensively blue.

From the time my brother Ben and I were children, my parents had rented a house in Lake Tahoe for a week each summer. After Ben's accident ten years ago, we quit going for two summers, until my aunt insisted on paying for our annual getaway. My mother and father had sold their house, moved into an apartment, and drained their savings in order to pay for Ben's ongoing medical care, and now he lived less than ten miles from them, just outside Sacramento, in an obscenely expensive supervised apartment community. Eve visited Ben every couple of months, and afterwards, she usually stopped by my parents' place. During her last drop-in, she'd mentioned that she'd been invited to teach at a nearby poetry conference during our trip. "Don't

you think it's weird to invite them when Ben isn't going to be there?" I'd asked my mother. Ben didn't know about the vacation; we weren't supposed to upset his routine. "I didn't invite them for your brother," my mother had said. Her life project seemed to be alleviating Eve's guilt.

Eve and Ben had met in Mexico as undergrad volunteers for hurricane relief efforts. I was around thirteen at the time, and I'd imagined them dusty and dehydrated, locking eyes across crumbling rubble, trying to save lives. I'd found this very romantic. In their early twenties, after Eve already felt like a part of our family, she'd cheated on my brother with Teo, and when Ben found out, he'd taken off on his motorcycle without a helmet.

Inside, my mother buzzed around the kitchen, assembling a charcuterie board. My father stood nearby, completing menial tasks as they were assigned. Currently he was slicing a pear. When we entered, they flew toward Eve and Teo. Hugs were exchanged, kind words. I sat at the dining table and watched. Outside the large windows, conifer-covered mountains rose from the lake, and far in the distance, a boat shot across water, a horizontal white streak on blue canvas.

"I love the tiger," my father said to Eve, tapping his clavicles. He'd once told me that if I got a tattoo he wouldn't help pay for college. That was before, back when they'd had savings.

"You're always so stylish!" My mother stepped back to admire Eve. If an outfit confused my parents, they deemed its curator fashionable. Eve smiled. She had a pretty mole inside her philtrum that I'd always liked. I put a finger to the putty-colored mole on the side of my nose.

My father opened a bottle of wine, and we all struggled onto the benches of the picnic table-style dining set. Teo told a boring story about their trip to Iceland, and Eve interrupted often, touching his shoulder before she spoke, the same way she always had with Ben. After we decimated the appetizers and killed the bottle of wine, my mother, who rarely cooked, brought out individually plated heirloom tomato salads and bowls of fish ceviche. I hit the second bottle of wine hard while everyone talked around me. No one mentioned Ben.

My father asked Teo if he'd pulled the trigger on the new bike he'd been coveting. Cycling was the only thing they had in common, but for some reason, it was enough. Teo and my father took long weekend rides together, and bought each other stupid bike accessories.

"Last weekend, actually," Teo said, and my father congratulated him.

"I feel like cyclists have a specific personality type," I said.

"What, OCD?" Eve said, and I felt a rush of tenderness for her.

"No shoptalk, Eve," my father said, but he was laughing. He topped off my mother's glass.

"So did you always secretly have a thing for muscular quads?" I said to Eve. "Because Ben had those skinny runner's thighs."

She smiled into her ceviche, embarrassed for me. I was falling into my old pattern: compulsively making Eve and Teo uncomfortable, then later regretting it. I missed Eve. After Ben's accident, she'd been suicidal, and my parents had taken her in. She slept on our couch, helped care for Ben, and left little presents at my door during the months I refused to speak to her. Now, since I'd skipped her wedding years earlier, she didn't call as often, but we still spoke at least once a month. And though I was glad she was healthy and stable now, it was hard to witness her and Teo's smug happiness.

"Ignore her. She's deranged," my father said, blinking rapidly.

My mother gazed at me from across the table, her wine glass at her lips. With his tongue, Teo assaulted a molar, and beside me on the bench, I could see Eve place a hand on his knee.

When I was fourteen and Ben was in college, he'd brought Teo and Eve home for Christmas. Over turkey dinner, Ben began talking about the atrocities in Darfur and told a story about a woman who was forced to watch as her husband and children were hacked apart. I had nightmares for months. My father and Teo had tried to get him to stop talking, until finally my mother slammed her hands on the table, and said, "Your little sister doesn't need to hear this."

He'd said, "She needs to know what to expect. I wish you'd told me what a shitty, terrible place the world is. It's just, like, pulsating with evil." Under the table, I saw Eve move a hand from her lap onto Ben's forearm. He took a deep breath, and let my mother change the subject.

Which is what Teo did now, patting Eve's hand on his leg, exhaling, and turning to me. "So, you're officially a professor now?" he said.

"Assistant Professor," I said. "And I'm looking for a new job. Know anyone desperate for a 15th century British literature specialist with interests in medieval chess and sex?"

"I always thought being a professor would be fun. Summers off. You don't like it?" Eve was a published poet but her source of income was her psychotherapy practice.

"No. It's as ridiculous as it sounds." I took a slug of wine.

When I looked up, Eve's eyes were on me. Her cheeks were pink from the alcohol. "You were so passionate about Malory," she said.

"Yeah, well, now I can't stand him. I think at that time I was drawn to all the betrayal and adultery."

"Okay, Liz," my mother said.

"Speaking of cheating, remember the guy I moved to Albuquerque with, Landon? Well, he decided to fuck a colleague in my department, and I'd really like to not have to continue peeing in the stall next to her every day, hence the job search."

"That's enough, Elizabeth," my mother said. She'd already heard the saga.

Eve shook her head like it was to be expected. "Sorry, babe," she said.

"I told you he was a wanker," my father said. For insults, he favored Britishisms.

After dinner, my father insisted on upholding the tradition of the family game, so we all filed down to a basement and stood around a pool table, onto which my father placed in the center three twenty-dollar bills. This dice game was called Left, Right, Center, and it required no skill or logic, an absence I increasingly appreciated as I grew more shitfaced. Near the end of the

game, I was almost victorious, until Teo swept in. I'd already been fantasizing about buying new sheets to replace my single set of faded, ripped linens, and so, when he did a jerky dance and waved the bills over his head, I said, "You have more money than God."

"It's just a game, Elizabeth," my father said. "It's meant to be fun."

Teo pushed the bills at me and insisted I take them. "I was going to give it to you anyways," he said. "We don't need it."

I smacked his hand away and excused myself for bed.

Upstairs, I found the room my mother had put my luggage in earlier: a slope-ceilinged afterthought with bunk beds meant for children. The attached bathroom was the size of a stall shower and the water that gasped from the faucet had a sulfur stench. I went looking for another bathroom, and passed a door half open, Eve and Teo at the foot of a bed, hugging. Their room had a window onto the lake, a king-sized bed, and an adjoining door to a bathroom. I wondered which room I would have been given if I'd brought a date. I went in through the hall and locked both doors behind me. This bathroom boasted dual sinks and a tub with a natural rock surround, giving it the look of a tropical grotto. Behind one sink, lined up like a little militia, was a row of creams, serums, toners and essences. At thirty-four, Eve appeared younger than I was, even though she was six years older, and I examined the bottles and tried to commit to memory the French and Korean brands. I washed my face with a foam that smelled of flower petals. Next, I anointed my forehead creases with green oil from a tiny dropper. A creak came from outside, and I smeared two thick unguents onto my face and rushed back to my room.

Late the next morning, I found Eve outside, slicing a cantaloupe. A woodpecker drilled at the cabin's siding, and Teo was at the far end of the deck investigating, as if he had a stake in the property. My parents had gone for a bike ride. In the high altitude, the sun was oppressive. There were no clouds, and already I could feel my exposed shoulders frying. I sat across from Eve and

asked her about her patients, the poetry conference, and her father back in Missouri, but she gave vague, distracted answers, watching Teo as she spoke. “Hey, do you want to do something, just the two of us today?” she said.

I said okay, and felt a visceral thrill. Back when I was in middle school and my brother and Eve were in college and madly in love, I’d always craved alone time with her. She’d sit cross-legged on my bed behind me, and I would move to the floor so that she could French-braid my hair. I’d stare at my Waterhouse *The Lady of Shalott* poster while she asked about my love life. She never treated me like a child. “I am half-sick of shadows,” she’d said the first day she did my hair, and I hadn’t known what she was talking about.

“There’s a hike I’m dying to do,” Eve said now.

Except for a weekend in Vermont in college, I’d never hiked, and whenever I had to fill out medical forms, I reluctantly checked the lifestyle box labeled sedentary. “Maybe we could do a beach day? Since it’s so hot,” I said.

Through Teo’s furious clapping, the woodpecker continued to jackhammer. Eve watched with an indecipherable look on her face. “Sure,” she said. “How about beach today, hike tomorrow? Teo has some work stuff to catch up on.”

Teo was a corporate attorney in Silicon Valley, and I was pretty sure they were rich. There was the Tesla, and they were always vacationing in some new country. Teo had grown up in Buckhead, Atlanta with old money. Now he had old and new. Everything he’d ever wanted. As if he could hear my thoughts, he turned and waved to me.

“Okay, sure,” I said. “Hike tomorrow.” I was already thinking up excuses.

Eve reached across the table and set a hand on mine, and the warmth and intimacy of her palm made me pull my hand away. “Lizzy,” she said.

“I go by Elizabeth now,” I lied.

“Sorry, Elizabeth.” She said it with a straight face.

"I don't know why I said that." I grabbed a hunk of melon and sucked on it, letting the juices run down the sides of my tongue before swallowing. I could feel Eve's eyes on me, imagine her psychotherapist thoughts.

She knew not to speak, and we turned to watch Teo attack the siding with a broom.

"I saw Ben last weekend," Eve said, still watching Teo. "He's been painting those picnic tables outside his apartment. He already has one done. It looks good."

"Yeah, that seems to be his new obsession," I said. Ben had told me about the courtyard tables the last few times I'd called. He hated that they were red and peeling, and he'd gotten staff to agree to let him paint them his favorite color: bright blue.

"I hadn't seen him in three weeks, and I swear, his motor skills seemed better," Eve said. "He opened his own bag of chips, just tore it open on the first try. It was awesome."

"He's been opening chips for years, Eve. And they've told us a million times that progress stalls after the first few years. I don't know why you always do this."

She looked at me. "Some people continue improving. You should visit him and see for yourself."

"Obviously I'm going to visit him. You think I'm going to fly to California and not see my brother?"

Since I'd moved away, Ben and I talked on the phone often, but I only saw him a few times a year. He'd greet me outside in the parking lot, his limbs twitchy with excitement, and we'd go up to his little room, and sit on his bed, and he'd show me his car magazines and read me all the boring specs. He'd tell funny anecdotes about his coworker friends at Safeway, and I'd pretend to laugh along with him, distracted by his inability to speak as rapidly as his excitement warranted, his slow grasping for words. Before, he and my father would debate socialized healthcare, military spending, and capitalism, and Ben would yell and swear and speak so quickly that when he'd finish making his point he'd be out of breath. My father, a lifelong

progressive, would challenge my brother's idealism while smiling, his eyes full of pride. For Christmas one year, Ben gave me a copy of *The People's History of the United States*, and I'd studied it each night, hoping to impress him.

"I just wasn't sure," Eve said now. "I know you have a hard time with visits."

"I'm stopping by before my flight home," I said.

I'd never told Eve that every time I visited him, Ben always asked, "When's Eve coming?"

An hour later, Eve and I, burdened by blankets and beach bags, trudged down through the steep neighborhood, passing a bear-crossing sign and an elderly man running uphill. The area was an odd mixture of abandoned-looking old log cabins and modern monstrosities, all glass and steel. After another quarter-mile along a busy two-lane highway, Eve navigated with her phone, and led us through a narrow path between trees, which opened onto a small sandy beach. The lake was cerulean and calm, the shoreline and shallows dotted with pale boulders. We were the only people, save for a shirtless guy down to the left, who sat in a camp chair, reading and throwing a ball to his sodden retriever. He was tan and lean, his chest covered in dark fur. Eve saw me looking and raised her eyebrows, then spread our blanket on the sand.

I pulled out an *Architectural Digest* I'd stolen from the cabin, and Eve took the hint and rolled onto her stomach. She wore a retro-style eggshell blue bikini with white polka dots, which advertised its newness with a crisp tag at the small of her back that flickered in the breeze. My suit was from high school, the ass faded and saggy. I reached over and yanked off her tag.

After thanking me, she asked if I wanted to search for sea glass with her, but I declined, and instead, for a long while, I watched her bend and rise, bend and rise, pausing every so often to hold shards of bottle-green glass to the sun. She was beautiful to watch, and in her movements, still a dancer, though she'd told me years ago that after Ben's crash she'd quit.

When my brother first brought her home that Christmas, I remember re-examining him, trying to understand how he'd gotten a girl like her to be his girlfriend. She had waist-length thick hair the color of honey, and unlike Ben, she possessed a loose ease in her body, in her ability to find things funny. After dinner, as my parents cajoled her into a performance, she put on a recording heavy with hand percussion. At beat drops, she'd fall gracefully to all fours, penitent; she'd whip her hair back, jump to her feet, and raise her arms in a v to the heavens, her face turned skyward as if in ancient prayer. She floated, hung suspended, landed lightly before stomping and grinding the earth, her elbows and knees all ecstatic angles. Something inside me cracked open, and when the song turned to static and she returned, laughing, to the couch, it was as if, in those few minutes, I'd lived all the joys and suffering of an entire life. And even now, I never saw her smile the way she used to when she would dance: waves of surprised delight washing over her face, like she was unwrapping an unexpected, yet perfect gift.

From waist-deep water, Eve waved me in, but I shook my head. She dove under, and reemerged a moment later, her tiger tattoo gleaming orange across her chest. The man in the chair looked asleep: beneath a baseball hat, his mouth hung open and his shaggy rust-colored companion edged in behind me, snuffling in the tall bushes like a pig. I turned, and the dog looked up at me and trotted over. It pawed the sand near my feet, whined, then pounced on something. In the deeper, darker water, Eve's head bobbed along the surface, as she breaststroked out past the end of the dock. The dog whined again, stuck its wet face in my lap, and deposited a baby lobster with enormous red pincers. I shrieked, smacked the creature from my lap, and was ten feet away before I heard the man yelling.

"It won't hurt you, it's just a crawdad," he said, kicking at the sand. "And it's dead."

I walked over and he released his hand from the dog's collar. We watched it run down the beach after a gull. "Sorry," he said. "Lorna likes to give presents." Up close, he was older than I'd thought, maybe early forties, and better looking. He had straight, square teeth and faint laugh

lines that made him appear kind, but I couldn't see his eyes behind his sunglasses. His hat said *Greenleaf Designs*. "You're not local," he said.

"I'm from Sac, originally," I said defensively.

"And you've never met a crawdad?"

I shook my head, though now I recalled that I'd perhaps seen them on shore, belly up.

"Where do you live now?" He threw a tennis ball far into the water, and Lorna dove after it. I noticed he wasn't wearing a ring.

"Albuquerque." The adrenaline from the lap lobster was making my legs feel like lead.

"High desert," he said. "Roasted chiles."

He hadn't taken his eyes from the water, so I said it was nice to meet him and started to turn back.

"I'm Gil," he said. "Know how I knew you weren't local?"

"My metropolitan aura?" I was wearing a ripped I Heart NY t-shirt and the saggy-assed bikini bottoms.

He laughed and looked at me for the first time. "That too, but no, it's because you're really burnt." He pressed a finger to my shoulder, and I watched the skin turn pale, then flush a deep pink. He jogged over to his chair and returned with a bottle, handing it to me. It was some greasy sport block with SPF 50. I thanked him, and Lorna returned, coughing water, and dropped the ball at Gil's feet. He threw it again. "Gotta wear her out," he said. "That dog will probably live forever." He said it like it was a bad thing. "Is that your friend?" He nodded to Eve, who was slowly stroking back toward shore.

"Kind of," I said. "She's my brother's ex."

"And where is he?"

"In semi-independent housing for people with brain injuries. She cheated on him with his best friend, and after my brother found out, he crashed his motorcycle."

Gil pulled his sunglasses off. His eyes were dark blue. I looked down, but could feel him watching me. When I glanced up, his eyes were on Eve, who was doggy paddling in toward the shallows. “She’s an atrocious swimmer,” he said. “People drown here every summer, you might get lucky.” We shared a smile as Eve stood and waded in. “There’s always tomorrow,” he said.

Lorna swam up after Eve, and headbutted her thighs from behind. Eve petted her head.

“She’s like my sister,” I said. When Eve and Ben had visited from college, Eve slept in my room on an inflatable mattress. She told me about her dead mother and her depressed father, who’d homeschooled her and four other siblings in a dark farmhouse with no television. She said I was smart and beautiful, and I believed her. Care packages arrived often, filled with trendy makeup and pirated music and notes that began with, *Hey Lil Sis*.

Eve gave us a wave, then collapsed onto our blanket. Her pasty stomach rose and fell.

Gil was smiling at me, but I couldn’t think of anything to say. The silence dragged. “I’ll bring this back before we go,” I finally said, waving the sunblock between us.

“Keep it,” he said, before turning and wandering back to his chair.

When I flopped down beside her, Eve didn’t say anything, just eyed me and smiled, but an hour later, she refused to leave until I returned the sunblock.

“He told me to keep it,” I said. “He didn’t want to deal with me again.”

She wriggled into her shorts and squeezed her breasts with a towel, trying to dry her top. “He’s obviously into you. And you need a rebound after Landon. Go.” I shook my head and she reached into her bag and pulled out a pen. She tore a scrap from the cover of *Architectural Digest*, and wrote my phone number on it. “Here,” she said. “Go give it to him.”

“What do I say?”

“Say you’d love to grab a drink while you’re in town.” She smiled. “Take more risks, Lizzy! Stop letting things happen to you. Be the architect of your own life.”

“I can’t.”

She grabbed me by the shoulders and pointed me in his direction. “You can.”

As I walked over, I could feel my pulse in my throat, and when I reached his chair, I didn’t know what I was saying, only that words were issuing from my mouth. I shoved the scrap of paper at Gil, who was seated, Lorna curled at his feet. After a few moments, when I realized that I was still holding the scrap, I returned to my body. I set my number on his armrest.

“I’m married,” he said.

“You’re not wearing a ring.”

“Yeah, well, still married.”

I tossed the bottle into his lap. “Here’s your sport block,” I said, and forced myself to walk back, not run.

Eve hefted our rolled-up blanket over her shoulder. “When’s the date?”

“He’s married, you bitch.”

The sun was high and strong the next day, though it felt a bit cooler. A sign in the parking lot welcomed us to Desolation Wilderness. Weak with residual humiliation, I’d allowed Eve, at breakfast, to bully me into hiking, and now she pranced toward the trailhead in a black leotard under flowy black pants; she looked like she belonged in a ballet studio, not the rugged, pine-infested wasteland we were entering.

During the first mile, we passed an older couple with serious equipment—poles and large packs—and a group of college girls in skimpy workout clothes and sorority gear. From behind, a continuous, gentle breeze blew. Eve tried to ask me about Albuquerque in various, creative ways, and I offered brief, generic answers, like a politician. I wanted to stop walking and lie down next to each other under the trees, our arms touching, and not say anything, just close our eyes. The thing I couldn’t tell her and didn’t fully understand myself, was that it comforted me to be near

her physically, but whenever she spoke, I still, after all these years, often felt full of rage. I didn't want to hear about her life.

Eve picked up on my need for quiet, and after a long while, the trail narrowed, all other people vanished, and the only sound was the occasional hysterical bird trill. We marched through a forest of tall, thin pines, on a path so rocky I had to stare, not at the natural beauty surrounding us, but instead, at my grubby shoes. Just ahead, Eve started to tackle another steep incline, but I was out of breath, my armpits, back, and bra drenched in sweat. I thought about suggesting we turn around and treat ourselves to drinks at a waterfront bar. I pictured a Mai Tai in front of me, gentle sounds of water lapping at the beach. What kind of sick person wanted to spend a lake vacation swallowed in dark woods, climbing hills and panting like dogs? Eve didn't seem to notice I wasn't having fun, and I stopped and bent over, my hands on my knees. After a while, I heard the crunching of her footsteps cease, but when she asked if I wanted to take a break, I said no and kept climbing.

At the top, Eve paused to read a sign post, then turned right. We began another ascent on a trail that was worse than anything I'd been imagining: a staircase made of boulders that looked like it'd been conceptualized by a toddler. Every so often, over her shoulder, she'd warn me of another loose rock, or say, "Almost there," or, "My thighs are on fire," though I could tell, based on the tiny spot darkening her leotard at her lower back, that she'd barely broken a sweat. When we finished climbing, I could hear my heart thudding in my temples. Eve waved me down the trail to a rocky platform at the top of a few more stairs, and from here, the lake below sprawled between green pines like a bolt of cobalt silk. The visibility was hazy, due to distant forest fires, and this gave the water a misty, dreamy effect. We stood for a long while, admiring.

Eve said, "They say it won't have its famous blue color for much longer."

"I think I heard that," I said, though I hadn't.

As if sensing my lie, she said, “The lake is warming, because, well, everything is. And something about the oxygen at the very bottom, it’s making some kind of algae grow. I can’t remember all the details, but the lake might turn a scummy green color and smell like rotten eggs.” She inhaled. “During our lifetime.”

Ben had lost his virginity on the beach here, the year we’d stayed at a busy campground; I had first entered the lake as an infant, learned to swim in these waters. As children, we’d watched clusters of kokanee spawn in the river, their cherry red flashes reminding me of bobbing for apples. Mothers and cubs in meadows of wildflowers. Bald eagles. The landscape was one of the few things I still loved about my country.

Eve said she wouldn’t mind making it back in time for happy hour. “But let’s get a picture for your brother first,” she said.

I didn’t move. I thought of Ben back in his room: the streaked single window, the recycled air, the smell of processed cafeteria food. His Safeway employee apron that he was so proud of, hanging on a hook near his twin bed. His incoherent social media posts of local traffic and photos of female celebrities half-naked. Eve replied to every post, because now, at thirty-four, she’d gotten married, become a published poet, established her own practice, bought a house, and changed her appearance and her mind countless times, while my brother would always stay the same.

She held her phone out in front of her and tried to pull me in for a selfie, but I shrugged her off, causing her to lose her balance, stumble down three rock stairs, and land hard at the bottom, a foot tucked beneath her at an odd angle. I rushed down the steps. I tried to help her to her feet, but she slumped back to the ground. She’d fallen a distance of only a few feet, and I told her so. “My foot got stuck,” she said, pointing to a gap in the rocks. One loud sob escaped her. “Something’s not right,” she said. We tried a few more times to get her to stand, her arm around my neck, but she couldn’t put any weight on her left ankle. A bird in an overgrown manzanita

kept screeching a long, high-pitched call that sounded like an alarm. Like a baby crying. I ordered Eve onto her hands and knees and I bent down and told her to climb onto my back. For a few seconds, I thought it was going to work, that I'd just have to walk slowly back down the mountain, but then I staggered, turning around. She screamed when I dropped her.

My phone had no service. Eve's flickered with one bar occasionally, but when I tried to call my mother, it didn't ring. I sat beside Eve and gave her a few minutes to recover before I told her we might be able to call 911.

"Let's just wait," she said, then murmured something that sounded like *I don't believe this*, or, *I deserve this*.

"It's already colder," I said, which wasn't true, but I'd seen in the forecast that it got down into the forties at night. "Can you crawl back?" I knew before I said it that it was cruel, and so I waited, sweetly anticipating her anger.

She rolled onto her stomach and pressed herself up onto her hands and right knee, holding her left leg off the ground. Each time she moved her hands forward, she had to drag her good knee across the rocky trail in a spastic jolt. She looked like a wounded animal. After maybe twenty feet, she collapsed and rolled onto her side. I waited too long before I jogged over. She was crying, mouth open, and from her top lip to bottom stretched two thin spiderwebs of saliva.

"I can't do it," she said. She hiked up her pants on her good leg and exposed a mangled kneecap dripping with blood.

I sat down beside her. "I'm so sorry," I said. At the hospital just after Ben's accident, Eve had convulsed in my mother's arms, my mother holding her and repeating, like an incantation, that it was not her fault. I remember thinking then that it was. "I'm sorry," I said again.

"Lizzy," Eve said, looking at me. "It was an accident." She pulled her knees into her chest, unlaced and removed her tennis shoe, and rolled off her sock. Her foot was swollen and purple, the skin over her ankle taut and shiny, like a water balloon.

The blood rushed from my legs. “I have to go back,” I said. “Or at least walk until there’s service.” I stood up. “Let me try 911.”

“Not yet,” she said. “Please. Someone will come.”

It seemed like hours since we’d seen other people. “What happened to being the architect of your own life?”

“Most criticism is just projection.” Eve looked at me for a long time, then said, “I’m afraid you won’t come back.”

At first I thought she meant that something might happen to me, too, and we’d both be injured and stranded in the wilderness. Then I thought of the other meaning of her words. I didn’t ask her to clarify. “We can wait a little while,” I said.

Flat on our backs, arms touching, from the middle of the trail we stared up at the sky. Sunlight filtered through tall pines, and shadows danced across our faces. Two birds called back and forth in a singsong, three-syllable staccato. The smell of pine needles and dry earth and smoke hung in the air like a heavy fog. I closed my eyes.

“Teo wasn’t going to come this weekend, but we didn’t want to make your vacation about us,” Eve said. “We’re getting divorced. It’s not official yet, but we’ve been living apart for a few months. I’ve been wanting to tell you.”

“Congratulations,” I said. I’d thought it would sound witty, but it came across as tactless and flat. I opened my eyes and Eve was looking at me. Crusty dried salt streaks left a white cast on her cheeks.

“I felt like I had to marry Teo,” she said. When I didn’t say anything, she continued. “At first we were so close, but only because he was the only other person who understood how I felt, the guilt.” She took a deep, wavering breath. “I stayed because I thought if we ended up married, then maybe everything that happened wasn’t for nothing. Like there was some reason I cheated.”

I looked back up to the blue, blue sky.

"We've never been happy, me and Teo," she said.

I was surprised by this, at first. "Is anyone ever really happy?"

"Yeah, I was. With your brother. I think he was, too, at least in the beginning." Something scuttled around in the manzanita.

"Well, he was in his element when you met. Depressing disaster zone."

She laughed and winced. "It hurts to laugh," she said. "We snuck away the day we met. I'm sure Ben told you the story." She closed her eyes and smiled.

I tried to recall the scene of their meeting, but all I could picture was the rubble and the locking eyes that I'd invented in my childhood. "No," I said, sitting up. "But I think I should go."

"Not yet." She lay with her eyes closed, then said, "Your brother came up to me on the second day—we hadn't spoken to each other yet—and he said, 'Want to go swimming?' I was covered in dirt, but off I went with him and this friend of his. What an idiot. They could have been planning on raping and killing me. But your brother was so good looking."

I always had to focus in order to picture his face the way it had been before the accident, before the scars and the eye surgeries, the subtle shifts that made him look like an imposter.

Eve opened her eyes for a moment, and a brief expression of confusion crossed her face, as if she were bewildered by her surroundings. She closed her eyes again. "So we go to this stop in town outside of a laundromat and get on a local bus. I'm in the same seat with your brother, and his friend is across the aisle. We're the only tourists, and this brother and sister—around our age, twenty, maybe a little younger—move seats to sit in front of us. They're locals, twins, and they turn around so they're facing us, and they start asking us in English about the US. They were identical, except the girl had long hair, and they're telling us about their jobs at this evil resort, but they don't have to work that day, and they offer to take us to a better beach, a local's beach. So we get off with them, and we walk forever down this dirt road. We stop at a little store

and buy tequila and beer, and the twins buy rolling papers. And this beach, it was incredible, the most beautiful place I've ever been." She opened her eyes and looked at me. "Truly," she said.

The white line of a plane passed overhead, and I thought of sending up a smoke signal.

"There were only a few other people there, way down the beach, and the five of us swam in our underwear all day and got crazy on tequila. The sand went really far out, so the water was warm, and these steady, little waves kept coming in, and we all dove around, pushing each other over. Then it started to get cloudy and we came in to warm up. We didn't bring towels or anything, so I remember we were drying off with our t-shirts and getting a little cold without the sun, and then this huge storm came out of nowhere. It just started pouring." Eve raised both hands up at the word pouring. "I mean, like some of the strongest rain I've ever seen. Which was weird, because we were there to rebuild, and now it's just dumping and windy as fuck again and we all start running, following the twins. But we're laughing, because we're drunk, and it's kind of fun getting caught in a storm drunk, and we run for miles, I swear, down those dirt roads, and we get to this smaller road with all these homes made of wood and-" She squinted, trying to remember. "Maybe palm fronds? I don't know. The twins say their parents aren't home and we can hang out at their house for a while, so we go in, and it's this beautiful little house, all wood inside, with big beams across the center and a thatched roof, and baskets and blankets hanging from the beams and hammocks at both ends. Ben's friend passed out in a hammock, but the rest of us smoked and talked and drank the rest of the tequila, and then, what seemed like hours later, the brother twin starts telling this long story about the hurricane, about how they could feel it coming in, the crazy wind and walls of rain. He's talking about how it's a miracle they didn't lose their house, and about the inequality in the government's response. I'm out of my mind, trying to follow, and your brother's next to me on a chair, and he keeps smiling at me the whole time. Then he leans over and asks if I want to see something. I told him to shut up because the kid was talking, but he kept gesturing for me to lean toward him, so I did, and he opens up the

breast pocket of his t-shirt, and there's this tiny hummingbird inside, its little beak pointing at me, its little eyes blinking. Eventually the kid finishes his story and says their parents will be home, so we wake up Ben's friend and say goodbye and all that, and outside it's hot and sunny again. In their front yard, Ben pulled open his pocket, and the hummingbird buzzed around like a bee, and then shot off into the sky. During the storm, while we were running, Ben saw it stunned in a puddle and picked it up. I remember thinking I wanted to be that hummingbird."

It was quiet for a while, except for birdsong and a faint wind that rustled the leaves. The speckles of sunlight on my skin felt weaker, and I glanced down at Eve's ankle. It had gotten bigger. Her eyes were still closed.

"I've always wanted to go back alone," Eve said. "But Teo's against it. It's probably fine, but every time I mention it, he shows me articles about tourists in Mexico being held hostage."

I said, "I think I should go now."

"No, someone will come," she said. She sat up, squinting.

"Your tattoo," I said, remembering the day we'd gone together to each get our first. It was a couple of weeks after Ben's accident.

Eve twisted her arm toward me, exposing the soft flesh of her inner elbow and a tiny, gleaming, green and ruby hummingbird.

At the time, I'd been offended that Eve had gotten a tattoo for her dead mother and nothing for Ben. "I didn't know it had anything to do with Ben," I said.

"I thought that was obvious," she said.

"You told me it had been your mother's favorite bird," I said.

"It was," she said. "That's the crazy thing."

We'd sat together in the waiting area of the tattoo parlor, Eve twenty-four, myself an eighteen-year-old mess. Eve went first and then held my hand while I had Ben's former face permanently carved into my wrist. Now, I flipped my arm over and stared at the blank space, the

light scarring over vertical blue veins. A couple of years ago, I'd had the tattoo laser removed in a sterile desert office. The doctor had said the same thing as Eve: "It's going to hurt."

"I want to try to walk again," Eve said.

It took us three and a half miserable hours to get out, even though I carried her part of the way on my back, and two beefy college guys carried her for the last mile. By then, it was almost dark. In the car, my phone buzzed with messages from both parents, Teo, and a number I didn't recognize. Before calling my mother, I scanned the unknown text:

You wrote your number on AD. I'm an architect. Weird.

Sorry I was a dick.

Any chance you'd still want to get a drink?

The next text was time-stamped an hour later:

Or we can see to a drowning, if that's more enticing.

Ten minutes after that:

I'm not married.

Forty minutes later:

Okay, sorry again for being an ass. Safe travels back to NM.

This is Gil, by the way.

After Teo left to take Eve to the hospital in Truckee, I texted Gil before getting in the shower. Drying off, I saw he'd already responded, though it was almost ten, and when he suggested a place just down the road from the cabin, I told my parents I was going out, and dragged myself to the bar. To her credit, Eve had limped much of the way, but I had blisters on both heels and chafing on my hips from carrying her as far as I could.

Inside, a fake waterfall greeted me, along with a humid rush of air and the smell of fried fish. A gray-haired ponytailed man sang and played guitar in a corner—classic rock numbers—

and large parties laughed and talked around tables. Gil sat at the bar, a beer in front of him, and I made my way over. I hated that men never watched for me; I always had to search them out.

He greeted me by pulling out the neighboring stool and nodding to the bartender, a man named Barry who seemed to know him well. They exchanged a few disparaging remarks about a group of drunk tourists at a high top, while Barry found a menu and placed it in front of me. I'd been craving a cocktail all day, but drinks here started at fourteen dollars. I took a gamble that Gil would offer to pay, and, though rum usually made me sick, I ordered a Mai Tai.

"I can't believe you came," Gil said. "I showed a single friend the texts I sent you and he said, 'You dumb fuck.'"

"Yeah, well, slim pickings. My brother's ex is at the hospital. It was you or my parents."

"Is she okay?"

"She'll live."

He took a long drink of beer. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"Not especially."

"Thank God."

I laughed and he smiled at me and then we both looked down.

Barry came back with my Mai Tai, which was served in a tall glass with a purple orchid floating on the surface. I pulled it out and stuck it on the napkin, then took a few healthy gulps.

"Don't you hate that?" Gil said. "Makes it hard to drink."

"It's elitist," I said. "What if you don't know not to eat it? Also, the drinks here would cost nine dollars if it weren't for the floral arrangements. And what's with the fake waterfall? Why did you suggest this awful place?"

He shrugged. "I like Barry. And the break from good architecture." He leaned in closer to me. "Do you know what else I like?"

I shook my head.

"Your ability to see the worst in things."

I took another drink.

"I'm serious," he said, touching my forearm. "It's been hard for me to find anyone here as negative as myself to spend time with."

The ponytailed crooner started in on a new song, and before I could place it, Gil said, "Like A Hurricane."

The man's falsetto was surprisingly beautiful, but the song sounded off with only a guitar. "It's weird without piano," I said, but I let the words wash over me. We listened for a minute, and then I said, "So, are you separated, or what?"

He let go of my arm. "Not exactly," he said, gesturing to Barry for another beer.

I didn't believe him that he wasn't married. "Let me guess, she's dead."

"Actually, yeah." He looked at me and twisted his mouth into a stiff smile.

I asked if this worked on most tourists, just as Barry came back with a fresh beer.

"Barry, tell my friend Lizzy why I'm in here most nights."

Barry leaned against the bar and looked nervous.

"Why I'm sad," Gil said.

"You mean Ada?" Barry said.

Gil nodded. "Who was Ada?"

"Your wife?" Barry said.

"And what happened to Ada?"

The song was heating up, and a few yips rose from the audience. I glanced around and felt like I was in another person's body.

Poor Barry looked sick. "She died?" he said.

"Correct! She died. Six months ago. And how'd she die?"

"Pancreatic cancer?"

"Barry! A-plus!" Gil said.

"Okay, I believe you. Jesus," I said.

Gil thanked Barry and he trudged away, disturbed. After pulling his hat off, Gil looked down and rubbed his head. He had thick hair, but hints of a receding hairline. I tried to picture him bald.

"Sorry," I said. "My brother's ex—her mom died of the same thing."

He whipped his head up to look at me. "How old are you?" he said.

"Thirty." I was twenty-eight and this was the first time I'd lied to say I was older.

He nodded a few times. "Thirty's great. No one you know has died yet."

"Not true. Three of my aunts and uncles died, three of my grandparents, plus a girl I knew in college. And my brother almost died. That was the hardest."

"*Almost* sounds pretty good to me."

I made eye contact with Barry and ordered another Mai Tai. The song ended and I clapped along with a few other people, while drunk tourists stumbled out a side door, letting in a surge of cold mountain air. "That's a rude fucking thing to say," I said, bold with rum.

"Just being honest," he said.

Barry placed a fresh drink in front of me and held up my discarded orchid. "Are you finished with this?"

"No," I said, and grabbed it from him and tucked it behind my ear.

"Pretty," Gil said.

"My brother was in a coma for three weeks. When he woke up, he was deaf in his left ear and partially blind in his left eye. I wasn't even allowed to see him until after he had multiple surgeries. They took skin from his thighs and transplanted it to his face and he doesn't even look the same. It's like some amateur artist tried to draw him." I made it sound worse than it was. To

me, Ben looked strange and misshapen, but to others, he looked like a tall, somewhat handsome guy with bad scarring on his cheek and jaw. His left eye was cloudy, the skin around it saggy.

Gil inhaled between his teeth. “At least you get to see him. I’d take it.”

A group of young blond women sidled up next to him, but he didn’t seem to register their presence. They were loudly discussing whether or not they would go to a casino later.

“He’s not the same. You can’t talk to him like before.”

“Still. Beats dead.” Gil shrugged.

I started to get up.

“Wait, sorry,” he said. “I’m really sorry. I’m just saying you’re lucky he’s alive, okay? Don’t leave. They’ve got me on all kinds of prescription drugs and I’m not supposed to drink and I know I say stupid shit.”

I sat down. “I never see my brother. I moved away.”

“Maybe you should move back.”

The musician thanked us all for coming out and started in on his last song.

“Is he happy?”

“Who?”

“Your brother. Like my wife, even toward the end, when she was sick from treatment and barely eating, she still wanted to ride along to the bakery on Sunday mornings and then sit on the deck with me while I drank coffee. She’d wrap herself up in a blanket with the sun on her face.”

In the two years after the accident, when I’d postponed college and gotten a job at Chili’s, I’d lived at home, and Ben had been so optimistic and determined that I’d often thought he seemed happier than before, as if some trapped sadness had been jolted free during his collision, released upon impact. “It takes him longer to think now. And he has different interests than before. He gets confused and forgets times and dates, and he needs help, especially with stuff that requires motor skills. He can’t drive, that sort of thing. But yeah, I think he’s happy.

Actually, one of the things he's still working on in rehab is not laughing at inappropriate times. A customer will tell him their dog died, and something will set Ben off, and once he starts laughing, he can't stop. They're like these laughing fits." I smiled. "You'll get a new pair of shoes and he'll think they're hilarious. He thinks everything is funny now. It's gotten better, but it's still a problem."

Gil was smiling. "You made him sound like some tragic case."

"I did not."

"Yeah. You did," Gil said.

A while later, I found myself in the passenger seat of Gil's fancy pickup, speeding down a two-lane highway. Ahead of us was nothing but soupy blackness, the misty beams of headlights. It felt like we were hurtling through space. Despite the chill of the night, Gil had his window cracked, and we fell into silence, into the hypnotic whisper of air. At some point, it occurred to me that I didn't know this man, that he could kill me, that he shouldn't be driving, but I didn't feel afraid. I did, however, feel like I might throw up, and when we slowed down at an intersection, I asked him to pull over at a visitor center. The building had been constructed to look like a rustic cabin, and had little window boxes bursting with cascading petunias. I threw up in the flowers and immediately felt better. A sign on the door said *All Are Welcome*, and when I yanked the handle, there was a snapping sound, and the door swung open. I squinted into the headlights at Gil, but he was looking at his lap. I went inside.

When the door closed behind me, I couldn't see my own arms. I stumbled forward into darkness, and as my eyes adjusted, I could just make out shelves on both sides, crammed full of brochures, postcards, and books. In the center of the room, a large island stood, a faint glow radiating from the cash register. I made my way to the end of the room, and into a hallway. I felt certain there was something here for me.

The hallway was the kind of dark that looks like static. The walls were cool and bumpy as I ran my hands along them for guidance. At the end of the hall, I felt a door, and I opened it, searched the walls for a switch. Nothing. I went downstairs, to a large room, the floor covered with boxes. I walked toward a dim light at the back of the room, stepped behind a register, and pulled open a box on the floor. Inside were packages of inflatable inner tubes and rafts. A shuffling, crackling sound came from somewhere, and I grabbed an inner tube package and a raft and tucked them under my arm. When I stood up and moved around the counter, I was facing an old woman with a white crown of hair, who stood a few feet away, blinking at me, in pink pajamas. Behind her, a door I hadn't noticed hung partially open. She took a step forward, dragging, from one slipper, a long string of packing tape.

"Can I help you?" she said.

"I think I'm lost," I said.

She nodded. "Well you're in the right place then. Where are you trying to go?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "I'm not sure how I got here."

She walked up to me and squeezed my shoulder. She smelled of lemons and cedar wood. "That's alright, honey. We'll get you sorted. Are you here with your parents?"

"Yes," I said, leaning into her touch, feeling, unexpectedly, like I might weep.

She moved behind the register and fumbled in a drawer, eventually pulling out a clipboard. As she set it on the counter, a light behind the door she'd appeared from switched on.

I turned and ran and didn't stop until I was back in Gil's pickup, shouting for him to go. He didn't ask what I'd been doing in there, but a while later, inside his steel and glass home, over our third round of bourbon and a disgusting frozen pizza, an antler chandelier hovering above and Lorna snoring on the couch, he held up the inflatables and said, "I'm an accomplice." He disappeared with them and I heard what sounded like an engine running. When he reappeared a few minutes later, he was carrying the tube and raft, fully inflated. "Let's go," he said.

I told him it was freezing out.

"The water's finally warm. If it makes you feel better, I have wetsuits," he said.

"You're like seven feet tall."

"I have one that will fit you," he said.

It was quiet for a moment after that.

"Have you ever swum in Lake Tahoe at night?" he said. When I said I hadn't, he said, "Well then, raft or tube?" and I said, "Raft."

From his house, we walked a few blocks downhill, scampered across the highway, and came to an iron gate. Gil was wearing the inner tube around his waist, and he held it diagonally as he put a key in the door and passed through. The gate slammed behind us. The moon was large and bright, and we stumbled across uneven grass, climbed down a small set of stairs, and kicked our shoes off in the sand. Gil left his tube on the beach and walked into the water. He'd warned me that it would be cold at first, then handed me goggles and said, "Do what you want, but I strongly recommend these." I watched as he, in one swift movement, lowered himself straight under the water, as if a stool had been pulled out from under him. His head and shoulders surfaced a moment later, barely visible against the black metallic water. Gentle crests of tiny waves glinted under the night sky. He swam out about ten strokes, then flipped onto his back, floating. With the raft under my arm, I walked in up to my knees. I was wearing his dead wife's wetsuit. I could feel the flood of cold enter, and I ran a few feet ahead and plunged in. I gripped the raft in front of me, like a kickboard, and kicked furiously, feeling my body warm, my strength, my delicious, vulgar vitality. The black emptiness of water subsumed me, and I lifted my face only when I was desperate to breathe. When I finally stopped kicking and clambered onto the raft, I was out past a dock and couldn't locate Gil. It was quiet, except for the occasional, hollow pha-lunk of a wave lapping the belly of a boat. I lay back on the headrest, pulled my goggles onto my forehead, and stared up at the faint wash of stars, the moon yellow

and close. It seemed I could see every crevice, every dark hollow on its surface, and the mountains in what I was pretty sure was Nevada rose from the lake, patient and eternal. Across a cove, I could see dots of lights flickering, as people drove their cars, turned on their reading lamps, lived their small, beautiful, heartbreaking lives.