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AFTER THE BURNING: EXCERPTS AND STORIES

by:

Pamala Rachel Ewing

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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## ABSTRACT

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This collection features short stories and two novel excerpts all dealing with flawed characters struggling to build and maintain meaningful connections with the people around them. Some of these characters fail while others succeed, although this success often takes a different form than the character anticipated. The stories take place in Mississippi and Tennessee, and are infused with the troubled relationship with the past that so often marks literature set in the American south. While the individual pieces deal with a wide variety of situations and circumstances, the collection is united by a pervasive theme of loneliness, exploring the danger characters face in the potential loss of relationships, as well as the risks they are willing to take to maintain these connections.

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## Bullet

For nearly nine months of Tech and Marnie's first year together, he barely touches her under her clothes. It's a concession, she feels sure, to her youth—nearly nineteen years to his thirty-two—and tender consideration of her painful past, the high school where she drank and slept with boys she knew called her *slut*, just to feel weighted to the earth; the touch of warm skin on hers worth the pain of her stigma, worth the grind of seatbelts into her back and the steady crack of her head against a truck door, like clock ticking. Tech spends time talking with her, spends time listening. He knows all about those boys, their truck doors and their whiskey breath. Tech understands her. Tech takes care.

From the beginning she sees that the world is against them. Even her best friend Aliana can't see that the age difference is perfect. In all ways Tech is such a *man*, a dazzling mix of gentleness and power, sad dark eyes and slender long fingers that pluck bills from a money clip so fat she looks away, embarrassed, when the dinner check comes. A beautiful complex puzzle. In January, when all of central Tennessee awakes without electricity to a world blanketed with snow and ice, it's Tech who remembers Marnie has never seen such a storm, who shows up at the apartment she and Aliana share to take her whirling in doughnuts over the Wal-Mart parking lot. Before Marnie's midterms, when her laptop malfunctions, Tech comes over at three in the morning to fix it, and on a skeet shooting trip to a friend's land one May afternoon he says *watch* before he shoulders his .22 and picks off a cardinal perched in a tree at fifty yards, red feathers fluttering down like confetti. When Marnie cries, he is shamefaced and sorry, not

understanding what he has done to her with his easy handling of the gun, the cruelty in the lines of his mouth. Just one word, *watch*, and a shot, and she wants to hate him and take her jeans off all at once. For her nineteenth birthday she has a hardback edition of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a red feather tucked inside. And still he says *no, wait till you're ready* when after nights of drinking and cocaine they lie kissing on her bed, the flickering light of kitchen appliance infomercials playing over the curve of her open mouth, the arched back which she means to say *please, yes, touch, take*. If he laughs at her sometimes, when in her desire she unthinkingly rocks her hips against his, he makes up for it by holding her close, and by September, when finally, finally he takes her into his bedroom on Dubois Street, she could faint for want of him.

Of course Marnie doesn't consider moving in. She comes to Tech's house that first night without pajamas or her contact solution, without a toothbrush, even. But Tech has extra of everything, and in the morning he says, *Stay for lunch*, and she stays—for lunch, and dinner, and then breakfast and lunch again, that day and every day after. Why overthink it? The very first morning she understands all that she needs to know. With her knees drawn up under her chin she surveys the stacks of money spilling from the open briefcase he's tossed on the bed. *This is my life*, he tells her, and Marnie shuts her eyes while he explains what's behind the wall in the guest room. Kilos of cocaine. Thirty-two at the moment. For an instant Marnie's brain sticks on repeat. *A kilo is over two pounds*, it informs her. *Over two pounds. Over two pounds.* She opens her eyes when she feels him sit down on the bed, sees him drop his face in his hands. Then she's beside him, kissing him, pulling him down so she can cradle his head in her lap. The

months of waiting, she understands, were also her trial period, a time of his ascertaining whether or not she was worthy. Whether he could trust her with his life.

“It’s too fast, Marnie” Aliana says, the first time Marnie goes back for more things. Marnie jumps—on Friday afternoon Ali should be in class, not materializing at Marnie’s bedroom door with opinions.

“God you scared me!” Marnie drops a handful of socks and underwear into her duffel bag and leans back against her dresser. “Why are you here right now?”

Aliana appraises her, one small, pedicured foot balanced on the other. “Well,” she says. “Why are you?” She glances at Marnie’s half-filled duffel. “What are you *doing*, anyway?”

Marnie’s shoulders jerk. “What does it look like? I’m getting some stuff.”

Aliana sighs. “That’s not what I mean.”

Marnie yanks the strings of her bag closed. “Well, what do you mean then? Me and Tech been dating forever. And it’s not like I’m officially moving in.”

“But you’ve been there for days. Don’t you want to stay here tonight?” Aliana’s voice becomes wheedling. “We could have boxed wine,” she says.

At this Marnie smiles. Boxed wine was the drink of their freshman dorm room, the drink of late conversation on bunks in the dark, Aliana giggling over Marnie’s embarrassment at talk of uncut dicks or the taste of sperm, Marnie thinking of the pretty girls she used to watch in high school, girls whose easy knowledge of their own perfection let them link arms with each other as they walked down the hall, let them draw on each other’s hands or play with each other’s hair while Mr. Bilkney droned on about

mitochondria. Marnie thinking *so this is what it's like*, being mistaken by such a girl as one of her own.

“You? Staying in with boxed wine? On a Friday?”

“I would if you would,” Aliana says.

Marnie sighs. Pretty Aliana, pulling her china doll look, chin tilted down and brown eyes wide. Tech has called this pose insincere, but Marnie understands the drive behind it, the way of saying, *you love me, right?* Marnie knows she is part of the noise Aliana keeps around her, one of the people Ali counts on to be available when wanted. Soon after Tech and Marnie met Aliana made them into some kind of fairy tale—Tech the Big Bad Wolf who lured her silly friend deep into the Dark Woods with free grams of cocaine. As if Marnie doesn't know a trail of breadcrumbs when she sees it. And Marnie does love her.

“It's okay, Ali,” she says. “Go out tonight. Have fun. I'm fine.”

Aliana shakes her head. “I don't think so,” she says.

But after all Aliana will be fine—her friends on campus are legion; her phone lights up day and night with texts. With Tech, Marnie is special; her age alone makes her something his friends—all in their thirties, like him—discuss with grins and head-shaking. *Must be nice*, she's heard them say, and she knows they mean fucking her—*her*, little blonde Marnie from Pickens, Mississippi. With Tech Marnie goes out for lobster and VIP rooms downtown, and she can almost forget the shotgun home where her tired mother refused to notice things—whether Marnie came home late, for example, or drunk or high or not at all. Whether or not her stepfather's gaze followed too closely the



movements of her body through the house. Marnie has always been a smart girl. At seventeen she nabbed the scholarship she knew was her escape, but school is only a means to an end. In September, when she wakes in the second bluish dawn at Tech's she places her hands on the smooth skin of his back, feeling the slow motion of his ribs, in and out. She paces her breath with his.

Of course Tech's job is a secret they keep. The house on Dubois sits in a forgotten corner of suburbs, where elderly residents let the grass grow a little too high, and houses stay strung up for Christmas all year. Here, the lots are large enough that no one notices the smell, when Tech and the huge man Marnie knows as Horse unpack kilos of cocaine in the kitchen, peeling away layer after layer of Saran wrap and electrical tape painted with stinking transmission fluid, meant to fool the K9 dogs. Sometimes, before the weather gets cold, Marnie takes Tech's dog Alfalfa out walking when the coke comes in, to escape the reeking surreality of it all—reading *Mrs. Dalloway* and doing lines from a plate while in the kitchen Tech and the terrifying Horse crack jokes. When it's nice she and Alfalfa see other people out walking or bringing in groceries, and Marnie looks at these innocents with a mixture of wonder and pity, and for some reason her heart aches. Sometimes she wants to stop a stranger, to hold her by the arm and say *listen, don't you know you could live another way? Don't you know how easy it can be?* Telling Tech this makes him laugh.

“For you, it's easy,” he says. “College kid, out of state. Plus, you keep to yourself, like me.” He palms the top of her head like a basketball. “No one to bother you.”

Tech brings Marnie back a small present every time he goes anywhere, and gas station knick-knacks line up on the windowsills. In the house on Dubois they stay up for days, snorting coke from a kilo they keep in the nightstand. If Aliana only knew about that! It makes Marnie laugh to think of the color her face would turn. But Aliana has seen too many movies. Tech and Marnie have a system: only one open kilo per shipment, and when the others sell, he sells the open one, too. In between shipments, they snort grams, like anybody, except with them nothing is ordinary. When Tech and Marnie are high they share things, talk of all they wish they hadn't done, and of all that someday, they're going to do. Tech knows he made sex fun for her; he can't help smiling when she trembles and inhales. Marnie, he says, is the best sex of his life. All that October and into November they make love in every room, and every afternoon in class Marnie grips the edge of her desk when she remembers what they did in the morning, what they will do again when she gets home. And then, out of nowhere, Cass comes back from California and moves into the house across the street, the one with the red door Marnie loves.

\*

Tech and Marnie are making dinner when he tells her, the two of them working together in Tech's small kitchen with its seventies' décor, tiny wallpaper blooms of ochre and green. This is Marnie's favorite Sunday ritual, a time she likes to picture from the outside while it's happening, the way it would look if someone peered in the window to smile at the way they talk and touch.

Tech props his lean body casually against the counter. "Oh hey," he says. "I almost forgot." And in the amused tone people use when they make statements on the

shrinking world he explains about the new neighbor moving in across the street.

Someone named Cass. A woman Tech knows. He saw her outside just today. “You’ll like her,” he continues. “She’s a friend from way back.”

“Oh wow,” Marnie says. “That’s nice.” She turns back to her potatoes, a small worry flickering in her gut, a tiny gas eye lit and set to simmer. *A friend from way back* means *a friend I’ve slept with?* Maybe. Probably. Yes. *A friend I’ve been talking to,* perhaps—*a friend I told about a place for rent.* Marnie takes a deep breath. *Stop.* Of course everyone has a past. The last thing she needs, now, is to show him he was right about whatever lingering doubts concerning her maturity have made him wait till now to tell her about this woman. And he has *waited*, she knows. Because even if Cass did just stumble across the place, Tech would never, never for a second forget such a thing, someone new moving in so close.

It’s not till days later that things become clearer, when Marnie comes home from school to find Cass and Tech snorting from the kilo in the drawer.

“Well hello there!” Cass says. “Why didn’t Tech tell me what a pretty little thing you are?”

In that instant Marnie stands very still, apprehending two things at once. First, that Cass is lovely, with silky black hair and surprising blue eyes, a smile that flashes like sun on water. And second, that *a friend from way back* means more, so much more than sex; it means *she understands about me.*

\*

What Marnie understands is when to shut up and smile. She keeps calm until she knows for sure what Cass is after, the night that Cass shows up on the doorstep with tickets to some eighties cover band. *Two* extra tickets, because of course Marnie is coming! Coming to be steered around by the elbow, introduced to strangers as *Tech's new girl! Isn't she a doll?* Coming to sip whisky from a flask on a wobbly metal stool and be called *bitch* by the drunks she turns down, while on the floor her reserved, attentive boyfriend does the Robot and sings—with Cass—the words to a thousand songs Marnie is too young to know. When she can't take any more she heads for the bathroom—a single stall room, which means waiting, but once inside the cool, tiled room is all hers. With shaking fingers she takes out her bullet, a little plastic cylinder filled up with coke just for her, to have whenever she wants. Tech's only rule is to ask before taking when it's empty. She puts two generous scoops up each nostril, breathing in deep while the lobes of her brain light up.

“Okay. It's okay,” she whispers.

She checks her face in the mirror, runs a hand through her hair. She looks all right. She can do this. She's rummaging in her bag for lip gloss when the door bangs open. Marnie yelps, dropping her things. The bullet skitters across the floor. In the doorway there is Cass.

“It's just me!” she says. “I'm sorry!”

“It's okay.” Marnie presses a hand to her breastbone, where a small pain flutters.

“You should really lock the door, you know.”

Marnie doesn't answer. Cass bends to pick up the bullet, holds it out for Marnie to take.

"It's nice, isn't it?" she says, going into the stall. "That he's so generous, I mean. One of the benefits of being with Tech."

Marnie's mouth feels suddenly dry. She swallows a gob of residue, bitter and thick in the back of her throat. "That's not why I'm with him," she says.

"Oh, no!" Cass's voice comes through the stall door. "I didn't mean that. Of course not. And I mean it's not like it's all fun and games with him either. There's a lot to worry about—for a lot of girls it's just too much."

Marnie's heart jumps, skipping beats. She presses harder on her chest.

Cass emerges from the stall and leans down to wash her hands in the sink. Marnie lifts her chin, her green eyes connecting with Cass's blue ones in the mirror.

"I'm not a lot of girls."

Cass smiles. "I'll remember that," she says, and then she's gone, letting the door bang shut behind her.

\*

In the morning Marnie is nervous, worried that Cass will say something, that Tech will be angry. In bed she kisses him awake, climbs on top of him although her head is splitting. By lunch she sees she's gotten it wrong. Cass is back with smiles and hugs, joking with Marnie about being too cool to dance. Cass has decided to set up a little grow room in the basement of her house.

"Will you help me out, Tech?" she asks. "Go with me to the garden store?"

Marnie stands at the window, watching them go. A nicely matched couple, both tall and lean, with the same dark hair. Women at the garden store will look at Tech and Cass and smile, thinking how cute they are together. Marnie reaches for the phone.

Aliana answers on the third try. “You’re being crazy,” she says, when after some time Marnie pauses, struggling to hold back tears. “Why can’t she just be a friend? Some people stay close to old friends.”

Ali’s tone is short, and Marnie knows what’s wrong. She gathers herself up and tries.

“I’m sorry, Ali, what’s happening with you?”

But she can’t listen to what her friend says. This is only the beginning, in her gut she feels it. A force is building around the walls of her world, heavy and cold as dark water. Already they tremble beneath the weight.

But no instinct could prepare Marnie for how quickly things fall apart. Every day Cass needs something—help with pH levels, or spider mites—or she has something fun to suggest. Within weeks Marnie could pick out Cass’s face by touch—the high, wide set of her cheekbones, the eyes that must feel ice-blue even through the pink sea-shells of her lids. By Thanksgiving Cass is nailed to the wall, smiling and winking through the red leaves of the tree she painted, just for Tech.

“Not in our bedroom,” Marnie says, and Tech stares. The colors go with their bedding, he points out, and up it goes. The new incense Tech likes is the smoky patchouli of Cass’s skirt on fire, and the new beer in the fridge is her brand. Marnie gets angry, and Tech takes his frustrations across the street, leaving her to the anguish of

imagining Cass's counsel: *I'm sure she's just overwhelmed—adult relationships take some time to get used to! And isn't she failing her classes? Maybe she's cracking—I'm worried about her!* And so on, and on and on. Marnie knows it's happening, knows no one will believe she's not crazy for seeing. When Tech is home he treats her gently, says things like *You're so skinny, Marnie. Please eat something.* Or, worse, *What would your mother think, if she knew how old I am?*

It's true that Marnie has stopped going to school—in December her afternoons are filled with cleaning and charred attempts at making Tech dinner. Night after night she throws the ruined food out and snorts her lines alone, looking out at the brick steps and cherry red front door that she once loved. When her phone rings, lighting up with Aliana's picture, Marnie doesn't answer. *Cass and I are friends,* Tech says. *And I'm helping her out.* Marnie nods. Of course. Cass needs help with the pot plants she's trying to grow in the basement. Cass is a friend from way back. Two days before Christmas Marnie and Tech fight horribly. It starts when he won't make plans to eat lunch with her, when she knows he's going to be with Cass. It starts with Marnie speaking calmly, in careful "I" statements. It ends with her screaming, then chasing him out to his SUV. She catches his sleeve as he reaches the driver's door.

"Please don't leave! Tech please! Please don't!"

She's crying and she can't stop, even though she knows how ugly it makes her, her makeup smeared and her nose running. He jerks away from her, sending her wobbling into the door.

*"Goddamn it, Marnie!"*

He punches the window she's leaned against, a thud that reverberates in her skull.

“Don’t you know I’ve got too much going on for this shit? *Don’t you know?*”

He collapses face forward against the door beside her, his head buried in his arms.

There are problems right now, he says. Someone who owes him fifty grand just got robbed by a customer, and an associate’s wife ran into trouble at the bank, with a bill she didn’t know was counterfeit. The police have been by the guy’s house, asking questions.

“I’ve got to take care of the first problem,” he says. “Horse is coming in town for the other. To make sure no one’s talking.”

Marnie stares. “Horse is—”

Tech interrupts. Holding up fingers in her face, he explains her two options. She can take her things and go, or she can stay and shape up. No more filling up that bullet. The last of this shipment goes out soon, and when it does, Marnie is detoxing.

Tech is shaking. Marnie moves forward, trying to wrap her arms around him. Gently he pushes her back.

“I won’t be back early,” he says.

That night Marnie does too much coke. Sick and afraid, she pops a Valium and steps in the bathroom for a hot shower. Inside, on the floor of the tub she scrubbed earlier, is a short black curl—the closest she’s been to her boyfriend’s crotch in weeks. It’s too much. Marnie sinks down and weeps, aching for the crevices of Tech’s body, for the smell of him, for the way he used to run his hands over her skin, marveling at the smooth plane that stretches from her belly button down. So much nicer, he’d said, than the way the girls his age had always done it. Marnie remembers Tech’s .38, in the closet



with the other guns and the .22 that blew apart the bird, on their day in the country ages ago. She could do it, she's sure. If she pressed it to her head above the ear there wouldn't be any question. In the shower she talks herself through it, hot water streaming over her face. A long time passes before she moves.

\*

In the morning Marnie wakes to Tech standing over the bed, watching her, an almost empty pint of vodka in one hand and a mug of something in the other.

"Here," he says, holding the mug toward her. "I gave you the last of the orange juice. Don't say I never did anything for you. Cheers!"

He turns up the vodka, draining the last of it into his mouth. Marnie tastes her drink, a screwdriver strong enough to turn her stomach. Watching him sway against the bed, she takes a bigger swallow. He flings the bottle over his shoulder, banging a large dent in the drywall. Marnie flinches. She sets her drink down on the nightstand, clutching a blanket to her chest.

"Oh, baby, baby, baby," he says. "Sweet baby, where have you been? Come on and dance with me."

He lunges for her, dragging her up from the mattress. She clings to his arms, terrified and elated. He's touching her.

"Tech! What—"

"*Kalija was a wooden Indian, standing by the door,*" he shouts, drowning her out. He spins her around over the floor, walls and furniture moving past her in a blur. She trips over his shoes and crashes into the bed; trips over her feet and bounces against his chest.

“Tech, wait! Tech, please—”

*“He fell in love with an Indian maiden, over in the antique store! Kal-i-ja!*

*Ho-o!”*

Marnie finds his waist and wraps around it, tight as an octopus.

“Stop spinning me! Tell me what’s wrong!”

He throws his arms around her, continuing to sway. Against her bare front the fleece of his jacket is soft, the zipper a hard, cold point in her sternum.

“What’s wrong? I’m screwed baby, that’s all.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“I mean.” His breath puffs in her hair. “I mean that I’ve got to make a delivery— five kilos. Five kilos, and I can’t fucking do it.”

He pulls away from her and stumbles to the bed, where he sprawls, rubbing his eyes.

“I haven’t been to sleep. I’m fucked up. I can’t drive.”

Marnie stands still, her arms crossed over her chest. She stares down at him, this man in whose footsteps she’s stumbled, his moving form always beyond the reach of her stretching fingertips. Her Tech, who holds the universe like rattling dice in his hand.

Marnie has no time to think.

“I’ll drive you,” she says.

Tech laughs.

“You? Yeah, I’m sure. That sounds like a great plan. You driving across the city with five kilos in your car. I’ll just have to cancel—piss my guy off. He doesn’t know where we live.”

“No,” Marnie says. “But your boss does. And those are the last ones, right? Four in the hiding spot, and the one in the drawer. Don’t you think someone will want his money?”

She crawls up beside him on the bed, puts a hand on each side of his face.

“Tech, listen to me. Do you remember the morning you told me everything?”

His eyes are shut. He shakes his head slowly, *no*.

“Yes, you do. I know you do. We woke up together here, and you threw that briefcase full of money on the bed, and at first I thought it was some kind of prank, remember? And you told me what your life was like, and you told me I had to choose.”

Marnie feels something growing inside her, a corded thing, brilliant green, its roots buried deep in her heart. Tech’s eyes open, locked into hers.

“You are so fucking stupid,” he says, tracing his knuckles over her cheek. “Do you really think you could’ve walked out on me then? Before anyone scared your mouth shut, or worse? Do you really think I’d have told you anything, if I hadn’t had your mother’s address?”

But nothing Tech says can matter anymore. For once, Marnie has the means to life inside herself.

“I’m not stupid,” she says. “Do you think I sat around and waited for you to tell me who you were? I took the key to the spare room, one night when you went out for more beer.” As she speaks, the scene fills out in her mind, becoming a memory. “I found the space in the wall behind the bed. I knew—not everything, but enough. I could have left; I wanted to stay. Please, Tech. Please let me drive you.”

He studies her face and then sighs, pulling her close to kiss her mouth.

“All right,” he says. “Be ready at five.”

He doesn't think he can sleep, but she brings him Valium, anyway, and stays beside him until sometime past three, when his breathing becomes regular and deep.

\*

*Hey, hey! Today's the day! Today's the day Cass goes away!*

The refrain is stuck in Marnie's head. It sets the pace of her nervous loops through the house, timing the rhythm of her boot-taps on the wooden floor. *Hey, hey! Today's the day!* Window, coffee table, hallway, bedroom. *Today's the day Cass goes away!* Bedroom, hallway, fireplace, window.

Of course Cass will still live across the street behind her red door, still move in the same circles as Tech—a satellite orbiting his world. She will still need ridiculous amounts of help with her pot plants; her name will continue to light up his phone. But the scales she's made will fall from his eyes. No longer will Tech look at Marnie and see a little girl in grown-up heels. Today's the day Marnie kicks Cass out of bed, reclaims the space where Cass wriggled in, whispering words like *child* and *addict* in Tech's ear. Today's the day Marnie becomes a real partner—the day she can finally prove what she's made of.

At the window Marnie pauses. Outside, the world is wet and brown, and since morning the temperature has dropped. Winter has gone on forever. So have the minutes on Marnie's watch. An eternity of waiting and still it reads 4:10. The picture window, she notices, is dirty, festooned with handprints and smears from the dog's nose, ghostly dirt that shows up in afternoon, along with the dust motes in the air. It looks awful. Marnie should clean it—stop forgetting—*Hey, hey*. On the coffee table, newspapers sit

in neat chronological piles—something Marnie’s started doing for Tech, who saves them for the Sudokus that calm his nerves. The hallway is dark. The bedroom, darker, thick curtains pulled against the light. *Hey, hey! Today’s the day!*

In the bedroom Marnie pauses again, listening for Tech’s light snores. He’s there—still there—safe and solid, sleeping beneath a wad of blankets, his knees drawn up towards his chest. From the foot of the bed Alfalfa watches her alertly, ears cocked forward. Marnie polishes off two generous lines, then hovers, hesitating. She shouldn’t do it. She shouldn’t. But after today the drawer will be empty. What if he really does cut her off? She pulls her bullet from her coat pocket, unscrews the cap, and fills it carefully. This is the only time. She promises. Rising, she checks on Tech again. Damp brown curls cling to his forehead and cheeks; he looks hot with them stuck to his face like that. Marnie rubs her palms on the hips of her jeans. No—it might wake him to push them back. Alfalfa whaps her tail on the mattress, yawning a yawn that ends in a whimper. Marnie bends close, taking the dog’s velvet ears in her fingers. “Hey, hey, Alf,” she whispers. “Today’s the day Cass goes away!”

Bedroom, hallway, fireplace, window.

In the den she mashes her face to the glass, sending a flattened-pig snarl and two middle fingers toward Cass’s house. The whine of car tires makes her jump. Down the road a dented green Ford Explorer appears, moving toward the house at a fast clip. It can’t be. But it is. Aliana, driving toward her. Aliana, today of all days. *Oh God. What could she possibly want?* Marnie grabs her gloves and slips outside, easing the door shut behind her before the vehicle pulls into the drive.

She finds Aliana frowning, reaching to turn down the volume on her radio.

“What’s wrong?” Aliana says. “Are you okay?”

“Of course! Are you?”

Marnie stands awkwardly at the window, her smile stiff on her face.

“Well you came running out here...” Aliana stares at her. “What is *wrong* with you?” “Nothing! It’s nothing. Tech isn’t feeling well, that’s all. I didn’t want—I mean, he’s sleeping.”

“Oh.” Aliana bites her lip. “I’m sorry. It’s just—you haven’t been at school, and you won’t answer phone calls. I thought I would come see you. See if you wanted to finish up your Christmas shopping with me.”

“Well, actually today’s not really—”

Aliana looks away, fiddling with the tuning knob, even though the music is too quiet to hear.

Marnie sighs. She checks her watch—4:15.

“I’ll tell you what. I can’t hang out today, but if you want to just take a drive for a minute we could at least catch up. I just have to be back by 4:30.”

“That’s weird, Marnie,” Aliana says, but she nods, too, and Marnie steps back inside just long enough to leave Tech a note.

Aliana’s car is hot; blasting vents send residue sliding down the back of Marnie’s throat, making her swallow and swallow again.

“What’s new? How are things with—” Marnie’s brain flounders. Jonathan? Joey? The heat is making her head swim. She opens her window and leans toward the air.

Aliana smiles. Her teeth are incredibly white.

“With James. Things with James are really good. I stayed the night last night. I thought about calling you, to pretend someone would still worry if I didn’t come home.”

Her tone is light—she’s joking. Marnie looks out at the trees going by, big oaks with heavy bare limbs. What is it that makes her want to cry? Suddenly she wants to tell Aliana something true, to give her something to keep, like a locket. *Sometimes when you were out I would go through your closet. I straightened all your clothes on the hangers.* The tree limbs make a knobby black screen against the grey sky.

“So tell me what happened,” Marnie says to the trees. “Come on, I want details.”

Aliana’s auburn ponytail bounces as she talks, piping on about beer pong and stolen kisses in a hallway. Marnie tries hard to care; she listens for pauses that require a sound of agreement or an exclamation. But the whole world is a clock ticking, counting down the seconds until what she has to do. What will she say, she suddenly wonders, if Ali asks about *her* night? Tell a story about Tech’s pubic hair?

Marnie giggles. Aliana whips around to face her.

“What? What the fuck is so funny?”

Marnie laughs harder, bending forward in her seat. “It’s nothing,” she says, struggling for control. “I just thought about something else. Please don’t be mad. I’m sorry.”

“Whatever.” Aliana looks older when she frowns. She glances both ways and runs a four-way stop. “Are we just going to drive in loops all day?”

“Well, we can go back.” That’s wrong, Marnie knows. She should say something else, something about missing her friend. She’s doing this wrong, and she can’t help it. A new side of her is in charge now, a side that says *Just get rid of her.* The

words spill out in a rush. “And I wanted to tell you—wanted to tell you that it’s probably easier if you make sure and call from now on, so I could tell you when it’s good to drop by.”

Aliana’s frown deepens.

“You mean when you’re not cracked out, or when Tech says it’s okay for me to come inside?”

“What are you talking about?” Marnie passes over the first part of Ali’s sentence. “*He* doesn’t say anything about it. But I mean—well it’s obvious you don’t like him, Ali.”

This is an understatement. In the house Aliana acts like she has some rare disorder, shifting her weight around and chirping through a ridiculous smile. Her eyes bounce over Tech’s face like brown stones skipping water.

“Oh! Well excuse me! Of course I should feel super about hanging out with a drug dealer.”

Marnie sits up straight.

“He’s *not* a drug dealer. Don’t talk about him that way.”

“I’m not stupid, Marnie. I know he gets his money somewhere.”

“Oh! So he’s generous and now he’s a drug dealer? His family’s rich—I told you! And anyway who cares? You don’t have to come to the door with it plastered on your face.”

Marnie clenches her fists. She can’t explain what she means, that every judgmental glance from Aliana is an added negative influence that Marnie cannot have,



another thing making Tech look at her and say, *God, you're going to hate me some day.*  
Marnie just can't have that, not ever again.

“Oh, so my face hurts his feelings, is that it?”

“No, Ali! Your face hurts *me!*”

Aliana slams on the brakes.

“*I'm* hurting you? *Me?* When's the last time you didn't lie to your mother,  
Marnie? When's the last time you left the house?”

Marnie slams her fists into her thighs.

“I don't want to hear this shit from you! He goes out of town! I watch the house  
and the dog! So what?”

Aliana stares.

“So what? Seriously, *so what?* So you're ruining your life for someone who  
doesn't give two shits about you, that's what! Someone who's probably fucking that  
woman across the street!”

“*You bitch!*” Marnie is frantic. “You don't know *anything* about our lives!” The  
metal tongue of her seatbelt cracks against the window. “*Fuck you* for talking like that to  
me!” Outside, the cold air exalts her, filling her with energy. She slams the passenger  
door with everything she's got. For a moment the Explorer idles, then roars away in a  
cloud of exhaust. Marnie rips two handfuls of rocks and brown grass from the shoulder  
and hurls them after the green hatch door.

A barking dog startles her—an excited chocolate lab tugging at its leash. A  
young couple with matching Burberry scarves is staring at her, open-mouthed, the man  
with a protective hand against the buttons of the woman's tan pea coat. Marnie turns and

begins to walk. Aliana drove in circles, but still Marnie has more than a mile to go to get back to Tech. She checks her watch. 4:43. *Shit*. Marnie begins to run.

\*

She hustles up the final stretch to Tech's house with her lungs on fire from the cold. 4:55. They're going to make it. They will. She's on the front walk when the door opens.

"Hey I'm—" She stops, her mouth hanging open. Cass slips out on to the stairs, her skirt swirling around her ankles beneath the hem of her coat.

"Well, well," she says. "Look who's come home! Where have you been?"

Something hums in Marnie's ears. She's on the steps before she thinks, glaring into Cass's face.

"What are you doing here? Did you come banging on the door and wake him up?"

"I'm sorry, sugar." Cass holds a hand in front of her mouth, her blue eyes wide and shining. "Was he supposed to sleep till you got back? I didn't mean to spoil your plans."

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing, baby, don't worry. You better get inside now."

Marnie shoves for the door, but Cass catches her by the arm.

"I'd stop what I was up to, if I were you. Nothing gets by Tech for long."

And then Marnie is inside. The den is empty except for Alfalfa, lazing in front of the fireplace.

"Tech! Where are you? I'm home!"

In the bedroom she stops short. He's there, leaning against the bed, his eyes bloodshot and his face pale.

"Where have you been, Marnie?"

"Out with Aliana—I left you a note. I didn't want her to come in—you were sleeping—I forgot my phone. I'm sorry—we got in this stupid fight and—"

"Marnie? What are the two kinds of people I can't stand?"

He speaks slowly, like a teacher embarrassing a dull child. Marnie blinks.

"But I'm telling the truth! She kicked me out of the car! I had to walk!"

"What kinds, Marnie?"

"Thieves and liars, but—"

"Yes! Thieves and liars, good job."

He bends and takes the kilo from the nightstand, looks down at it, and then at her.

"Have you been stealing from me?"

The question enters Marnie's head and swells, pushing against her temples. Cass. Cass must have been saying things. *She has that bullet all the time. Are you sure she asks before she fills it?* Marnie forces herself not to look down—does the plastic container make a bulge in her pocket?

"Have you been stealing. Yes or no."

"No!" She looks him straight in the face. "Why would you ask me that?"

He smiles at her.

"You're sure?"

"Yes! What's wrong with you? I don't steal."

“Good. That’s really good. Don’t cry—it’s just a question. Do a couple lines quick if you want—it’s time to go.”

\*

Marnie’s hands are cold. She shoves them under her thighs for warmth, watching Tech come out to the car. In his dark jeans and grey hoodie, with his curls falling in his face, he looks younger than he is—like a student. It’s not even noticeable, really, the backpack he’s got on—the backpack with over eleven pounds of cocaine inside.

Tech opens the door, studying her.

“Hey, feeling scared? You know I can do this if you—”

“No,” Marnie says, “I’m not scared.”

With a shock, she realizes this is true, although for one crazy instant it seems wrong to her to drive on the right hand side of Dubois. At the first yellow light she accelerates—then changes her mind and brakes too hard.

“I’m sorry.” She bites her lips.

“Hey, no problem,” Tech says. His tone is easy. “Why don’t you tell me about your fight with Aliana?”

“Oh, that. It was stupid...” A strange thought enters Marnie’s head. “Isn’t it nuts how people just drive around? I mean, I used to see people and feel better than them, because our lives weren’t safe like theirs. But really no one is safe—especially not driving.”

She brakes for a red light. Across the intersection, on the sidewalk, a woman in a blue coat struggles to push her child inside the city bus. The child doesn’t want to go.

The woman swats him on the rear, then slings him onto her hip. The child tilts his head and screams, his mouth a red, wet circle.

“Marnie, you’re fine. Everything is. This guy likes public places. We’re going right up here, at the plaza with the shops and the coffee bar. I’m anybody, meeting a friend. You’re anybody, waiting on someone. All you have to do is wait for me, okay? Just wait.”

Marnie nods. Just wait. They pull into the parking lot, and he kisses her cheek.

“All right. No sweat. Think happy thoughts. Think about you and me.”

And he steps away toward the shops.

\*

Marnie knows that she and Tech wouldn’t be together if not for something she made up. She was out drinking, the night they met, at a bar with sticky tables and a low, smoke-stained ceiling, the kind of place where no one bothers with things like I.D.’s. Marnie had not wanted to go. She came, of course, for Aliana, who’d been asked by some boy in her Biology class, and who had said *but what if he puts something in my drink?* Marnie trailed her fingers through the wet circles left by her beer, letting her mind drift. Under the table, the red-haired boy next to her put his hand on her knee and Marnie sighed, too tired, this time, to knock it away. Red Hair was getting drunk; even in the dim light his face was bright pink. Should she fuck him? He might give her a ride.

“Earth to Marnie!” Ali shouted. She was almost in Biology Boy’s lap, her auburn hair slightly disheveled. They were talking rape fantasies! Did Marnie have one? And if so, did she feel guilty about that? The table was still—three glazed, rapt faces. Even Red Hair’s fingers stopped their prowling. Marnie took a deep drink from her beer.

“All right,” she said. “I’ll tell you. I’ve got one, and it’s a good one.”

Suddenly she was talking, setting up a scene—herself going about daily life, shopping at Walgreen’s maybe, or eating at McDonald’s. The gunman, of course, came out of nowhere, bursting through the doors of the place and shooting up the ceiling, sending everyone ducking under tables, or diving behind aisles of shampoo and office supplies.

“I mean, this is no ordinary robber,” she said. “This guy is a real psycho. He’s got the automatic, of course, and who knows what else in his backpack, and he’s got a pistol in a holster on each hip.” She told about the gunman circling the room, binding the hands and feet of customers with plastic ties; about him kneeling beside her where she cowered, her nose pressed to the tile; about the gloved hand he ran gently over her head. Ali, Red, and Bio Boy leaned forward over the table, eager and almost smiling.

“Now here’s the thing,” Marnie said. “Maybe he rapes me, and maybe he doesn’t. All I know is that when the cops surround the place and the hero comes bursting through the window, holding a gun on him and yelling, ‘Freeze,’ I’m the one who somehow gets one of the pistols from the holster, and I just blow him straight to hell, right in front of the cop. I mean, I blow his head completely to mush, even though he’s already dead.”

Bio Boy sat back, confused. Red took his hand from her lap.

“Gross, Marnie!” Aliana said. “That’s not funny!”

But from the next table someone laughed. Marnie looked, and Tech raised a glass to her. On her way back from the bathroom, she stopped for a chat, and then a drink, and then another. Of course Tech didn’t feel of her legs—not that night, and not a few weeks

later, when she got so drunk she passed out in his car, and woke up covered by an afghan on her couch. Within a month he have her her first free gram of coke, grinning almost shyly at her disbelief, when he refused her eighty dollars. He liked amazing her, she could tell—liked swooping in to be the hero of her night, especially since, after that first time, she never pushed him for cocaine any more than he pushed her for more than a kiss. Not that she needed to push, any more than he did.

\*

Marnie fingers the plastic container in her pocket. Tech has been gone for centuries. The evening has gotten extremely cold. In the parking lot, people lean into the wind, struggling to their cars with chins tucked down inside scarves or zipped-up coats. The rectangular bags they carry sway out behind them, catching the air like kites. It's going to freeze, no doubt. The houses decked with Christmas lights will have yards covered in snow. Anybody's dream Christmas.

From the road, a flash of white. A police cruiser, pulling into the lot. Marnie stares straight ahead. *Keep breathing. It's okay.* Nothing unusual about cops circling a lot. Cops drive through parking lots all the time. Another car slows, pulling in. A clean, black SUV. Marnie goes rigid. *Undercover?* No—it has to be just a person. Just some person, that's all. Marnie is shaking; she grips the cocaine in her pocket and leans her head toward the steering wheel. *Dear God please. Please. Please.* She looks up again and gasps. Near the door to a clothing boutique a familiar face stares back at her. Aliana. *Oh God, the Christmas shopping.* Of course she would come here, probably came straight over after Marnie left the car. Now she's striding toward Marnie at a purposeful pace. Any moment now Tech will be back. *Get rid of her!* Marnie's new

voice screams. She jumps from the car and hurries directly toward her friend, tiny white flakes spinning and whirling into her eyelashes. She meets Aliana halfway.

“Ali, I’m in the middle of something.”

“Hold on, Marnie. I need to talk to you.”

Marnie clasps her hands in front of her ribs.

“Can’t it please wait, Ali? Please? I’m sorry—I’m sorry about everything. Can I call you later?”

The parking lot is crawling with people—going in, coming out, talking on phones. None of them, none of them are Tech.

“I’ve waited since September, Marnie. I’m not waiting anymore.”

The police car is still circling, easing past pedestrians. Where is the black SUV? Where’s Tech?

“Marnie!” Even through her coat, Marnie feels the tight grip of Aliana’s hand.

“Are you even listening to me? I’m trying to tell you to come get the rest of your stuff. I’m getting someone else to move in.”

Aliana’s eyes are startling. In her anger the warm brown of them looks backed with gold, like the foil on chocolate Easter eggs. Marnie stands still.

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Just what I said. Tell your mom she can save your rent money.”

She shoulders past, heading for her car. Marnie chases after her.

“Ali, you can’t! What am I supposed to do?”

Aliana turns her head, shouting.

“Stay at Tech’s! What’ll be different?”



“But we haven’t talked about it! What if something happens? Ali, *please*.”

She grabs her friend’s arm, pulling harder than she means to. Aliana shoves her.

“Get *off* me!”

Marnie staggers and falls, crashing into a bumper. The blare of a car alarm splits the air, and then the flash of blue lights makes her heart drop. She struggles to her feet to see the police cruiser a few yards away, the cop standing between the door and his seat.

“Is there a problem, ladies?”

“No sir,” she says. “It’s nothing.”

Across the lot she sees a figure in jeans and a grey hoodie. Tech glances at her curiously, as if he’s never seen her before. He steps behind a van and is gone.

\*

He won’t be at the car. She knows he won’t. But there he is, coming around the corner when she reaches the door, his face white and his nostrils flared.

“Are you a fucking moron?” His voice is low. “All you had to do was sit here. Just *sit* here, you fucking idiot. No—don’t say anything. I’m driving.”

He reaches into her coat pocket.

“What’s this?”

The plastic container is in his palm. Marnie freezes. Tech slips the container inside his sleeve. He reaches into her other pocket and comes up with the keys.

“Get in the car. Get. In.”

Marnie slides in the passenger seat, blind with tears.

“Sit up straight. Put on your seatbelt. And don’t say a fucking word.”

They leave the parking lot and turn onto the road, Tech looking constantly in the rearview mirror. He slips into the right hand lane, turns down a street that leads away from the way they need to go. Marnie sobs, past caring where she goes, whether or not she lives or dies.

“*Goddamn it. Goddamn it. I think someone’s following.*”

Tech drives in loops across the city, through neighborhoods and over highways. Marnie gets carsick; vomit rises in her throat and she swallows and swallows again. It’s pitch black when, at last, they pull up to the house on Dubois Street. No cars have been behind them for some time, but when Tech enters the house he flips off the lights. In the weak glow of the streetlamp Marnie sees him pull something dark and shiny from the waistband of his pants, moving to the window. His .38. He’s had it the entire time. He looks out, muttering to himself. Has he gone crazy? The question floats into Marnie’s head like a bubble. She curls up in a ball on the couch.

For a long time she stays there, not moving, waiting for him to speak. The legs of the armchair squeak across the floor. He must have pulled it to the window. Marnie cannot bear her misery. Her voice echoes in her head. *Thieves and liars...No! I don’t steal.* And then the parking lot. The memory burns her; she goes over it again and again, a punishment by fire. He’ll never forgive her. Never. And without him she is ashes.

“Cass was sure you were doing it. I didn’t believe her.”

Marnie does not breathe.

“You need to get your stuff together, tomorrow—get out of here.”

The words cut something loose inside her. A sound escapes her and she sits up.

“No talking about it. We’re through,” he says.

On the final word his voice trembles. A wild hope tears through Marnie's brain. Her whole life is in that tremble. The floor is cold when she slides down. His face is a pale smear with black holes. She keeps her own eyes on it, and crawls.

“What are you doing? Get away.”

Marnie keeps coming. She reaches him and leans her head on his knee.

“What are you doing? I said get away.”

For a long time they sit still together, and then after another long time and another one again Marnie moves, slipping between his legs and reaching for the button of his jeans.

“Stop.”

Now she can see him. In the faint streetlight, his eyes are gleaming. Her fingers close around a corner of denim. She pulls.

“Stop.”

She feels the metal of the gun as it noses through her hair. Beneath its hard pressure she is conscious of the fragility of her skull, the thin bone like porcelain.

“I said stop.”

But Marnie doesn't. She moves her face down and keeps going until he tenses up, until his whole body shudders, collapsing back into the chair, the gun pointing now at the floor. She leans her cheek against his knee again and waits. After a while, she feels his hand, caressing the top of her head.

“Marnie, Marnie. What are you thinking?”

Marnie doesn't say anything. There is nothing to say.

“So this is how it is? If you get shot, you’re shot? Crazy girl. My sweet crazy thing.” His fingers drum lightly on her skull. She shuts her eyes.

“Another shipment comes next week,” he says. “I’m going down south to pick it up. I need another driver to go with me.”

Marnie stays quiet. Then she says, “What about Alfalfa? And the house?”

“Cass. She can watch things. You and me will go.”

\*

In the morning the yard and road will be white with the snow no one believed would come. By the house the hedges will be frozen, each leaf coated with a perfect clear glaze. Tech will take Marnie out to the deserted Walmart—spin the car in donuts over the ice. When she laughs he’ll lean close and kiss her, tell her that when they get back, he’ll teach her to make snow ice-cream.

## Onion Weather

### Eli

On the night after Christmas, his eighth year, Eli Mauldin lay in his little blue bedroom made snug with down bedding and a wash of warm lamplight, realizing for the first time that God is not kind. It was his mother who planted the knowledge in his heart, his mother with her terrible, determined kindness, when she sat on his bed and began telling stories about her sister, the aunt he loved, she claimed, when he was four. This aunt was sick now, his mother said. This aunt needed help from them. And so Eli's cousin Phil, a stranger whom Eli had never met, would have to come and stay—*depressionhospitalsomethingsomething*. Eli buried his head under his pillow, tears stinging his squinched eyes, his brain crying *no, no*. He knew what this meant—the matter of fact tone, the hand rubbing his shoulder. All of it was the same as before his mother's boyfriend Bart started coming around, except that then she'd said *we're just a mommy and a boy—we need to find a daddy for our family*. And now it was *it'll be nice for us both to have friends our own age*. Eli knew it would not be nice. Eli wanted to scream, to kick, to run away down the street and be hit by a car. Maybe then she'd be sorry. Maybe then she'd care.

What Eli's mother couldn't seem to see was that Eli was fine without a friend his own age, just like he'd been fine without Bart his whole life. Until this year, things had been good; Eli and his mother had had food and winter coats, and a string of goldfish all named Peanuts. They hadn't had to worry because they'd both done their jobs—being a good student and fixing ladies' hair at the Curl Up and Dye salon. And there was the

emergency help besides—the money that came every month in the mail, just because Eli’s real dad had died fixing roads.

Now, Eli’s home wasn’t safe anymore—wasn’t a place to rest after the jostle of school. Already Eli cringed through the evening hours, shrinking from the inevitable moment when Bart would say *now you look here*, and go off about Eli’s attitude, how he wasn’t good enough, how he should want to go out and do something horrible, like play a sport designed to kill him and make him look dumb. Already Eli’s mother had no time for games, and Saturdays of reading magazines and sweeping up curls at the salon were transformed into hours of “work detail,” which meant doing chores with Bart until Bart got mad.

“Oh Eli,” his mother said, whenever she came home to find him on the couch with his face shoved in the crack. “He just wants to teach you something. Can’t you please just try?”

By the time of the Phil talk, Eli struggled through his days with the constant feeling that he might be sick. He stopped getting A’s in cursive and could not understand long division. On the evenings that Bart did not come, or did not stay until after Eli’s bedtime, he lay on the couch in grateful repose, almost crying into the chicken soup his mother brought him for dinner. Every night his prayers were the same, a desperate appeal whispered again and again: *Please God let Bart run off with a woman, and please let Phil get kidnapped. Or let both of them die*, he wanted to add, but to thinketh something in the heart was the same as doing it, and Eli wasn’t prepared for murder.

And then—then there comes a bitter January afternoon, when outside the twigs of trees are glazed with yesterday’s frozen rain. Eli, hiding near Scum Lake—his name for

the neighborhood pond—from the sound of Bart’s truck tires, looks up from his quiet thoughts to see fluffy flakes falling from the sky, falling fast and thick on the grass and dirt, and sticking there. Snow. Snow that could keep Bart away; snow that might mean days of cozy safety at home, movies with his mother and hours of play, her bringing out buttons and carrots for the tiny mom and son snowmen they might scrape together in the dazzling yard. Eli turns and runs, snowflakes sticking in his lashes, his boots making dark spots in the light dusting which already coats the ground. He flings open the door, and stands, petrified, in the threshold. There, in the kitchen, is Phil, and in the space of a breath that Eli cannot take the world falls apart as softly as flakes scatter and melt on the green linoleum. Standing there, in the backdoor’s rectangle of warmth and light, Eli looks at Phil and hates him with a burning down-deep sickness so overwhelming that he’s not surprised, when his eyes meet Phil’s, to see that the feeling is mutual.

Of course it’s as bad as Eli fears. The weight and mass of Phil’s body in the center of the universe throws the natural order farther off course than ever. Everything begins to revolve around Phil—what he wants for dinner, if he needs help with homework, whether or not he has had a good day. And every day belongs to Phil. Before bed, Eli’s mother helps Phil put a big, sparkly star over that day’s square in the calendar, marking off the time until the aunt comes home. Blotting out all the things Eli and his mother had to remember—the record of their life together. It’s wrong, Eli knows, to feel the hot squeeze in his middle over that short sequence of stars, when Phil trails his finger over row after starless row, his mouth turned down in a hard little frown. But knowing it’s wrong just makes Eli feel guilty, and feeling guilty only adds to his loathing. How dare Phil come here, and take over everything, and then make *Eli* feel bad about it?

After a week Phil is moved into Eli's class at school, and within a few days Phil is part of the crowd Eli has always only watched from a careful distance—the boys who team up, at recess, to play soccer or kick ball; and who attend (or so Eli's heard) boy-girl birthday parties at the skating rink—whole Saturday afternoons of cool, nonchalant happiness under the swirling colored lights and sparkling disco ball. Even Sundays bring no relief. At church people act like they've never seen a boy before. Old men and ladies who generally give Eli only vague smiles come up and pat Phil on the head, saying things like *oh we are so happy to have you come visit us! Aren't your aunt and cousin lucky!*

Of course the worst thing is far worse than Eli could have imagined: Phil even makes friends with Bart. Increasingly, on evenings and weekends, Eli watches the two of them go out alone to work or play their stupid games—alone, that is, until Eli's mother goes out to exclaim over the way Phil throws a football, or to see him demonstrate what he's learned about the car. As the weather warms and spring comes on, Eli often finds himself inside the trailer, alone, looking out at Bart, Phil, and his own mother. Mom, Dad, and son—a family.

## **Raina**

When the hands of Mrs. Dutt's Ronald McDonald clock point to 1:00, Raina Hunter places both palms on her desk, forcing herself to stay still while the first rush of students lines up for recess. She's nine, after all, and other girls are watching her. It's not fun, but things have been this way ever since a Girl Scout meeting a few weeks ago, when she sat with her troop in a semi-circle of quiet horror in their leader's den, watching a bouncy, ponytailed cartoon teenager smile all over the television screen and explain



that, *any day now*, her familiar, smooth body would begin to do all kinds of unspeakable things, with no regard for common decency. Since that day it's become important to be somber, to hang back from things like recess and to talk about how worried you are that you might *start*, especially if you are short and skinny and your mother won't let you shave your legs yet. But today being mature is especially hard—all day the classroom has seemed dirty and close, with crusty rings of red dirt—broken free from the sneaker soles where they'd dried—getting crushed and smeared all over the floor, and Mrs. Dutt forcing Ricky Lewis, who was slow, to read aloud until sweat came out on his face, while some people mocked him and everyone else dropped their heads and squirmed.

The metal double doors at the end of the hallway clack open, and Raina steps out onto the concrete sidewalk, squinting her eyes in the brightness. She takes a breath; the air smells green like cut grass and weeds. *Onion weather*, she thinks—her name for any time of year with hot sun and frequent storms, when anyone who wants wild onions can pull up a whole bunch at once without half trying, clods of moist black earth still sticking to the pale globes. This kind of weather strikes a chord. It makes Raina feel grateful and almost sad, like the summer morning a few years ago, when on her way back up her long gravel driveway with the mail, she suddenly dropped all the envelopes in a heap on the ground and stretched her arms toward the sky, whispering, “I'll never forget you, 2005. I never will.”

The memory makes Raina wince. Blushing, she takes off toward the playground as fast as she can go without breaking into a run, aiming for the metal parallel bars which line the sides of the wooden bouncing bridge. Playing is one thing. Training is another. Almost all Raina's friends want to be gymnasts. Last summer a few of them watched the

Olympics together, overcome with awe for the poised girls in bright leotards, their slim bodies flipping over balance beams and vaults, tumbling over blue-matted floors.

*Olympic gymnast* is what Raina wrote down, at the beginning of the year when Mrs. Dutt asked the class what they wanted to be someday. She reads books with titles like *The Littlest Gymnast*, and she has begged her mother for the lessons her friends get to take.

“Ask again in a year and we’ll see,” her mother said, and Raina knew that this was punishment for the softball and soccer teams she quit, and the strawberry yogurt she always begged for but then forgot about, leaving it to turn to a watery mess in the fridge. So for now there’s only practice at recess, and a secret half-hope that someone might see her and take note of her form, and decide to give her lessons for free. If *The Littlest Gymnast* could make it happen...well?

She centers herself on the bar, ignoring the shudder of the bouncing bridge beneath her feet, the shouting ruckus of the playground, and the group of Girl Scouts gossiping on the benches. *One, two, three, up*—her arms extended, she flips carefully forward, legs straight, toes pointed, knees together, somersaulting playground and sky. In a minute she’ll progress to back flips, hurling her lower body up and over, and then to a new move which involves draping her body over the bridge, one bar clamped in the crease of her knees and the other in her hands, then letting go, sailing under her legs and completely off the bar to land on her feet in a cloud of playground dust.

It’s only thanks to Raina’s ingenuity that she gets to do her routine at all. This morning her mother woke her up by banging shut her closet door and throwing a Sunday dress on her bed.

“You’ll just have to dress like a lady, Raina, until you can learn to act like one,” her mother said, not looking at her. Raina sat up, miserable, knowing that this was her punishment for what she’d done the night before in the swimming pool—the Incident Too Terrible To Think About. She fingered the lace collar, wanting to cry, to throw herself in her mother’s arms and say that she was sorry, that she’d never go near the jets again, that she never, ever would have done it in the first place except her friend Mary Alice had told her it would feel good. But her shame paralyzed her—how could she ever hug her mother again? It *had* felt good, and her mother knew it. An wall was raised up between them. All she could think to do, after her mother left, was to keep life as normal as possible, which meant pulling on her nearly forgotten green soccer shorts under her dress. They were the only ones thin enough not to be noticeable.

After her third flip Raina stops to regain her equilibrium. Out in the grass a boy is—watching her? Or looking past her at someone else? Raina glances over her shoulder, then back at the boy. He’s a small boy with dark eyes and hair almost falling into them. Nice looking, even though he’s not one of Our Boys—Mary Alice’s name for the more popular guys in class, the ones Raina always only approaches with Mary Alice, but whom she wishes she could talk to alone, just to show she’s not less important. He’s in the other classroom, but she knows him—he’s cousins with the boy Phil, who was in Mrs. Dutt’s room for a week, before he got switched over. Phil who just yesterday scored three goals at soccer—who *definitely* qualifies as one of Our Boys. Phil who, when in Mrs. Dutt’s class and too new to be popular, liked to sit next to her on the reading rug. One day, after she had been up all night the new family kitten crying and mewling in her room, she fell asleep during the reading, and woke to find herself leaned

against Phil's shoulder, a wet spot of drool on her cheek and his collared shirt. Other people snickered, but Phil said, "So? Everybody sleeps." Raina looked for Mary Alice, but Mary Alice was busy talking. This dark-haired boy is looking at her, Raina decides now. Maybe Phil likes her. Maybe this boy likes her, too. She glances at the bench of girls—no, no one is looking her way; no one will ask what she's doing. She smiles at the boy and lifts her hand in a wave.

## **Eli**

It's a fluke, Eli thinks, that the girl waves in his direction, when he's out by himself in the yard, looking for four-leafs in the patches of clover. No one waves to him, or talks to him much, especially not a girl like her. She's a Hairbow, one of the Girl Scouts who come to class every Thursday in green shirts with huge matching bows in their hair, a different color every week. One of the girls who, on Valentine's day, Eli will see handing out funny or flattering cards to boys like Phil, sometimes with candy attached. (Those cards make Eli slump far down in his desk, despising the pile of cheap, ugly nothings forced upon him by the rule about bringing cards for everyone. If it weren't for that rule, Eli knows, he'd only get Valentines from the truly desperate, like long-haired, rat-faced Serena, or Marty, who is big-nosed and fat.) But the next day it happens again, and the next day and the next. Different dresses, but the same scenario, the same girl running for the bouncing bridge, her hair like sun and dandelions, the only thing not belonging in the loud, dirty scramble of bodies over swings and slides. The same slow, careful flips. The same awful, wonderful rush when her skirt falls up around her waist, showing slender legs and—*oh*—the same green Umbros. Eli begins to wait for

the girl, to watch for her small form, her sunlit hair. The thing is an enigma—why should any of it make him feel dizzy, the way he feels when he tells a lie? Of course it’s wrong, horribly wrong, to look at girls under their clothes; Eli cringes when he remembers the day, a few years ago, when he lost track of his mother in Penny’s and tried to find her by sticking his head under the door of every stall in the ladies’ dressing room. But this girl is not in her underwear. She has on shorts. So far, she always has on shorts, covering whatever would be otherwise revealed, when she turns upside down. So far. And every day, before she leaves the bridge, she looks at Eli and smiles.

Eli begins to think about the yellow-haired girl, in the moments before sleep, about saving her from kidnappers, or maybe vans full of drug dealers offering candy. About how maybe she thinks about him, but is too shy to say anything about it. The yellow-haired girl becomes his secret, a lovely warm and vital thing, a coal to take out and blow on for warmth when life feels barren and he’s too much alone. He learns her name—Raina—and begins whispering it aloud when he’s by himself. Every time he says it, it feels like touching dry ice, and everything is all right until one awful morning when Phil looks at him and says *Look here*.

## **Phil**

“Look here, I’m gonna teach that girl Raina to French.”

It’s a lie—a mean one—and unplanned. He watches Eli’s mouth and eyes open wide to take the meanness in. They are on their way to school, a short walk through the neighborhood and around the Shell station down to the corner, where the yellow-vested lady crossing guard stops traffic for them to cross to Hell Hill—the common name for the

steep slope up to Rankin Elementary. At Phil's real school he has to ride the bus, thirty minutes of jouncing over back roads with a crowd of middle school idiots thumping, hitting, or wiping boogers on him. Eli doesn't like walking, Phil knows, because before he showed up, Eli's mother drove him.

“At recess today,” Phil says. “She said I could.”

It's a mean lie, but why should Phil care?

Before today, Phil was okay on the walk to school. It was nice to get up and get ready, to go someplace almost on your own; nice to ignore your stupid cousin, plodding along behind you like a sulky turtle, not talking or looking at anything. It was nice too, sometimes, to think about Mrs. Willis, your teacher with the curly dark hair; how she'd be there in the classroom, waiting on you when you came in. How, no matter if you held on to your backpack and sprinted, leaving Eli behind like Aunt Kate says not to, draining out all the sparks that jump inside your body and get you in trouble during math—how *even then*, she'd already be there, smiling, when you ran through the door. (Sometimes, if it's late at night and you can't sleep, and you don't want to cry in the same room with Eli, it's even nice to pretend Mrs. Willis lives in the classroom, all alone, wandering the empty aisles of desks and rearranging the chalk sticks, thin and white as finger bones, in the trough, waiting for the morning clatter of children's feet—your feet—to make her smile again. Of course, you should never tell anyone that.) But the best part of walking to school was thinking about Raina—whether she'd be absent or present, whether you'd have outside recess, which meant you'd see her, or inside recess, which meant you wouldn't, since the gym was only big enough for one class at a time. And of course this was the part that Eli had to ruin.

It happened earlier, at breakfast. Phil was eating toast with blackberry jam at the tall, round little table in the kitchen, listening to the clack and swish of Aunt Kate washing dishes, hoping she'd start humming, like she sometimes did. The toast was face down on Phil's shirt before he knew what happened. His new shirt that Aunt Kate had bought. Phil looked at Aunt Kate's back, and down at the huge purple square on his belly. Would she be angry? Maybe if he changed, he wouldn't have to risk it. Maybe she wouldn't notice; he could ball the shirt up under his mattress, pretend he didn't know what happened. He eased off the chair and padded down the hall toward Eli's room, where he slept balanced on the very edge of Eli's big, creaky bed. Just outside the door, he paused. Eli was in there, talking to himself—saying the same word again and again, like a sigh. Phil held his breath.

“Raina,” Eli said. “Raina. Raaaaaaaiina.”

Phil jumped. Quickly, blindly, he retreated, stumbling back toward the kitchen. Eli liked Raina. He *liked* her. Raina, Phil's Raina, whose hair smelled like raspberries. It was humiliating, *violating*, like the time he'd walked in on Bart on the toilet, or when he'd bumped into Aunt Kate in the hall, her body and hair wrapped in towels.

“Goodness!”

Phil was standing beside the table again. Aunt Kate had turned around from the dishes. Soapy water dripped from her upheld hands.

“What happened to you?”

Phil opened his mouth, wanting to tell her, wanting to scream that Eli didn't know what it meant to care about someone. If you cared about someone you made them sandwiches and brought blankets for them from the closet. You brushed their hair

sometimes and you told them they looked nice. You hugged them when they cried, and if the two of you were watching TV, you let them sleep against you no matter how much your arm started to hurt. That's the way Phil cared about Raina. He knew it and *she* knew it. Eli didn't know a goddamn thing.

Phil opened his mouth and burped, then gagged. Suddenly the tears came, overwhelming him in a hot wave. In an instant Aunt Kate was on her knees, her arms wrapped around him, hugging him hard, making warm, wet blots on his back.

"It's okay. I'm only kidding—I'm sorry. We'll get you changed and Aunt Kate will get the spot out, I promise."

Phil buried his face in her neck, feeling her solid, almost familiar form, her embrace almost right, but so terribly wrong. He hated Eli for liking Raina. He hated Raina for being liked.

This morning Phil walked behind Eli on the way to school, staring at his stupid, sulky turtle walk and thinking of all the reasons he should go to hell. Eli who thought he was so smart, just because his ugly face was on the wall as Mrs. Willis's Star Student of the Month. Eli who never wanted to do anything, but who got mad at Phil for playing with Bart, when anybody could see that Bart wanted to play with Eli more than anybody else. Eli who stood right in front of the sink and brushed his teeth for three hundred years, so that Phil had to either push him or spit in the sink. Eli who made liking Raina seem ridiculous.

In the Shell lot tiny brown birds hopped and fluttered, pecking at the pavement, and in the parking spaces spots of oil shimmered pink and green. By the pumps a man in



a baseball cap squeegeed the bug guts off the windshield of his F150, pausing to shoot tobacco juice from his mouth in a skilled brown arc.

“Hey Eli!” Phil shouted. “Look here!” And then he told his mean lie, and then he stood there smiling, because what else can you do when you hate someone so much you want to die?

Eli’s mouth will never close. Phil can’t bear any of it any longer—Eli’s face, Eli’s house, living here in this stupid town for weeks and weeks and weeks. He turns and runs down the sidewalk, and in a moment he hears footsteps coming fast, after him. Up ahead, the crossing guard lady stands in the street in, one white-gloved hand held up, the open palm facing Phil. Down the road, a red truck is coming; sunlight gleams off the windshield and leaves a silvery dark spot in Phil’s eyes. A strange thrill shivers over his body. What if he just keeps going? What if? The crossing guard looks from the truck to Phil and back again. Her eyes widen and she opens both palms at Phil. Phil’s breath rips at his throat. He has to get away from the footsteps behind him. He has to get away. The sound of a whistle splits the air, and then in a squeal of slamming brakes Phil leaps off the curb. There is a sensation of the truck’s shining grill, somewhere close, very close, to his right. A blur of the crossing guard’s arms, flailing at him, trying to grab. Then it’s over. Halfway up Hell Hill he turns back to look. The crossing guard is leaning forward, one gloved hand on her knee, now, and the other on her chest. Near her, the red truck is stopped. A man opens the driver’s door and half steps out.

“What the fuck, kid?” He shouts.

And there is Eli, standing safe and motionless on the far sidewalk, staring up at Phil with a mixture of disbelief and hate—the same face he had the awful night Phil

arrived, after hours in the car with the church lady Miss Nancy, who talked incessantly about things Phil had already heard. How people who were sad had to go away to get better, how he had to be a good boy, how he'd be home by summer and *blahblahblah*. Phil had leaned his face against the back window and prayed she'd shut up, twisting the edge of his t-shirt tight around his fingers. The only person who helped at all was Aunt Kate, who knelt in front of him and explained that her mother—the grandmother Phil didn't know—had had sad spells, too, and that she always came out of them just fine. She had been about to say more when Eli stormed in, letting in all that cold air and ruining the one moment of peace Phil had, all with that hateful look on his face.

Phil's body is blowing up with the sparks; he feels them shooting out everywhere.

*"I'm gonna get her good!"* he screams, as loud as he can. *"You just wait! She's gonna be PREGNANT!"*

Other kids, on their way to class, stop on the sidewalk and look up at Phil. He turns and runs again, his own words ringing in his ears. Can Frenching a girl make her pregnant? He thinks there's more to it than that—he's fairly sure—but it's at least part of the process, and there's no way idiot Eli will know. All morning he tries to get Eli's attention, making kissing faces at him when he looks. And it's not until Mrs. Willis comes over, squats down and tells Phil to stay in late at recess that Eli looks back at him, vindictive triumph on his face. Suddenly, horribly, Phil wonders—what if Eli asks Raina about the whole mess?

## **Eli**

Eli moves slowly into the obnoxious brightness of the yard, carefully stepping on every crack in the web of fissures which laces the sidewalk, absorbing the knocks from the spurt of students rushing past him like a small rock bounced along a creek bed. Why should he care what happens now? It doesn't matter if Phil lied. Phil likes Raina; she'll like him back eventually. Special Phil, whose mother's a lunatic, who can run fast and throw hard and fling his tall body into anyone, unafraid. Who takes things and doesn't care if they were never supposed to be his. Yes, Phil will get what he wants, in this case as in all others, and Eli, who is a nice person, will have to stand by and watch it happen.

Eli trudges to his usual spot in the clover, not bothering to pretend to look for four-leaves—not bothering to make believe that other people might care what he is doing. Now, before Phil gets out, is the only time Eli will have to say goodbye to Raina. He has to see her, and there she is, standing on the bouncing bridge, the sun in her hair and her dress—white today—blown back against her body by the breeze. But of course even this moment can't go right. The three Hairbows, the ones from the bench, stand on the ground in front of her, talking. Raina won't be waving today, not unless those three move away in a hurry. Eli swallows something hot and unpleasant, like coffee. It wouldn't be fair to blame her. It's not her fault, after all, that she was born perfect. Or that Eli was born a nobody.

Eli looks carefully, one last time, at her loveliness—the lines of her slender body and the quick movement of her face. He thinks of his fantasies, pulling them out one by one like tissues from a box—his rescue of her from drug dealers, and other dreams. Each one is more mortifying than the last: Raina slipping him (a better version of him) a furtive

note, when the two classes pass one another in the hall; him showing Raina how to skip rocks on Scum Lake, expertly flicking his wrist the way Bart tried, and failed, to teach him; her suddenly laying her head in his lap, while the two sit together under a tree, her hair spread on his thighs in a silky gold sheet. God! How could he be so *stupid*? Eli's throat smarts and he squinches his eyes shut, mentally crushing every vision and kicking it away over the ground.

He opens his eyes, and his heart spasms in his chest. The girls, all four of them, are staring at him. He should leave—oh God he should *run*, but—

“Hey you!” one of the Hairbows shouts. “Come here!”

Eli stands, waiting to faint, to have some sort of seizing fit. Waiting for the Earth to open and swallow him into a sea of boiling rock. But the seconds drag on, eventless, and in a moment the feet that would not carry him to safety begin to walk toward the girls. He stops a few feet away, the closest he's ever been to Raina. He dares to glance at her, but she stares fixedly at something beyond him on the ground.

“Hey,” the Hairbow says again. Her dark eyes shine in her thin face, and her smooth brown hair curves just under her chin. Her nails, Eli sees, are coated with red paint; her mouth is bright pink and shiny. “What were you looking at?” she says.

Eli opens his mouth, then shuts it again. Pink Lips smiles. The breeze tosses a section of her hair onto her mouth and it sticks there until she drags her red nails over her scalp, pulling everything back and letting it spill down around her face again. What are the ends like, Eli wonders, by nighttime? Full of pink goop?

“Hey, it's okay,” she says. “Were you looking at Raina?”

The other two Hairbows giggle. Black sparkles flood the corners of Eli's eyes, and for an instant he sways on his feet. Pink Lips smiles wider, then leans in close.

"She's real pretty, isn't she?" she says, her whisper loud enough for everyone to hear.

"No!" The word explodes from Eli's mouth. Raina looks up, her eyes—*green, green like apples not blue after all*—round and surprised. She flushes dark red.

"I mean, I mean, I don't know." Eli's whole body is on fire. Over and over his mind clamors *don'tcrydon'tcrydon'tcry*.

"So you think she's ugly? Why were you staring so hard then?"

"No...no!" What's happening? Things have gone so wrong somehow—how can he fix it? "I had to ask something," He hears himself say. He should stop—*stop!* But it's too late; the words tumble out like marbles from a cup. "Is she going to French Phil Alexander when he gets out here today?"

"Is she going to—*what?*"

Now all four of them have round eyes.

"Is she—my cousin—"

"Why do you ask that?" Raina's voice is urgent but blank—not *are you kidding me* but *really, why do you ask?* "Did he say we were going to?"

Eli nods. The girls draw a collective breath.

"How about," Raina says, smiling, "you and me go and talk about all this—I mean somewhere private?"

"Well, *well*," Pink Lips says, but Eli has no time to consider what that might mean. Raina strides away across the yard the way Eli's mother zooms through the mall,

head up and arms swinging—except Eli’s mother never balls her hands into fists. In agony Eli follows, trying to keep a medium distance, not trailing along but not chasing. More than anything he wants to be home—sudden gut-anguish for his old safe place threatens to knock his legs from under him. What would happen if he just left? If he ran for the building and went to the nurse? But there can be no stopping now. Raina reaches the bushes, ducks, and vanishes inside, and without a pause Eli goes in after her.

Within, the world is dim, and for a moment Eli is lost in the confusion of his own body, his breath rasping and his blood pounding in his ears.

“Tell me the truth; did he really say it?”

Raina’s voice is so close Eli jumps. His vision clears and then he sees her, standing in an open space between two trunks, the sun, broken by the overhead branches, scattering her body with shards of light.

“Yes,” Eli says. “He told me so.”

“Well, you tell Phil he best come talk to me. We have to chat—in person.”

“Okay,” Eli says, and before he can think she continues.

“Hey, why *do* you always stand there and watch my routine? I didn’t tell them you always do.”

For the hundredth time this day Eli wants to die. He shakes his head, examining a small bunch of tri-leafed plants next to one trunk—*poison oak*. Suddenly Eli remembers the old people who once lived across the way from him, long ago; the ones with a grown daughter, not right in the head, who used to sit always on the front porch, watching. That woman made Eli afraid to play outside. What must Raina think of him, out there watching her, like a creep?

“Come on, won’t you tell me? I’ll never say anything,” she says.

“I’m looking for four-leafs,” he says.

“What?”

“I said I’m not watching you. I’m looking for four-leafs. Clovers.”

“Oh,” Raina says. She turns away from him—she’s irritated, why? “Well.” She steps up, trying to go around him, to get out the way they’d come in. She’s leaving.

“He said he was gonna get you pregnant,” Eli says.

Raina stops. She looks at Eli, her eyes huge in her solemn face.

“Excuse me?”

Eli repeats himself, growing more and more uncomfortable with her increasing distress. Suddenly, horribly, Raina folds herself up on the ground, her arms wrapped around her knees and her face dropped into them.

Eli feels sick. Is she crying? Again he stares miserably at the poison oak, then at a large red ant running frantically over the dirt. Why, why, *why* couldn’t he just keep his big mouth shut? Why couldn’t he just never be born?

After a time she sits up straight. She rubs her chin thoughtfully, deciding, maybe, whether or not she wants to have Phil’s baby. A mosquito whines in Eli’s ear, but he stays still.

“Hey,” she says suddenly. “Your name’s Eli, right? Have you ever, you know, seen a girl—down there?”

Eli stares. A wave of dizziness tilts the world. Raina flushes dark red again.

“I mean, what I’m saying is, if I promised to let you, would you let me? Would you pinkie swear never to tell?”

What happens next is something Eli will never know for sure. More words are exchanged, bodies change position, and then in a rustle of fabric Eli comes to himself with the waistband of his shorts and white Hanes briefs stretched as far from his hips as he can pull them, both he and Raina peering over the expanse of his pale belly and down into the gap. They stand without breathing, the humid heat becoming almost unbearable in such stillness. Raina is close, so close he can feel the warm blood-pulse of her, so close that she is no longer a girl but something mysterious and magical, like a unicorn. Here, in this eternity of stifling calm, Eli considers, for the first time, the awful reality of his existence, balanced forever in the instant when future becomes present and present becomes past. He thinks: *Here I am, a boy in the world. Here I am in this second, this second, this.* Up on the playground, he knows, a group of girls, black and white, are swing-racing, pumping their legs and rocking their bodies furiously, their hair flying in the wind as each one tries to be the first to feel the chains go slack in her hands, her seat jerking under her as she descends backwards from the sky. On the slides at least one person struggles to climb up the slick surface, while an outraged group at the top screams that they are coming down. By the monkey bars or out in the grass, Phil's friends are almost through dividing up teams, and the boys left in the dwindling unpicked pile frown and shift their feet. On the benches the Hairbows chatter—about Raina and Phil, most likely—and inside Mrs. Willis's room Phil swings his feet over the linoleum while his pencil moves slowly across his notebook, his lips twitching as his mind works through the math problems or long-answer questions she's surely given him. Eli should absorb it all, keep track of it in his heart forever—the salt taste of sweat on his upper lip, the scent of raspberries baking from Raina's hair.



From the playground someone laughs, a loud long *ha ha ha*, and a shiver runs over Eli's spine. He lets his shorts snap back in place.

"Okay," he says, louder than he meant to. "Your turn."

Raina jumps, then pulls away.

"I don't want to play anymore," she says.

A weight falls from Eli's limbs; the sudden lightness makes him confused. Is he cheated? Or relieved?

"But you have to!" he says. "I went, so you have to go! That's the rules!"

Raina crosses her arms. "Who says?"

Eli's mouth drops open.

"Who *says*? You do!"

She plunks down in the dirt. In the spotted light her face looks angry.

"Well I'm not going," she says. "Unless—unless you find me a four-leaf. That's the rules now. I called it."

Eli's thoughts spiral helplessly—the only thing he knows for sure is the swelling ache in his heart. There are no four-leaves in the kind of clover that dots the schoolyard, or at least Eli has never heard of anybody finding one. Folded and indignant on the ground, Raina is farther away than a star. How can he say to her, *your hair is like raspberry Newtons, please come back over and stand near? The world is big and hateful; we should have this secret, you and me.*

"My yard at home is covered in four-leaves," he says. "They start right at the edge of the porch steps and go all the way out to the road. If you want I'll bring you five tomorrow."

“That’s a lie,” she says. “Ain’t nobody got a yard full of four-leafs.”

“I do,” he says, and describing the clover, he can almost see it, a lush carpet ready to roll in, good luck to take with him, everywhere. Yes, a yard full of four-leafs. Of course he has one. He does. He draws near and sits down next to her, leaning forward to try and see her face. “If I don’t bring you five four-leafs tomorrow, I’ll rub poison oak all over.”

For a moment Raina sits still beside him, her breathing loud and fast. Suddenly Eli is desperately tired; the uncertainty is too much to bear. Would Phil sit here, like a pansy, waiting for whatever happens? Eli reaches toward Raina, praying she doesn’t notice the way his hand shakes. Gently, lightly, he touches the cotton of her dress where it drapes over her leg. Then Raina moves—her solid, strong shove against his shoulder sends Eli sprawling on the ground. Before he can recover he hears her crashing away through the branches. He staggers up, trying to call *Raina, wait!* But by the time he emerges into the sun she is already striding away up the hill, past another figure, coming fast toward him. Phil.

## **Phil**

He tries to catch Raina’s eye, to say something to her as she stalks past, but she looks straight ahead, her cheeks red and her eyes brimming. Phil’s legs go limp and tingly—the feeling he used to call *yellowy* when he was small. What has Eli told her? And where is she going? Phil can see the worst already—a world where Raina is frightened of him, where she shudders and flinches away when he tries to explain, retreating to Mary Alice and the others, a united front of glaring, protective hatred. A

world where no one will play soccer with him anymore. Where everyone whispers behind his back the awful thing they know, that there's something wrong with him, deep down inside, something nasty and scary. Something bad.

Eli is still standing by the bushes, looking at Phil like he's got nothing to hide, like *what are you gonna do about it?* Well, Phil can show him. He runs the last few steps and seizes Eli, shaking him so his head bobbles.

“What did you say to Raina, huh? What did you tell her?”

Eli grunts and slings his arms free. He dodges left, but Phil is too fast; he's got Eli again, tighter this time.

“You tell me what you said to her, Eli.” Phil puts his face close. “You. Tell me. Right now.”

Eli lifts his chin and looks Phil dead in the eye.

“*Fuck* you,” he says.

In a white-hot flash Phil rears back, right fist ready to bust Eli's ear into a mass of swollen cartilage.

Eli tries again to get away—darting right—but this time his feet slide out from under him, and when he hits the ground he starts to wail, drawing his legs up to his chest and rocking. Horrified, Phil steps backward, rubbing his palms on his jeans. That kind of crying, so loud and abandoned, makes something feel loose inside Phil's middle. Things flicker in his mind—dangerous things. *Pillows with satin cases, soft and cool on your face. Pills rolling on a blue-flowered dinner plate. A smooth, white claw-foot tub.* Eli's voice is high-pitched—he's almost screaming. The sky jumps at Phil, making his

stomach plummet. Eli has to stop. If he doesn't Phil will be flattened, crushed by the space and mass of things, the dark heaviness hidden under sunlight and air.

"Please, Eli," he says, low. "Please don't."

Phil crouches near his cousin, focusing on the small, heaving body to keep the world from rushing in.

"Please, Eli," he says again. "Look, I'm sorry. I won't hit you. And I didn't mean it, what I said this morning. I—exaggerated. Raina didn't say anything."

Eli takes a gasping, hiccupping breath. In the hot sun Phil shudders, keeping his eyes on the only part of Eli's face he can see—the blood-red tip of ear he planned to punch. Gradually Eli's crying quiets, becoming regular. Slowly, Phil's lungs have space to breathe.

"Probably she can't even stand me," Phil says. *Especially not after whatever you said*, he wants to add, but doesn't. Eli mutters something into his knees.

"What?"

"I said *she likes you!*" Eli shouts, lifting his head. He glares at Phil, his face mottled and his nostrils flared. "She likes you and you *know it*, just like you know it about *everyone!*"

Something strange bubbles up within Phil. He wants to laugh—Raina *likes* him! Likes *him!* She said so! But Eli is watching him with quivering lips, and anyway something else is wrong, something that Phil cannot forget.

"Well, why was she crying just now?"

Eli sighs. "I tried to do something bad," he says.

Phil's knees and ankles go yellowy again; once more the world threatens to plunge at him. It's not trustable, Eli's kind of crying. No one can ever know for sure what somebody who cries like that will do.

"What do you mean?" Phil says, his voice sounding faint and far away.

"I—" Eli's shoulders sag. "I tried to make her French. I grabbed her and tried to make her, and she pushed me and she cried. So you can go ahead and hit me or tell Mrs. Willis or whatever you want to do."

Phil looks at Eli, who's started to cry again, this time not so awfully. Eli with his quiet paleness, his small, noodle body and his insufferable frown. Part of Phil does want to hurt him, to grab his hair and smash his face down into the soft ground, pressing until he has grit in his teeth, till blood flows in red lines from his nostrils. But Phil also remembers things—what it is like to hurt someone you shouldn't; what it means to do things without thinking, cruel things, like saying how the backpack from last year is babyish, or smashing a Christmas ornament on the fireplace, the old bluish glass you were supposed to take care of shattering to splinters on the rough brick. Phil thinks again of the pillows and pills. Of a patterned cowboy belt hanging between his sweaters, the design traced in bruises on his shins.

"I know how you can feel better," he says. Eli doesn't respond, but he doesn't move away. "You know how—" Phil pauses. How to explain? What if Eli doesn't understand? He takes a deep breath and flounders ahead. "You know how at church, when somebody is bad, they're supposed to pray and be sorry and it's okay?" Eli nods, wrinkling his forehead. "Well," Phil says, "not everyone does it that way." Carefully he begins explaining, telling Eli about his father's mother, the wrinkled, sweet-smelling

woman he barely remembers, who sometimes kept him before she died. Slowly he feels his way—there are sharp edges, maybe, in thinking like this. But it’s okay, he finds, to picture her, this lady who so long ago turned to cold Silly Putty in a long silver box. Thinking about her—just her—is okay. In the house where she lived they were always alone together. It’s nice, really, to remember the way that sometimes, when he didn’t obey, she’d sit him on her lap with a string of pretty beads, make him repeat things after her. It was supposed to be punishment; when it was over she was happy with him, and kissed him, and Phil didn’t have to feel bad. When had the ritual stopped? It was sometime before his grandmother died, when Phil mentioned it and somebody or another got angry.

“But anyway,” Phil says, now. “When you get older and do really bad things then saying stuff isn’t enough to make you feel better. Sometimes, though, if you do something that hurts, it will.” This is the part that makes Phil nervous, the part that he knows is weird, but Eli is listening, nodding his head. “What you need is something for punishment, something like—” *A belt.*

“Poison oak,” Eli whispers.

Phil blinks. “Poison oak?”

“Yeah!” Eli scrambles to his feet, wiping his face roughly on his shoulder.

“Poison oak is perfect! She’ll know I’ll never do it again! She’ll see I’m sorry!”

“Wait!” Phil says. But Eli charges into the bushes, not listening.

“I know where some is!” he calls back over his shoulder.

“Eli! She’s not supposed to know!” Phil’s right foot has gone to sleep. He struggles up and after his cousin, who is obviously too stupid to understand anything. Phil should have realized.

He finds Eli in a nearby clearing, looking down at a cluster of plants with shiny, veined leaves, grouped in the tell-tale bunches of three.

“Hey!” Phil says. “It’s supposed to be a secret—not something she can see! Do you want to make her feel worse?”

“No,” Eli says. “She won’t feel worse. You’ll see.”

Eli seems happy—his mouth turned up and his eyes shining. Phil’s mind scans over the ways that this could go badly. “What are you going to tell your mom?” he asks.

“Just that it was an accident, of course. Hey how much do you know about this stuff? I mean, how much do I need for it to be bad enough?”

Phil’s mouth drops open. “You mean you’ve *never* had poison oak before?” He thinks over his own experiences with poison oak—the aggravating, itchy bumps that seemed to show up out of nowhere, sometimes when he hadn’t been outside all day. He thinks about Eli and his brattiness, the way he’s probably ruined Phil’s life. He thinks about a lot of things, and the wild feeling that’s simmered in him since morning flares up again, different now—angrier.

“You have to get a good big bunch,” he says. “Rub it really good all over.”

Eli looks at him, his face pale and doubtful. In the dim light he seems very young, younger than Phil has felt in a long time.

“You’re sure?”

Phil sighs. “Look, do you want to get poison oak or not?”

Slowly Eli pulls a bunch of leaves from their stems and begins to rub them, gently, up and down his arms and legs.

“Make sure you press down good,” Phil says. He feels awful, but good too. Let Eli rat, like he’s sure to do. For a few days, or maybe a week, Eli will know what it’s like to be uncomfortable all the time, to have everything in the universe hurt, and to not be close to anybody.

From far away the end-of-recess bell sounds, calling everyone back to class. Eli gives a few final swipes, ones to his neck and cheeks.

“You should probably eat one, too,” Phil says. “Just to make sure.”

“*Eat* one?” Eli is doubtful again.

“Yes, eat one!” Phil says. “If you don’t, the rash will be real light. You’ll hardly be able to see it at all.”

Eli places two leaves in his mouth and, grimacing, chews. Phil smiles.

“Good job,” he says, when Eli’s done. “Let’s go.”

When they exit the Euonymus, they part. Eli silently goes left on a diagonal, and immediately Phil goes right. Up on the lawn Phil feels people looking at him, Mary Alice and the Hairbows in particular. Glancing across the yard, he feels a sudden pang of gratitude, and something else, for the slim figure of his cousin, pacing along as if he doesn’t know Phil at all.



## **The White Buffalo**

This was the summer the white buffalo calf was born in the buffalo park in Hayley, Mississippi. The white buffalo was special. On the front page of the Daily Journal it peeked out from behind its mother's legs, and soon the Indians came, drawn together, it seemed, from far-flung corners by the magic pull of the black-button eyes. The Indians would have ceremonies, the paper explained; the white buffalo would be the star.

"We are truly blessed," the governor said, "to have this wonderful animal born here in our state." He smiled into a bouquet of news microphones. "It's times like these that make us really step back, and slow down, and take a moment to appreciate life and its miracles. And of course we are so proud to host our Native American friends."

In the preschools teachers read at naptime the story that made the buffalo what it was.

"Listen," they said to the round, sleepy heads. "This is an Indian fairy tale."

Even in Verona, several miles south, local stores sold t-shirts and key chains featuring the buffalo's wondering face.

"It's a miracle, maybe," some people said. "Either of science or of God."

"It's a white cow," others opined. "Damned foolishness, this. Or worse."

In Verona the believers spoke with both pride and envy, the disparagers with fear or hateful disgust, the way they all spoke of any part of their world that pointed to something beyond them, some possibility glimmering just out of reach.

\*

The first Monday after the summer solstice found Avery Hood, ten years old, rising unsteadily to her feet on the top of a dusty mahogany armoire in a dilapidated house off Dubois drive. From the floor, the armoire had been nothing, barely as tall as Avery's father. Now, the rough stone fireplace she'd used to scramble up loomed impossibly far below. Avery took a breath. Getting back down, she reminded herself, was not yet an issue. Above her, her friend Kendall Jacobs crouched on one of the exposed ceiling beams, outlined against the bright blue square of skylight floating far overhead. Kendall, who had come from nowhere to become Avery's neighbor, opening the door to life in this house with a neon sign and no anger surging under quiet words or shut up inside gently closed doors, bad air awaiting detonation. Kendall, whose relatives couldn't help but fascinate—Uncle Bop, the weirdo, and Aunt Pinkie, the witch. Kendall with her pointed elf-ears and blonde hair.

“Come on, Avery!” she said. “Just grab this one and pull up.”

Avery gathered her nerve and hefted. For a moment, things looked iffy, but then with a final strain and kick she was there, squatting on the beam, the front of her jumper streaked with grime. Her mother would not be pleased. But they had to come up here, Kendall said, to complete their first mission. Their first mission was to find out when they would die. The exact date. And maybe some of the circumstances.

\*

While her only child crawled higher into the skeleton of the house just past the old Pure station—so long abandoned, now, that the roof had caved in and tall grass grew between the pumps—Regina Hood sat on her living room floor examining a stack of Styrofoam cups, inchoate Egyptian chariots for the Bible class she'd teach on Sunday.

She'd seen the potential as soon as she opened the pantry door, intent on finally clearing out expired cans and old grocery sacks. Two cup bottoms would form the wheels, and a half of a whole, upright cup would make the little scoop where Pharaoh's man could stand. Perfect. Her three-year olds could color the wheels before she helped attach them to the chariot body, and if time permitted, they'd make horses out of a paper pattern she'd cut, adding clothespins for legs. Adding a physical element to this lesson, her teacher's handbook said, would work to make the image of the Hebrews pursued by the Egyptians to the Red Sea more real to the children, allowing the story to take root in their memory.

Regina cut her first wheel, a flawless circle on the carpet. Her teacher's handbook was a load of crap. The children would yell and fuss, and wander off to play with blocks, and Arianna Abrams would try to disrobe and hide her underwear inside the Play-doh cabinet. *Why make both of us miserable, worrying over that shit?* Her husband's question, the one that had upset her last night, popped again into her mind. *So, things that matter to me are shit?* she'd asked, suddenly furious with Jack for not understanding, and with herself for feeling this way, like an ugly monster, out of control. *It's shit,* Jack had said, *because you just want their parents to think you're perfect. Because you care more about that than anything.* But Jack was wrong. The important thing was not the parents, or at least not in the way he thought. Regina snipped a cup carefully in half and then attached the wheels with brads, two tiny golden hubcaps. Already she loved her idea, something nice from her mind and her hands. What was important was that somewhere she still had the whimsy and fun she remembered; that at least to other people she could still be the woman her husband had long ago ceased to see, the woman she herself could no longer bear to search for in the heavy body in her mirror, or in the

frown-scored face. Bible class mattered—it *proved* something. Chariots mattered, even if several of them remained behind, on Sunday, alone and forlorn on the blue pews after the sermon ended.

Regina's knees ached from sitting on the floor, but the kitchen table was unbearable, so far from the blur and chatter of the television. She did everything she could in the living room, lately. On screen, the local news was out again at the buffalo park in Hayley, but Regina did not focus on the reporter or the flash of her scissors, methodically cutting smooth lines in the open curtains' patch of sun. She let her gaze slip past all this, beyond the edges of her town and farther, out to a vast and rolling prairie, stretching on toward the sky. Going West! The brown rumps of her team, trotting toward the horizon, were the only things to interrupt her view of pure, wide-open space, miles and miles to cross in her covered wagon. No husband with her—he was dead! Hit by typhoid fever in a camp a few weeks back, he'd died sweetly in her arms, telling her to *go on, darling, be brave, and live life to the fullest* for him. A courageous widowed bride, going on alone; she'd taken on his work—as a doctor! In the back of her wagon his doctor's bag rattled; she'd learned everything he knew, and more, sitting up at night, studying his books by the light of her campfire. She was heading out to help people—settlers and Indians alike. *She* didn't have any prejudices. She was a peacemaker. She'd build bridges between white and Indian by convincing the settlers to leave the buffalo—even the magical white one—alone. She was beautiful—her face haunted, worn thin by grief and care—but beautiful. Always beautiful. Like a young Jane Seymour. A young Jane Seymour, who, to a lone cowboy, his blue eyes squinted by sun and wind, would appear like something unfit to tread earth.

Regina finished the pieces of her second chariot and moved without noticing to her third.

\*

In the rafters the girls moved cautiously toward the center of the room, holding on to the vertical beams as they stepped. The mission demanded a good view. They'd seen the young woman pull up in her ancient Oldsmobile; any minute now she'd be in here with Pinkie for her consultation, seated at the red-velvet draped table in the overstuffed armchair and breathing in the aroma of drying herbs—mint leaves and rosemary. The neon sign above Aunt Pinkie's front door said *Psychic and Spiritual Guide*, and she received clients into the tall "reading room" to advise a course of action in difficult times, or to take orders for talismans and other small things that helped forces move in desirable directions. Aunt Pinkie knew when everyone would die; she could read it in the palm of your hand. She'd let this marvelous secret slip to Kendall, one night when she'd had a sip too many of her "tonic"—a mixture of grape soda and cherry-infused vodka. But she wouldn't tell anyone his date. *Too dangerous*, she'd explained, glaring at Kendall. Thus, the espionage. Watch her look at enough palms, and listen to enough advice, and the girls could catch on to her methods enough to trick her into thinking they already knew, some night when she was tired—or at least Kendall thought so. Pinkie's methods of earning a living were one reason Avery's mother disliked her—as if a person could help the gifts she was born with. The tonic was another reason, and that was stupid, too, since Pinkie had given it up after her slip. Kendall said she gave it up at least once every year.

The girls reached the tallest part of the room, almost directly above the round table. Kendall touched Avery's arm and nodded, then held her finger to her lips.

\*

Jack Hood, as always, was the last person to leave Hood's Body Shop that evening, and he was almost inside his truck before he saw Lyle, the worker he'd let go at lunch, step around the corner of the building. Jack watched the young man approach, the word *disgruntled* and an image of the pistol beneath his driver's seat flickering through his mind. Lyle's face was hidden—the bill of his Tennessee Titans cap pulled low, and his head tilted toward the ground. But the young man's shoulders were slumped, his hands only inside the pockets of his loose jeans by the fingers. Jack relaxed. The scene hadn't been bad, as firings go. Jack liked Lyle. He was just a kid, really, barely out of high school. And he was quiet—almost shy. But for the second time in a month Lyle had gone out to bring a car from the service lot to the shop, only to be found later, slumped over the wheel, asleep. It was meth, Jack knew. So many of the younger guys he hired were on it. Lyle had probably been awake all weekend, taken Valium to make the day bearable.

Lyle stopped a few feet from the truck.

“Mr. Hood...” His voice trailed off. He stood scratching his left wrist, something working in his throat.

Jack sighed. He opened the truck door and leaned back against his seat, arms crossed.

“Lyle, look. I can't give you your job back, if that's why you're here. You don't have to ask.”

“No, no, I know.” Lyle scratched a spot on his left wrist. A muscle in his neck was jumping. “I just came to ask if—look. My girl is four months pregnant. We've got

to get things, you know, and there's doctor's appointments." He stopped and lifted his cap, ran a hand over his hair and settled it again. "I just came to ask for my check now. I can't wait for payday."

Jack's mouth twitched with irritation. What part of his appearance screamed *dumbass*? He rubbed a hand over his lips. "Oh yeah?" he said. "What's her name, your girl?"

Lyle looked into his face, his eyes narrowing. "Amy," he said. "What's it to you?"

Jack laughed and swung himself into the cab. "Go home. You can wait til next week to blow your money, like everyone else around here."

"What the fuck?" Lyle threw his arms in the air. "I'm telling you I've got a kid coming! Fucking *doctor's bills*. And you're keeping my check?"

Abruptly Jack felt tired. He turned the ignition.

"It's a stupid lie, Lyle. Doctors reschedule. And if your girlfriend really is pregnant, the best thing would be for me to keep that check as long as possible, give you more time to decide to do what's right."

"Oh yeah?" Lyle stepped close to the truck, blotches of bright red mottling his pale cheeks. "Is that what you do, what's right by your family? That why you spend so much time at the bar? Why you come into work sweating beer?"

"Fuck off, jackass." Jack slammed his door and turned around, backing toward the street.

"You goddamn hypocrite!" Lyle shouted across the parking lot. "You're *pathetic*!"

Jack slammed a raised middle finger against the glass and peeled out, his heart slamming in his throat. A mile away from the body shop, he pulled into a gas station for beer, downed two and flung the crushed cans in the floorboard, feeling calm spread like cool water through his brain.

To get to the open road that cut home through a few miles of cotton fields and woods, Jack had to drive through the main drag of town—the ugly fast food places and stores, parking lots wavering in the gritty humidity. This was where teenagers “rode the loop,” driving in a slow, drunken circle about two miles long, pulling off into parking lots to socialize, or get high, or fight. The fights were frequent, and violent, and they made people upset. Every year, the police launched a new effort to shut down the loop, and every year the teenagers spent a few weeks getting drunk exclusively in houses or fields, and then the furor of civil action died down, and the loop started up again.

Jack had been in a few fights, himself. At the red light in front of Bumpers he rubbed a thumb over his chipped front tooth, remembering the night some asshole from Union county had grabbed Regina’s ass. Regina had liked to see him fight, then, although it scared her, and she had been something anyone would fight for—all supple curves, with a brilliant smile. When fights were over she’d kiss his split knuckles and cry, tell him to take her into the fields by Gun Club Road, to let her make it better. The night Jack chipped his tooth, she’d pulled open the clasp of his jeans and put her head in his lap, made him nearly wreck his father’s Bronco before they were outside city limits. What would his seventeen year-old self have said, if someone had told him the best part of his life would someday be working on engines?



Jack felt nausea grip his stomach. Suddenly, he couldn't breathe for wanting to talk to his wife. Not the stranger at home, the overweight woman who could spend hours crying in bed, who would scream at Jack if he tried to fix things, or if he tried to leave her alone. The real Regina, young and sweet, the way she'd been before Avery, back when they'd spent his days off running all their errands together, or relaxed on the couch in front of the football game. He wanted to tell her about firing Lyle, about how bad all of it made him feel, about how some days he hated moving through the world in his skin.

*Oh, honey, she'd say, touching his shoulder, or chest. It's not your fault, the way they act. I know you feel bad, but you can't blame yourself. Maybe this will be the wakeup call he needs.* And Jack would hold still, and let her kiss him on the neck and shoulder, and maybe he could find the words that had so often eluded him, tell her that this life—the hours at the Body Shop, and the ugly house in Verona—all of it was supposed to be for the two of them as a couple. For the Hoods as a family. He'd made all the right sacrifices. And somehow everything was wrong.

Behind him a horn blared. He was stopped at a green light, holding up traffic. Quickly he accelerated, lifting a hand to the rear-view as an apology to the pissy driver behind him. Maybe things would have been different if they hadn't had to try so long for Avery, if after her there had been more babies for Regina to take care of. A son for Jack to teach things to. Jack loved his daughter, but she'd always been so quiet, so retiring. Not like a boy, who would have thrown himself into the world, never looking at Jack like a scared rabbit, ready to bolt if he moved wrong. Even as a toddler Avery had cried at Jack's teasing, clinging to Regina and making her angry. Now, his only child was a bony girl who rarely smiled, who looked just as relieved as Jack felt whenever he headed for

the door. And Regina was always miserable. *You're pathetic*, Lyle had said. Maybe that was about right.

When he pulled at last into his gravel driveway, Jack felt close to crying. He took a moment on the back porch to settle himself before he came in the door, letting the screen fall shut behind him.

“Damn it!” Regina said. “Do you have to slam around like that?”

She sat on the floor like a fat, fluffed up little hen, nestled down in a slew of chopped up shit it would take her a week to clean up. Jack bit his lower lip, his cheeks flushed.

“Nice to see you, too, babe,” he said.

\*

Beneath Avery's feet, Aunt Pinkie tottered through the long silver tinsel that curtained the doorway, her pink scalp showing through her sparse, bleached-cotton tufts. She reached for the golden robe slung on the coat rack and paused, seeming to sniff the air. Avery held her breath. Ever since the girls began their mission, Pinkie had been thwarting it, rousting them from under the red velvet draped table, and chasing them from behind curtains and couches. Pinkie took her counselor to client confidentiality seriously. *I think she can smell our auras*, Kendall had said, after Pinkie pulled her by her ponytail from the empty cedar chest. *But I'm pretty sure I know a place where we'll be far away enough.*

*Aren't you worried about how mad she's getting?* Avery had wanted to say. But Kendall didn't like quitters, and if Kendall wasn't her best friend then Avery would never get to help Pinkie again with little things, like burying labradorite chunks in sea salt, to

purify later in the light of the full moon, or tying dog fur into bunches with white thread. One glorious day Pinkie had punished them by sending them out with Uncle Bop to slide flyers under the windshield wipers of cars in the Wal-Mart parking lot. That afternoon in the bright warm sun Avery had felt the tight-wound strings of herself slacken, and for just a few hours she'd forgotten to consider whether she might be making someone angry or sad; whether her voice was too loud or her movements too jumpy; if she should seem cheerful, or act as if she'd be happier alone. Avery would risk a lot of bad hexes for another day like that, feeding tiny brown parking lot birds with Kendall.

Pinkie spun around once, silently, tapping her chin with her long, thin finger. She swooped down upon the round table, yanking up the red velvet cover. Kendall and Avery exchanged glances. Below them, Pinkie began circling, pouncing suddenly on furniture and drapes, flinging open chests and cabinets. The old woman checked in places that the girls could never have thought of, themselves.

*Oh my God!* Kendall mouthed, jabbing Avery in her side. At last, Pinkie seemed satisfied. She slipped into her golden robe and settled herself at the table. With a final glance around the room, she picked up the small brass bell before her and gave it a short jingle—Uncle Bop's signal to set his beer can on one of Pinkie's doilies and show the client down the shag-carpeted hallway. Uncle Bop always escorted Pinkie's clients, no matter how many times they had come before, or how hard they tried to keep him from struggling out of his recliner. When they reached the silver curtain, he'd draw back the tinsel and announce the name, as if Aunt Pinkie hadn't spoken to the person when he or she came in the front door.

“Ms. Serena Howell,” he said now, and a slender, pale little woman ducked in, a fat dough-ball of a baby clutched in her arms.

\*

Jack threw himself on the couch, kicking his shoes off over one fat armrest, so that they clattered on the floor. He stared at the reporter, gesturing before the air-brushed sign at the entrance to the buffalo park—a dramatic scene of buffalo standing majestically amid an endless field of waving grass, their bodies outlined against a day-glow orange and pink sunset. Behind the speaking man, the flat green pastures were lined with oaks and pines, many of them strangled out by the ever-creeping blanket of kudzu. The reporter’s face was bright pink and shining with sweat; it must be hotter than hell out there, on a July day like today, with high humidity and no breeze at all. On a day like today, you could smell the manure from that place for miles. Jack snorted.

“That’s a nice redneck sign they’ve got out there,” he said. “Like there’s ever been a prairie anywhere near Mississippi.”

Regina sighed.

“Well, buffalo live on the prairie,” she said.

“Not at the Hayley buffalo park they don’t.”

Regina’s scissors snipped faster. She frowned, deepening the marionette lines at the corners of her mouth.

“It’s just a representation, Jack,” she said. “People like to think about buffalo out on the prairie. Not clomping through the mud by some catfish pond.”

Jack snorted again.

“Well, this person doesn’t want to think about buffalo at all.”

He grabbed the remote from the coffee table and hit the button to switch over to satellite channels. The screen flipped to a bright green field inside a stadium of excited fans. Blue and yellow-shirted figures kicked a black and white ball in the air. Regina looked hard at her husband, at his big egg-head and jutting chin, his stupid, pouting mouth. When had he started watching every sporting event on the planet? Once she'd thrilled over making him look just at her, while the Ole Miss Rebels were first and goal. Now he flipped channels as if she weren't there, zoned out over an announcer jabbering in some language that neither of them knew. It was another part of the change in him, another way he said *I don't love you anymore*.

"Jack," she said. "I was watching that. Jack?"

His gaze didn't move from the screen. Her scissors exploded against the wall, the two blades coming apart at the joint.

"Hey!" she said. "Do you *see me here?*"

\*

Serena Howell was dressed in an oversized t-shirt and jeans. The baby was naked except for his diaper. *Red-neck baby*, Avery's mother would have whispered. *Thing doesn't have a chance*.

"Welcome," Aunt Pinkie said. "Please do sit down."

"Thank you, ma'am," the woman said. Like a lot of people in Verona, she did not let her teeth show when she spoke. Aunt Pinkie watched her perch on the edge of the deep padded chair. She jugged the baby nervously on her lap.

"Well, child," Aunt Pinkie said. "What worry brings you here today?"

“Well.” The woman sighed. “It’s my husband. I know he’s seeing somebody else. Been knowing it a while.”

On the beam Avery felt herself nodding. Of course. Poor woman. Avery knew how it was, how husbands didn’t love their wives the same after babies were born. It made her feel sick to think about it.

“Well,” Aunt Pinkie said. “You want to know if you should leave him? Give me your hand, child. I’ll let you know if it’s right.”

“Well, no, ma’am. It’s not that. I didn’t come here for no reading.”

In the rafters Kendall bounced once, cutting her fist through the air in exasperation.

Pinkie leaned back in her chair, rubbing her knobby hands together.

“You want him to love you again?”

The woman looked down and shook her head. The baby grabbed a fistful of her lank brown hair.

Pinkie studied her for a moment. The woman did not look up from the floor.

“You care if I have one?” Pinkie said. She pulled her pack of Pall Malls from the pocket of her robe.

Serena jumped.

“Oh no! I mean yes—I do care! She cupped a hand around the back of the ugly baby’s skull, pulling his face toward her. “I’m sorry, I just don’t know how to explain. I can’t have him run out on me, Miss Pinkie. Baby food, and diapers—”

Her voice trembled, and snapped off. She was *crying*. Avery gasped. She knew that living in a trailer park didn’t make someone different inside; even her mother

admitted that, though she seemed to make it into an insult somehow. Of course the Serenas of the world were people, behind their flat expressions and unfriendly eyes. Of course they cried. But somehow Avery had thought they must seem different when they did so. Tougher, somehow, or stronger. This Serena folded like a morning glory at dusk, cradling her dough-baby against her chest. Avery felt her own stomach muscles flex. Here, in a stranger, was the feeling she carried always, the tears she cried only in her bed at night. Serena understood. Serena knew. Avery's heart stretched toward the woman. She leaned forward, not thinking; she rose to her tip-toes on the rafter.

\*

“What is *wrong* with you?”

Jack bounded up from the sofa with his nostrils flaring.

“Do you think I want to come home to this shit? Do you think I want to come home from work and have my wife *throwing* things?”

Regina was on her feet too, in a heap of tumbled chariot parts.

“Do you think I want to have you come in and act like I'm not even *here*? Do I turn the channel when you're watching things?”

She was not saying what she meant. It was not the T.V. It was the T.V. It was nothing and everything all together.

“God, Jack, I could be furniture!”

Jack stared at his wife, the deep crease down between her glaring eyes.

“We always watch soccer when I get home,” he said. “That's why we got satellite. So we could.”

“No,” Regina said. “That’s why you got satellite. *I* just went along to make *you* happy.”

Jack sat back down on the couch. He let his mouth drop into a smirk.

“So instead of asking to change the channel, you decided to throw scissors at me?”

Regina glowered.

“No,” she said. “But I wish I had. Why should I ask if you don’t? I was watching something special. The white calf out there. It’s not like one gets born every day.”

Jack laughed.

“So, what, you’re a pagan now?”

Regina took a step toward him. Then, suddenly, her face relaxed. She slumped where she stood in her pile of cups, looking into his eyes.

“You really don’t care about it, do you?” she said. “You really don’t understand.”

Jack hated the way she was speaking, as if he were someone she didn’t know. As if it hadn’t been her who started this shit, as usual, in what might have been a tolerable evening.

“I understand how pathetic it is, that people around here have nothing else to think about but a goddamn white cow,” he said. “No wonder everybody’s a fuck-up.”

He went back to watching the television, the hypnotic movement of the ball. He concentrated on the players, on the nonsense words the announcers said. He imagined that someday, if he kept listening, the words might start making sense to him, and his



brain would move with a foreign lilt, making every known object new again. He made sure he didn't notice when Regina gathered her things and moved to the kitchen.

\*

In the reading room Aunt Pinkie was soothing.

“Just a little something of hers. A snip of her hair, or a piece of her clothes. I need a piece of what's got a hold of him, if he's gonna do what we want.”

She patted the girl on the hand and stood, fumbling around on one of her shelves while the woman dug a wadded bill from her pocket and dropped it on the table.

“All right, child, now don't you worry,” she said.

But Serena had more to say. Avery saw the question building in her tense little frame.

“Miss Pinkie,” she said. “What do you think about that buffalo they've got over in Hayley? That stuff any real at all?”

Aunt Pinkie turned around slowly.

Serena shifted her baby's weight on her hip.

“I just wondered because people talk,” she said. “My little sister wants to go and see it, but I thought I'd make sure it was worth the trip.”

Aunt Pinkie smiled.

“Oh, it's real enough,” she said. “That's a powerful kind of magic, child, and one whose workings are foreign to me. It's not dangerous. But don't go out there while you're waiting on what I do. We don't want any interference.”

“Oh, no, of course not,” the woman said. “Oh no, I wouldn't do that.” She pushed through the silver tinsel. “I'll get the hair,” she said, over her shoulder.

Avery moved her hand, adjusting her grip on her wooden beam to watch the woman as far as she could. She felt the long splinter when it pierced her palm, felt the length of it slide beneath her skin.

“*Ouch!*”

She jerked her hand away. Immediately her balance wobbled; the world tilted into a chaos of glittering space, the sun gleaming down from the skylight above and bouncing back from the table and shelves of glass canisters some ten feet below. Somewhere to her left Kendall shouted, and then Avery grabbed the beam beside her again, oblivious, now, to the new splinters she’d have to pick out later. The universe settled. Avery was still alive, perched up here in the ceiling rafters. Beside her, Kendall’s green eyes were huge.

“You girls want to know when you’re going to die?”

Aunt Pinkie’s face was turned up to them, her eyes two blue points of flame in a mass of wrinkles.

“Get. Down.” she said. “Or it’s about to be now.”

\*

Avery ran out of the house after Kendall with Pinkie’s slap still smarting on her cheek. The summer evening was coming on; she stumbled across the yard in a watery haze of green leaves and pink sky. Kendall grabbed her by the elbow.

“Are you *crying?*” she said. “Come on, it didn’t hurt that bad! Plus, now we know what we have to do!”

Avery blinked and sniffed, wiping her nose on the top of her forearm.

“I don’t think we should spy anymore,” she said. She felt scorched by what she had done, watching Serena fold over her baby like that. Like walking in on someone in the bathroom.

Kendall threw her hands in the air.

“*Spy?*” she said. “Who cares about spying? It’s the buffalo we need—the buffalo has power on her! She told that woman so herself! We can make her tell us our dates! All we need is a piece of its hair—and a spell.”

Kendall dropped to her knees in front of Avery, pressed her friend’s hands between her palms.

“You have to ask your parents, Avery. She’d never let Bop take us there.”

Kendall’s hair was wildly tangled, her entire body streaked with dirt. She had cobwebs in her lashes, strings trailing down from her green star eyes. The palms of her hands were warm.

Avery giggled. Kendall was right. It was her time for action, now.

“All right,” she said. “I’ll ask them.”

\*

In the kitchen Jack slammed the cupboards, spun around to face Regina.

“What do you mean, ‘make something myself?’ There’s not shit to make in here! What is Avery going to eat?”

Regina sat in a chair by the window, looking out over her yard. On the table the chariots and wheels were stacked up neatly. She thought about trying to explain what had happened, that she had tried, earlier, to go to the grocery store, had gotten dressed and picked up her keys. And then the sudden panic, squeezing her heart motionless in the

doorframe, where she stood looking out the window at the green lawn, the Queen Anne's Lace by the sunny street. At the store there would have been so many people, and voices talking over the loudspeakers, and innumerable options for everything she needed to buy. She saw herself standing for hours before a wall of canned tomatoes, a silly, dumpy woman, unable to move her life the right way through even one small decision. But Jack wouldn't want to hear about that. He was worn out with her sadness, her anxiety. The emptiness he called *selfish* or *childish*. Who could blame him? Outside lighting bugs floated, silver and gold flares like wishes in the dark. Regina was hopelessly sorry, about the groceries and the television, about the person she'd become, and her unhappiness in this life she once had wanted so much. Her marriage was not a thing any explaining could fix. She let him go on thinking she didn't care enough about them. She wondered if maybe she didn't.

He grabbed the cordless off the stand.

"I'm ordering a damn pizza."

He walked away from her to do it.

Avery came through the kitchen door and found her mother. She was alone, thank God. Avery looked carefully at the lines of Regina's body and face. For once her mother didn't seem angry. That was even better. Then Regina turned her head and gasped.

"Avery! What did you do to your clothes?"

Avery looked down at her filthy dress. She'd forgotten she was as dirty as Kendall.

“I’m sorry, Mama,” she said. “I didn’t mean to. I’ll put the Spray and Wash on there.”

Regina rubbed her hands over her eyes.

“It doesn’t matter, anyway,” she said. “That dress is getting too small for you.”

Avery let out a breath. There was still hope. She stepped quietly across the kitchen, and stood at the arm of her mother’s chair.

“Mom,” she said. “Can we go see the buffalo, the white one they have in Hayley? Please, Mama, I promise I’ll make my bed. You won’t ever have to tell me again. And me and Kendall can be good—we won’t talk at all in the car...please?”

Avery lowered her eyes, timing the pulse of her wish with the tick of the clock on the wall—*Oh-please. Oh-please. Oh-please*—had slipping Kendall in been too much?

Regina sighed, getting to her feet. She moved to the pantry and pulled out the paper plates, tossing them on the table by the cup parts.

“There’s a white cow down the road, Avery. We see her every time we go to Wal-Mart.”

Avery stood still for a moment, feeling her eyes fill up with tears. Her mother went on as if nothing had happened, pulling napkins from a drawer.

Avery bolted for her room, slamming the door behind her.

“What the hell?” her father yelled, but she went right on in the closet, slamming that door behind her, too. She pushed through her hanging winter coats, the soft pressure of them like an embrace, and knelt on the floor in the back corner. There, on the white drywall, a column of tiny sentences ran down, each one exactly the same except for the date at its tail end. Seizing a pen from a pile on the carpet, she added a new line to the

list: *I will never speak to Regina or Jack Hood again. I hate them both forever. Avery Hood—6/28.* She put her face on her knees and sobbed; she shouted that she wasn't hungry, when her mother came to tell her there was pizza in the kitchen.

\*

But this summer life was full of surprises. In the morning the buffalo was gone.

On television the gamekeeper fought back tears. "I just can't understand it," he said, adjusting his John Deere cap. "She was here and then she wasn't. Never seen anything so strange."

"Well, you know who it was that wanted her most," the businessmen said at the water coolers, jingling the coins in their pockets.

"Who was it that took care of her?" the Indians demanded. "Who was it that didn't want us here?"

The police were on the case, investigating and offering rewards. For three days the town was glued to the news. Three days, and then the sightings began. People flooding the emergency lines, reporting they'd seen the buffalo on the hills beside highway seventy-eight, in the McDonald's drive-thru, or behind the movie theatre. The sirens zipped all over Hayley, and then the surrounding areas, screeching up to group after group of shaken witnesses swearing on their mothers graves—the thing had been *right there*.

In the paper a frazzled chief of police threw his thick arms in the air.

"We're talking about a hundred pound animal," the quote beneath his picture said. "How could a big white cow baby be *elusive*?"

Regina threw the paper in the trash, and stalked around the house with the television off, books on cassette blasting in her earphones. Jack spent more time at the auto body shop; he had to, since he'd fired so many.

But in Pinkie's house Avery and Kendall broke out maps of the state, and raided drawers for crystals hung from threads. They giggled together and were happy. The buffalo was around every corner. If they waited long enough, they would catch it, they knew.

## Little Planet

In the courtroom the people waiting for their names to come up on the docket sit on plain wooden pews arranged in two blocks, and these pews, plus the big center aisle of faded blue carpet, make T-bone think of the little country Baptist church his grandmother dragged him and his cousin Nate to, Sunday mornings when they were boys. In church, T-bone and Nate spent most of their time changing the words to hymns, so that when the congregation sang they could get away with something dirty, crooning out *breast* for every *rest*, or something stupid like that. Now, sitting in the metal folding chair which makes up the witness box, T-bone wonders, could those moments could have been it, the factor that made all the difference? And why not? Maybe this courtroom and these people—the whole sweet by and by—was forming hot-bright from the ether each time a buck-toothed T-bone went and met on that beautiful *whore*.

It seems as likely as anything in this courtroom, where new planes of understanding and existing are possible. Here where people can do things humans can't normally do. Somehow, with less than five minutes of questions, a skinny, scowling shrimp of a man has transformed T-bone from himself into a criminal, and now a sleepy woman in a black dressing gown is going on about why he must spend two years in prison, all for the two pounds of pot police found in his kitchen. Two pounds. Two measly pounds, the last shred of the operation he ran; the life he burned to ashes, flames stretching high into the night and driving him—*faster, faster*—in the face of his terrible, apocalyptic certainty: *They're coming*. No wonder the police were angry; no wonder they ran choppers over the whole area for days, looking for the plants they just knew



were there. What they have against him is unsellable, though they say he meant to sell it, tiny little buds so old they crumble in the hand. He saved it long ago on a whim, thinking of butter for someday cookies, and not till men in full scale riot gear came bursting through his door, threatening to shoot his dog and ripping open drawers and couch cushions, did T-bone remember that stupid goddamn fucking pot.

He's staring, he realizes, into the crowd, at the pretty blonde gripping her seat in the eighth row, her mouth open and her face already crumpling. His girlfriend Jolie, who for four years has loved him—the only person in this crowded courtroom who doesn't wish he'd go on to jail, or die, so they could deal with their own trouble. Jolie, his friend since childhood, the one who sat next to him on his back steps, not laughing, when he cried over the calf he'd seen taken down by buzzards in a pasture nearby—stumbling and falling and then kicking feebly from within the crowd of hulking black bodies. *Must've been sick*, his grandfather said, unperturbed. *They'll do that, then. Go for the eyes.*

This morning T-bone was mean to Jolie. It happened in their home, the house he'd been gradually making his ever since his grandparents died. Dressed for court, he stepped out of the bedroom and was confronted with her vomiting in their little bathroom off the hall, the sound and smell of it making his own gorge rise. Immediately he was angry—couldn't she shut the fucking door? She knew she got sick when she was nervous, and she knew what being around that did to him. She leaned up from the toilet bowl, the back of her hand held to her mouth, her eyes wide and filling with tears. Mascara had run down both of her cheeks, and in the harsh light he could see the purple vein snaking the center of her forehead.

“I threw up,” she said. “I'm sorry.”

She started to cry in earnest, and suddenly he wanted to slap her.

“It’s *my life!*” he nearly shouted, and slammed the door on her shocked expression, her small body crumpled between the toilet and tub. Immediately afterward he was ashamed. He could try to blame his stress, but really he knew he despised her, just a little, for being able to throw up at all, the girl who throughout his youth was the stuff of dreams. Why couldn’t he just be fucking nice on what might be his last morning with her?

But now, in the courtroom, he’s already forgetting the incident, forgetting the way they rode here in miserable silence. Instead, he thinks about the meal they had at lunch recess, at Sylvan Park, where long ago he’d cooked up omelets and hash browns. To be brave she ordered only chocolate pie, and when she couldn’t eat it he went to the jukebox and played “Stand By Your Man,” pretended to be mystified when she looked at him and giggled, her green eyes shining too bright. Instead of this morning, he thinks of the pink Starburst smell of her hair. The feel of it brushing his neck and chest when in bed she braces her weight on her arms, still moving her hips on his.

The judge is finishing up her speech—she hopes that T-bone will use these coming months to his advantage. She hopes he will reflect on his life, and learn something. The courtroom police officer steps forward, motioning for T-bone to stand and come down to the end of the center aisle, where friends and family come down to hug their convicts goodbye. T-bone braces himself. This is the moment to be strong, to press his own tears deep into the pit of his stomach, to say *I love you* (and oh God he does); to tell her *It’ll be okay*. After all their time together it has come down to this—a few seconds for giving her something to hold to, for rolling up all their embraces and

pushing an imprint of them on her heart. But in the eighth row Jolie hides her face in her hands. For a small eternity the silence draws out. He says her name softly, then louder, feeling his stomach drop, the space on all sides roll in on him, unbearable. He swallows against the sickness in his stomach. He hasn't wronged her—he hasn't! She knew about the plants—it was the plants that changed him for her, made her eyes light up with interest and just enough fright. He held up his life like a flame in the night, and she came flying straight for it. But still, there's this—the woman he loves weeping among strangers, his cousin Nate gone from Mississippi forever, and another friend in jail.

He feels his arms pulled back, the cool weight of handcuffs closing on his wrists.

“Come on son,” the court officer says, and T-bone turns toward the exit on his right. As he passes from the room, before the heavy door clicks shut behind him, he hears a sound, a low, wordless moan. *A woman keening*, he thinks, only he doesn't know whether it's come from her throat, or his.

\*

At its peak, the grow operation made both T-bone and Nate over twenty thousand a month. Nobody would believe it got started almost by accident, the night T-bone was supposed to kill himself. This was the summer he would turn twenty, when for four weeks he'd been alone in the dark little house where he grew up, waking in the bed where his grandfather had slept with the day spreading out like an empty horizon. On this night, after work at Sylvan's, T-bone said he couldn't stand to be inside anywhere, and so he and Nate sat drinking their beer in the parking lot, sitting on Nate's tailgate. It had been another bad day for the restaurant, which back then was new. Once again Mr. Todd Sylvan had gotten in a fight with his wife Gloria, and then gotten drunk on the cooking

wine in the office, so once again there was no money for Nate and T-bone or anyone else getting paid under the table.

“Not like he’d have paid us anyway,” Nate said, slapping at a mosquito on his neck. “Shit. That whole fight was probably just for show.”

“Probably,” T-bone said, looking out at the empty lot. In the office Mr. Sylvan had looked miserable, his round potato face frowning and his eyes red. But the night was too hot for convincing anyone of anything. T-bone sat feeling the heat and the dark push in on him like hundreds of sweaty palms. At the back of his skull a headache bloomed.

“Damn straight,” Nate said, slapping at his arm. “Hey man, you need money? I got a plan if you’ll hear it.” And before T-bone replied he was going on about a cabin he’d stumbled across somehow, a cabin they needed to break into. “Some place out past Fulton must be on a tree farm or some shit because for acres all around the trees are all only eight foot tall and spaced out with hardly no underbrush...”

Nate’s eyes were glassed, his skin clammy and sweat-shined. Obviously he’d enjoyed a foil in the bathroom, something he hadn’t felt the need to offer T-bone. Nate swatted a mosquito on his neck, leaving a smear of blood and insect. T-bone looked away, disgusted. *I don’t even like him*, he thought, and suddenly something inside him flattened, and he wanted very much to be alone.

“I’m not going,” he said, or thought he said. There was no telling, since Nate just went on about how desperate times called for desperate whatever. It was true that they were broke. Nate hadn’t been able to make the month’s rent on his place, and this morning T-bone ate the last bit of food from his grandfather’s house—a can of tomato and rice soup he shoveled in at the kitchen counter, not bothering with a microwave or

bowl. It didn't taste like anything, and there in the kitchen he didn't think about anything either, gazing out at the living room now covered in beer cans and fast food trash, little used balls of burned foil littering the floor. He could have taken food from Sylvan's, like Nate—made himself a couple burgers to go—but he hadn't. It didn't matter, he realized, just like it didn't matter if or when he would come back to work, what day it was or whether or not this strange dry summer would char North Mississippi to cinders. In a single, gentle instant, the truth broke in on him like a vision, crystalline and lovely: when he got home tonight he'd get his grandfather's hunting knife from the closet, climb in the bathtub, and slit his wrists from the base of his palm to well in the forearm. He'd do it after he cleaned the house, going through one room at a time, the way his grandmother taught him to do when he was small. After he cleaned the mess that he'd made there and more—wiping the dust off furniture and cleaning the crumbs from the stove that had been there since the old lady died years ago. The people who found him would see how clean he'd been, how considerate. His friends would say *that's so like him*, and then think that in some ways it was true. He'd take his space-wasting form from the universe, and never again would he have to face the empty expanse of morning, the days like moving through a pointless dream. On the tailgate he understood—it was a win-win solution.

“Hey,” Nate said. “What's wrong with you? I said, are you coming or not?”

T-bone looked again at the pale face. So young, as unlined as wax. Nate whose bottom lip was red from his biting, and whose glassy brown eyes were angry. Nate wanted to steal something from the world—he didn't understand that the world didn't owe him anything, that it wasn't even real, except maybe for people who hadn't dropped out of high school and who went to college far away, or maybe for T-bone's mother, she

who left so many years ago. For an second T-bone almost hugged him. Instead, he smiled and punched Nate gently in the arm. There was no reason to deny him this one last time. “All right,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Jolie had been worried the day after T-bone’s grandfather died. In the house she wrapped both arms tight around him, though back then then they were still only friends, and in a trembling voice that made him want to cry and also to pin her against the wall, kissing her, she said “Trevor, what can I do?” She knew he was alone, considering how his grandfather had treated Nate’s side of the family since T-bone’s grandmother died.

“I’m okay,” T-bone said. He told her he hadn’t really had to deal with anything. The mailman found the body, and at the hospital there was only the matter of convincing the dubious nurse that he didn’t need White’s, the town funeral home, but Genesis Medical Research in Memphis. His grandfather wanted his body cut up for science.

Jolie nodded, watching him.

“It’s not awful,” T-bone said. “Really. It’s good. He always did want me to go to med school, remember?”

T-bone looked at the floor, remembering the way his grandfather would come into the kitchen after dinner, interrupting T-bone’s homework and the calm sound of his grandmother clinking dishes in the sink. The old man would point at the paper, eyes wide, and read aloud whatever medical news he’d come across. *Doctors*, he would say, with some reverence. *Getting so they do miracles, almost.*

In the house Jolie was still silent. *What?* T-bone felt like shouting, but then he was talking again, not about his grandfather in the kitchen but his grandmother in T-bone’s room after his grandfather had striped the back of his legs with bruises.

“She’d tell me stories,” he said. “After he spanked me. Like how *his* dad once set his mom down in a chair and cut all her hair off. Shit like that.”

Now Jolie looked at the floor. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“It was the only time I ever hated her.”

Jolie shifted. “I think it was just your dad,” she whispered. “He blamed your dad for your mom.”

They stood there a moment longer. Everything about it was wrong. T-bone wanted to make her see how it was nice, in a way, to think of his grandfather far away on a silver table, a group of white-coated, somber people examining the intricacy of the old body, puzzling through the mysteries of his brain and heart. Instead, he told her about the last thing the old man said to him, before T-bone moved out to sleep on Nate’s couch: *You kids are shit. Your lives, everything you stand for. Nothing but shit.* “It was kind of like he was amazed,” T-bone said, and then couldn’t breathe for humiliation. God, why didn’t he just say, *poor me, please feel bad enough to love me?* When she hugged him again he pulled her close, pressing the curves of her body to his even as he hated himself for it.

There was no one at the cabin. T-bone was almost disappointed to see the dirt driveway empty, all the windows black. On the way out he’d kept drinking, crushing the empties in his hand and flinging them out the window. They took the back roads they mostly knew by heart, and T-bone talked to keep the truck hurtling around curves, headlights spilling out over fields or throwing tree trunks into sharp relief. It was magic, all of it—the dark road and the bugs splattering against the windshield with Nate clenching a lit cigarette in his teeth. Clint Eastwood in a backward Ole Miss Rebels cap.

What would they do, T-bone said, if someone was home—if two guys stepped out on the porch with their rifles?

“Any place way out like that, you know you never know for sure.”

Nate grinned, patting his right hip. “I got my thirty-eight, that’s what,” he said through his cigarette, and T-bone would have given anything to be drinking from a bottle, so he could make it smash behind them on the warm asphalt.

But Nate had other plans for breaking glass. On the cabin’s back porch T-bone held a flashlight while Nate went to work on the glass door, covering the entire pane with overlapping strips of the duct tape he’d pulled from his backpack.

“Why?” T-bone asked, and Nate laughed.

“Just wait.”

In the woods around them the dark was noisy, the cicadas buzzing too loudly in T-bone’s ears. Who had Nate been hanging out with, these past few weeks when T-bone hadn’t been around? T-bone felt the energy leave him. So this was the person Nate would be, when he wasn’t there to look out.

“There,” Nate said. “Watch.” He took a hammer from his bag and gave the pane—now a sheet of tape—four gently taps, one near each corner. “It shatters it,” he said, replacing the hammer and removing a box cutter. “Now you just slit her, see?” He demonstrated, sliding the box cutter in a smooth line down the pane’s center. “And here we go!” Nate pushed an arm through the slit and stopped. “What the fuck?”

“What?” T-bone said.

“There’s like—something’s blocking it.”



Nate pushed, and there was a ripping sound. Peering in behind him, T-bone saw something—it was cardboard, painted black—pull away from the doorway and fall. Nate slipped through the doorway and T-bone came after.

“Holy shit,” Nate said. In the room they stood frozen, blinking in the glare of blazing fluorescent lights. The entire place was full of marijuana plants. From the door they stretched back in nice, even rows—tall plants loaded with fuzzy white buds, their cheerful arms lifted toward the light.

“Holy shit,” Nate said again.

T-bone stepped closer, examining. Each plant grew up from a cup full of what looked like orange pellets, fitted down into a PVC pipe. The rows were formed by these pipes—*water lines, of course*—and there were ten of them, each one boasting twelve plants.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Nate said. In this bright room Nate’s skin looked paler than ever, and thin, as if there were barely enough of it to stretch over the dome and planes of his skull. His eyes bugged out like a frightened lemur’s.

“Look at this,” T-bone said. He touched one of the bright green tops. “Don’t they look happy? It’s like they’re shouting *hooray!* See?”

Nate put both hands to his temples. “T,” he said. “We’ve got to go! Someone is out here *every day*, man. Every day—who knows when?”

“Every day,” T-bone said. “Yeah.” Every day sounded about right. A person would have to be out every day, to tend to something like this. A person would have to mind it, this world he set in motion, a little planet with sun and rain and soil, little

biosphere crossed with winds from whirring fans and enveloped in the perfect air, carbon dioxide mixed in from a generator.

“Fuck this,” Nate said. “I’m not getting shot.” He stepped back through the cut tape.

T-bone opened a door to his left and found himself in a bathroom, still underneath a bright light. Here, tiny, bright green plants peeped up from a box with holes in it, more water lines running out of sight underneath.

“Trevor,” Nate’s voice came pleading from outside. “Please, just come on. Please.”

*Okay.* T-bone stepped toward the door, then stopped. In one motion he scooped a little plant up from the table, its white root nubbins dripping water through his fingers and streaking his jeans.

“Goddamn,” Nate said, when he saw.

“I’m taking it,” T-bone said.

They rode back into town in silence, Nate rubbing a hand continuously over his mouth and chin. When T-bone got home he ran water into a cup, plopped his plant inside and placed it on the table. He sat down and looked at it, his heart beating fast in his chest. He had things to do—information to look up, things to buy. His world would be smaller, *of course, of course.* He’d never build something bigger than a closet. But it would be his to take care of, all the same. He didn’t think about the hunting knife in the closet.

\*

His first night in jail, T-bone makes a mistake. He's in jail, rather than prison, because the state pen is too crowded, and Wetherford County houses some spillover. In Wetherford County, he's welcomed with his first prison-style strip-search, a slow process of handing over clothes one garment at a time, then lifting his penis and balls, then turning around, bending over, and spreading his ass cheeks for a man with a flashlight. Naked, he's sprayed down with foam for his lice bath, then left to stand in a freezing room for ten minutes, his dick shriveling up to a mushroom cap. When the foam is sprayed off, he's given a laundry bag, full of what are now, for all practical purposes, the total number of his worldly possessions: an extra orange jumpsuit, pair of white boxers, and socks; sheets for the pad on his bunk; four hotel-sized bars of soap; a short toothbrush; a roll of cheap toilet paper, the kind his grandmother called "gorilla paper;" and the smallest tube of toothpaste he's ever seen, about half a travel size. He has to force himself not to clutch the bag to his chest.

After a time, he's ushered down the hall by a guard who looks like a sad, shorn Santa, with watery blue eyes and drooping fat cheeks. The guard walks to a steel doorway and stops. "Master, 102," he says into his radio, and in a moment the door unlocks, buzzing so loudly T-bone jumps. Santa frowns. "Son," he says, "I'd try and get a hold of myself, if I was you." Then they're walking through the pod. T-bone's first impressions are of action and noise—men shouting and talking from rows of bunks like metal shelves bolted to the walls, or pacing the concrete floor. Men laughing and challenging each other at card games, their hands moving quickly over the steel expanse of picnic tables, bolted down in the room's center. How is it he's heard you're supposed

to walk in? *Chin lifted, chest out, not too far out. Eyes up, but not focusing on anything in particular. Strut a little. Don't strut too much.* T-bone tries. He loosens his death grip on the bag, moves through the pod with what he hopes is the posture of someone who's done this a thousand times before; someone calm, not looking for trouble, but not afraid to find it, either. Only one thing in the pod doesn't move, a hulking shape in the corner of T-bone's vision. He looks without looking, his stomach knotting up tight. Someone is watching him.

Santa stops so abruptly T-bone almost runs into him. "Here's your bed," Santa says. "Make it up nice." Suddenly T-bone wants to grab him, to shout *wait, there's been a mistake!* Surely a misplaced Santa, of all people, would understand how someone could get confused, could get lost and wind up in such a wrong place. Surely Santa could understand T-bone's heart. *We don't belong here,* T-bone could explain, and then he and Santa could bust out, could hop in a red convertible and head for the coast, their feet hanging out in the wind. But Santa's gone, hurrying back to the door, and T-bone is left alone with the prisoners.

He pulls out his sheets—*everything is fine.* He slides the fitted one over his thin mattress, an absurd desire to whistle flooding through him. But the knots in his stomach grow. Something is wrong. All over the pod, on the bunks and at the tables, conversations are stopping, and movement slows. Silence fills the room like darkness spreading. T-bone's hands begin to tremble. He shakes the top sheet out and drapes it crookedly over the bunk.

"Hey," a voice from behind him says. "New guy."

For a second T-bone shuts his eyes. *Don't believe it and it's not real.* The voice speaks again, louder this time.

“I said *hey*, new guy. You deaf?”

T-bone has been in fights before. He gathers himself, straightens and turns. The man is

big, bigger than T-bone expected, with broad shoulders and long, thick arms resting on his spread knees. A thick scar twists down the side of one cheek.

“Yeah?” T-bone manages. “What?”

“Come here.”

*Shit.* T-bone crosses the pod, a strange humming sound in his ears. He readies himself for his best left hook, one good shot to the big man's ear. Left hook, then knee to the face. Up close, he sees the man's eyes are bright blue.

“What?” T-bone says again.

Suddenly the man breaks into a smile, his mouth too wide, terrifying.

“Hey bro, you like grits?”

“What?” Now the word is just a question. Somewhere close by a person titters.

“I said, do you like grits?”

T-bone stares. Grits means something sexual—it has to.

“No,” he says, readying his fists again. “I never did care for grits much.”

The pod explodes with laughter. In an instant the tension has gone, the moment popped like a balloon. T-bone stands still, smiling half-heartedly from relief. The joke is on him, he knows, but how? The man looks at him, grinning more honestly now. “I'm Hygiene,” he says. “Welcome to 102.”

T-bone goes to bed worried and confused. What has he said about himself today? What is his standing in the pod now, and what will that mean for him? His stomach rumbles, still twisted in knots, and when he thinks about the toilets standing at the end of the pod his eyes suddenly sting. He takes a deep breath, thinking of Jolie, of her small self curled sleeping in bed, or, more likely, huddled on the couch beneath the flickering light of the television, the human voices lulling the worry from her mind, drowning out any noises outside. What would it be like, the way to her—how difficult, and how far? T-bone goes over it one step at a time, through the metal door and down the hallway, where he could bear down, one by one, on the halos of reflected light glaring from the gray linoleum. Outside, past the processing rooms and through the sets of automatic plexiglass doors, the world is dark and still—maybe a night with few clouds, a sky so star-bright, in this rural Mississippi county, that you can see the luminous veil of the Milky Way—and the road to her sprawls out for thirty miles down highway twenty-two. He falls asleep dreaming that he's out there, walking mile after endless mile of strange, looping highway.

In the morning things become clearer. At half past four, T-bone lines up with the others for breakfast, and when his turn comes up a tray, loaded with a tiny carton of juice, a piece of toast, and a sizable glop of grits, is drawn from a cart of identical trays and shoved at him by a prisoner in a jumpsuit striped black and white. He's barely sat down on the edge of his bunk, balancing the tray in his lap, when Hygiene appears beside him, scooping up the bowl of grits.

“Said you don't like these too much, right?” he asks, shoving the first hot spoonful in his mouth. His gaze rests on T-bone, sharp and cold as an eagle's, and then

T-bone sees a slight smile playing about the corners of his eyes. Hot needles of anger prick along T-bone's arms. He stiffens.

"Maybe I do like grits," he says.

"Yeah?" Hygiene's smile deepens. He spoons another heap into his mouth, talking through them. "Grits here are real good. Best food of the day, I think. You know, you're real lucky to be here, in county with us, instead of the pen."

"That so?" T-bone's pulse quickens. He thinks of slamming the bowl upward, into the bigger man's face.

"Yeah," Hygiene says. "It is. This is a workhouse jail. See those guys in black and white?" He nods at the men handing out trays. "They dress that way 'cause they got jobs. They work in the kitchen. You get a job in here, every day you're in counts double. So, say you got a three year sentence? You'll be out in eighteen months."

T-bone opens his mouth, then shuts it. He sits absorbing this information. Every day double. Out in half the time.

"You're non-violent, you get a job," Hygiene says. "Lots of people in this pod got them—it's just today's Saturday. And if you're here in Wetherford they'll keep you here, unless you get in trouble. Fight, or something."

He scoops the last bit of grits into his mouth, relishing it, drawing the clean spoon out slowly.

"Fights will get you sent off, every time. Not everybody gives a shit though. That's why it's good to have friends. Me, I'm friends with almost everybody."

He looks around the pod absently, then stretches and stands, putting the empty bowl back on T-bone's tray.

“Glad you don’t like grits,” he says.

T-bone takes his tray back to the cart slowly. The news about the time here is good, but the fear in him is stronger than ever. He looks over at Hygiene, now talking and laughing with a group of men at the picnic tables. Hygiene needs to be watched. It’s important to understand how other people treat Hygiene, whether he’s as tough or important as he makes out. T-bone sits back down on his bunk. With a flash of shame he understands that every man in here knows he’s green—that’s what the grits question was. He lies back, thinking *maybe this will be it*, being a little hungry in the mornings. But that’s a lie, he knows. Sooner or later, this will be trouble.



## After the Burning

### Chapter 1

**What they found** was mostly enamel and bone. After hours of labor through heat and smoke, struggle lit by fire and the dazzle-strobe of red and blue, there was this: a human's frail scaffolding, burned black in the charred ruin of a house ringed by pines, their seared branches dripping in the fog which obscured the deeper woods and the wide Tombigbee River. For the weary people searching that wreckage, the sound of water came from everywhere and nowhere at once, so that the pale November dawn took on the muddled possibilities of dreams. The woman's body—by this time sheriff's officer Derrick McCord knew it was a woman—was folded strangely, knees drawn up and arms curled over the empty cage of her chest, as if to the last she'd tried to keep the bright life that fluttered there. *No, no.* Derrick knew better. It was only the way the fire had fed, after it stalked her while she slept, creeping up curtains and along floorboards, feeling her out with tendrils of smoke that massed into thick cords, smothering. After her breath was gone—*after*, he wouldn't think of it any other way—the flames had licked at her, scorching her skin until it split, then drawn whatever fat she had up through the threads of her clothes, as a candle feeds at a wick. Muscles and tendons were last. The searing heat dried and tightened them; she'd curled like burning paper before the flames sank, hissing, in the deluge from fire hoses.

Derrick was having trouble. Just a moment before, he'd stood straight-backed in his new tan uniform, conscious of the expression on his face, the weight of his gun at his right hip. It had been all right, to shake his head and spit, taking in the scene as if from

somewhere outside himself, so that what he felt most was a sense of his own performance. Derrick McCord, Man Accustomed to Death. For one terrible wavering moment the absurdity of it nearly overwhelmed him, but he'd bitten his cheek and stared hard at an object that didn't belong on the ground, a fork with slender tines upturned and a vine pattern tracing down the handle. Four tiny leaves on each side, a fork like anyone would have, terribly terribly like the kind anybody might buy, after comparing packaged sets in a crowded Wal-Mart aisle. It was important, he'd remembered, and not just for his image, to play the part of listening kindly to the firefighter standing nearby, a young man like himself, whose hands couldn't seem to stop moving and who had forgotten how to blink. The fireman had to talk, the way a hot tea kettle screams.

*We couldn't stop it, he'd said. Not a fire like that, almost at flashover before we got here, smoke rolling from the top of windows. And out here in the county...no hydrants...* He shrugged. Derrick nodded, then shook his head. The fork was somehow the only clean thing in all that mire of sodden debris.

*Had to go to Unida for tank refill. Twenty minute drive. When we got back... he'd shrugged again, and again Derrick had nodded. At least sometime today he'd have a hot shower—he'd be cleansed of all this and back in the world. He could do anything, he'd thought, if he didn't forget that. But the remains in the burned cabin had a name. Roxanna Kelly. That's the body. According to the owner of this place. Man named Liam Cother.*

The shock was something that could not be gotten past, a blank white sheet wall that presented itself, over and over in his mind. Roxanna. Roxanna Kelly. A coincidence—yes, please. These bones, now hidden by the squatting forms of the fire

marshal and two investigators, could have no share in the child he'd pushed from his mind for so long, when her bare feet pattered in the shadows just before or after sleep. Roxanna Kelly. Most of the time, she no longer seemed real. Derrick thought of his older sister's children, girls aged seven and nine. The way the finest hair curled over their slender necks when they bent their ponytailed heads, reading or playing some game with him on his sister's beige living room rug. He made a noise, something between a cough and a gargle. The nervous fireman went on with his story—Liam Cother dragged out semiconscious, struggling to get back in, saying her name and one word—*upstairs*—before the paramedics whisked him away.

*Space heater*, the fireman said. *No evidence of arson*. But the syllables refused to quite string themselves into any concrete meaning. Derrick's mind resounded with a nonsense phrase, long lost in the dark folds of his memory. A girl's voice screaming, over and over: *Olly olly oxygen freak!* Derrick was twelve again, on the dead end street in Unida where he'd lived for less than year. Back in that summer of the cramped, wood-paneled house where his parents hardly ever spoke, and he'd dreamed endlessly of feeling through pitch-dark rooms, only waking when his stretching fingers ran suddenly into an open mouth. The screaming girl was Roxanna, all gangly limbs and eyes. Roxanna, trying to play kick the can with the neighborhood kids, all several years older, and all boys. Getting her can of rocks kicked immediately, and the call to summon the other players wrong. They'd all been mean to her, of course, the child who'd carried the wish to fit in with them like a red letter on her chest. It hadn't just been Derrick, who'd understood he was only one step above her. It hadn't been his fault.

The acrid stench of burned things wafted to his nostrils, along with another smell, an undertone of something greasy and sweeter, like barbequed meat. He gagged.

“McCord?” The deputy had come from nowhere. He looked at Derrick with raised eyebrows. “You want to go and check out the pickup?”

Derrick turned and went toward the red two-seater in the driveway, a dented Jeep Comanche. The thick, sooty mud clumped to his boots; he fought the urge to kick and send it slinging. Something was coming at him now, he knew, some bombshell dropped right on target. He’d have to spend a long time cleaning the impact of what was happening here. All of the mental strains he’d endured in the academy, all the pictures and morgue trips and simulated violence, was nothing compared to one little girl standing in grubby soccer shorts, her scabbed knees vivid enough to touch, and that blackened thing in what was left of a house. Derrick’s face reflected on the pickup window, pale and scared and young. His stomach twisted with sorrow. He hadn’t even wanted to go into law enforcement, really. It was only yearning to define the things he saw; to be a man who diagnosed and solved problems, who could take the world apart and put it together again, like a skilled mechanic with an engine. It was only that he’d been too mousy and thin for sports, and too shy to make friends, and all that terrible summer in Unida he’d felt his mother leaving, in the way her anger at his misbehavior faded, until at the last it never flared at all. He’d felt it, but he couldn’t make her stop, any more than, later, he could make his test scores qualify him for college at Ole Miss, or show the women he ached for the kind of man he was, under the pathetic body that never should have been his. When he’d first mentioned the Sheriff’s department, his father had turned away from him on his wide concrete porch; had said, *not everyone’s cut out for that kind of thing*,

while Derrick stared at the deep lines criss-crossing the older man's neck, planning with grim resolution the workout schedule he'd need to be ready for training.

On the passenger seat there was a purse, red canvas with white embroidered flowers like stars. The sight of it, so cheerful and pretty, made Derrick want to punch the window, to fall to his knees in the mud and cry. *Not fair!* Not fair for her to come back like this in his first month as an officer, confronting him with her unanswerable bones. Not fair for anything, his whole fucking life. He had been a good boy—a *kind boy*—and yet there was Roxanna with tears on her face, pink marks on her little girl's skin and the scent of grape bubblegum wafting from her open mouth. He'd hit her, pushed her down and done other things, several times that summer, her bird-thin arms pinned down by her sides and a noise like the inside of a shell filling his head. Out of sight, beyond the prickly holly hedges, other boys watched, elbowing each other with the mix of fear and horrified excitement he'd see in their faces, after. It had been a game, a game of dares, and it had begun with kissing. Otherwise he'd never have touched her. He was a boy who cried when he read *Where the Red Fern Grows*. But Roxanna had fought and shoved, slapping his face when he tried to turn hers toward him, and calling him names that made the others laugh. She hadn't understood what was at stake, why those other boys made it her or him, and he had to win or die. Once begun, the game grew quickly. The other boys tested their power, proposing different things. But—the truth came over him like a great wave, cresting—the initial impulse to violence had been his, that first sweltering afternoon when some dark, clawed thing had pricked him behind his eyes and he'd hit her, hard, in the chest, grabbed at the crotch of her shorts when he got her on the ground.

The door handle gave under his hand, unlocked. In the purse Derrick found two tampons, some cherry lip balm, a lighter, sunglasses, and what he really needed—a wallet. He reached for it with a suffocating tightness in his chest. *Please don't be her. Please don't.* But no. The photo on the driver's license was unmistakable, though in it she was a young woman. Roxanna had grown up a beauty, her green eyes no longer too large for her face, and her tangled reddish ponytail smoothed to a cascade of sleek curls. The cited birthdate made her eighteen. The breeze changed direction; he could smell her again. He stumbled behind the truck, and here it came—sickness, yes, and vomited coffee splashing on the wet ground, but also a kind of rush. Here he was in this isolated place with the body he'd wronged so long ago, now a girl stripped even of life and flesh. Derrick wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and took deep breaths, thinking. He had seen her—he now knew what it was to see the very core of her, when her body was no longer hers to attend to. Somehow, it was a secret he'd keep, the way he'd never mentioned his only one-night stand, but deeper. A discretion, for the sake of she who had sealed a much darker secret behind the curve of her pretty smile. He could do it; he knew. He could hold Roxanna in a black corner of himself, wrap her skeleton in thoughts soft as moss where soon they'd have good company, bodies from other accidents, and from crime scenes. A word came to him—*witness*. Gerund form *witnessing*. At the periphery of his vision some meaning flickered, beckoning, a light that vanished when he turned. He held on to Liam Cother's tailgate, steadying his nerves. Soon they'd be missing him. Overhead the sun had gained. The fog had lifted enough to see through the pines. Off to the right, the firefighter he'd spoken with stood with slack arms, staring past the trunks at the river. Thousands, millions of gallons of water surging by, out toward the acres of

scrubby, stripped forest and far flung buildings that made up the stretch into Huckman County, and the town of Unida, where soon the bagged remains would go.

**In Unida certain** people had to be told, beyond the family, before the official report was filed. The dentist who ran x-rays of her teeth over from his clinic, and the doctor who looked up those of the arm she'd once broken, falling off a porch. And once people knew, they talked. Old people shook their heads, dredging up other tragedies—children who'd gone out on jet skis and drowned, and drunk teenagers crushed in cars. Young men accidentally gunned down while hunting deer, or who put guns in their mouths over struggles they couldn't believe would grow small, given the distance of years. Roxanna was lovely and gifted, a girl standing on a threshold with sunrise in her face, but it was the bright ones who died, as often as not. What set Roxanna apart was Liam.

It had been six years since the accident that made Liam famous in Unida, the squeal of brakes and crunch of metal and glass that sent him flying from his motorcycle to the pavement, where the thud of his helmet against the asphalt knocked the memory of his wife and children from his brain, let them bleed away on the tide of loosed vessels that nearly took his life. He had denied them, when he woke from his five weeks' sleep, and as soon as he was able he had gone. Liam's presence was what allowed middle-aged men to be crass, shutting daughters' faces from mind and asking questions tinged with envy. *Do you think she wore her cheerleader's outfit for him?* Liam was what made wives and mothers bang the pots and pans they pulled from cupboards to make chicken pot pie and roast beef stew, mashed potatoes and deviled eggs, and casseroles of every

kind—the food which would say everything, piled into the Kelly kitchen. Liam. His accident had made his wife Vonny a different woman. Now, when you saw her at church with Ellyn and Darby, her daughters, or tending her flowers in a sweat-stained shirt, it was almost impossible to remember how wild she had been when Ellyn was young. (Ellyn, who was only two years Roxanna’s junior.) Always, wherever Vonny went, the tiny diamond chip Liam had given her glinted on her left ring finger. They had never legally divorced.

When someone called her, at eight-thirty, Vonny’s first thoughts were for him. Liam, whose eyes matched the blue horizon he’d stare into, feet up on the back porch railing of the house they’d shared, always longing for something he couldn’t name or touch. Who had once read her a love poem, by a fire in the open land behind her grandparents’ home, on a night so clear and dark that you could see the pale cloud of galaxy trailing through the stars. His hands and voice had shaken, and the poem had been so bad it broke her heart with love for him. She’d cried, reaching for the paper, but he’d balled it and tossed it to the flames, brought out rifles to teach her to shoot. He’d named each constellation before he took aim, pointing his gun at the sky. *Taurus, Castor and Pollux, Sirius, and Seven Sisters*. That was Vonny’s Liam, always coming close and pulling away, like the tide. He had left home, many times, before the strange and final exit. And many times he had come back again. For six years now, Vonny had known in her heart that this time would be no different. She had felt it, on days when a crisp wind or a summer dusk fed some verve within her—she was the moon, tugging him. He would remember himself, some morning while shaving before a cracked mirror, or while driving on an interstate highway, windows down and his hand reaching for the radio. He would



remember them. She was sure. And then out of nowhere he had come, not home, but close enough, moving into that cabin she now heard was razed.

She stood rigid in bra and jeans, listening to the wavering voice of Miss Mary, a gray-haired client of Vonny's at Christie's salon. Her mind flashed with images—burned bodies lying in hospital beds with tented sheets, moaning, their agony weak and hollow in wide white-tiled rooms. Flames shooting through rooftops in the dark, and the crack of glass shattering. A ball of wadded paper, flaring and gone. She tried to speak, to break this spell and restore the world to reason. *But I'm chaperoning Darby's field trip today.*

“Now, he is in the hospital, honey, but he'll be fine.”

Vonny's grip on the phone relaxed slightly.

“But you should know...” Miss Mary cleared her throat. “He wasn't alone out there.” Vonny sank to the floor, taking in the news about the dead girl. She wrapped one arm around her middle, where a pool of ice water welled. It was not possible. The Kellys' eighteen year-old girl. A child—one grade above Ellyn in school, but nothing like Vonny and Liam's wispy dark-eyed daughter. Roxanna was the cheerleader Darby liked to watch most at high school football games, tugging on Vonny's hand to whisper, *she smiled at me!* The homecoming queen and a hell-raiser, always in trouble for one thing or another. A girl very like the one Vonny herself had been, sixteen years ago. Down to the auburn hair. Vonny bit her knuckles, her mind tracing patterns in the wood grain of the nightstand in front of her face. All her little hopeful actions of the past few weeks returned to her, each one like a hot iron touched to her skin—the new hair and more careful makeup, the dresses in the closet with the tags still attached. The lingerie that had come in the mail. Something inside her quivered, struggling. All this time, her waiting-

time. These years of knowing he lived on money from the accident lawsuit while she bought expired bread. Years of not dating, saying she wanted to focus on her girls. All that yearning; the ache of being left alone an expanding cavern in her chest while she held on tight to the routine of life, telling herself through gritted teeth, *if he wants a divorce he'll ask for one*. For as long as Ellyn would listen, she'd told her every day that Daddy loved them; he was just hurt. She'd told Darby the same, last night. When she heard that he'd moved into that cabin, so close, she'd gone around smiling like the sun had risen only for her, and in every pair of eyes she'd seen a sparkle, a hint of shared unspoken joy. It had made people glad to see things turn out right for once. And now this. With her folded legs aching on the cool wood floor of her bedroom, Vonny felt suddenly that she could not bear it. She hated Liam—she wanted to hurt him, to snap her teeth shut on his testicles and pull. For the first time in six years, Vonny wished her husband's brains had smeared like an egg yolk over the wet asphalt the night his body had stopped housing the man she knew and loved.

“What Liam does is his own business, Miss Mary.” The dead calm of her own voice surprised her.

There was a pause.

“Vonny, the girl has *died*. Her family is devastated.”

*The girl. Her parents.* Vonny tried to picture Ally Kelly, and Caleb, her quiet husband. Two people Vonny had known, at a distance, for most of her life. Just last week she'd spoken to Ally by the sweet potatoes in Blount's Big Star. Roxanna's mother had worn a tight gray sweater—it drew attention to the belly she'd gained. She and Vonny talked about produce—*can you believe how much for spinach?* Vonny thought again of

Ellyn, and all the nights that her daughter had stayed out past curfew while Vonny sat at the kitchen table, only pretending to read.

“You’re right, Miss Mary,” she said. “It is awful.”

And then she laughed. It came in waves she could not stop, tipping the ice water jug in her middle so that cold spilled through her and she shivered.

“Vonny!” Miss Mary’s voice was shrill. “Vonny, stop that! Are you all—”

Vonny placed the receiver gently in its cradle and crawled into bed, the same bed where Liam had once loved for her to lie naked, letting him trace his fingers—lightly, lightly—over all her skin. She clutched a pillow to her face and sobbed. Why had he done it? Couldn’t he have stayed in Texas or asked for a divorce—spared her this final humiliation? Or couldn’t he have been decent another way, left alone a girl so young? Miss Mary’s voice came back to her—*girl is dead...parents are devastated*. She should feel for their suffering, she knew. As a mother, she should feel it. In her mind Vonny floated an image of the Kelly family in happier times, stretching herself to reach it—proud parents at the soccer field, when both Roxanna and Ellyn were small. *Yes, and I was five years older than Roxanna is now, and the world was still for us, and some distant future for our children*. Vonny was tired. She let the Kelly family and their anguish slip away. So what if she couldn’t think of the girl now? Everyone else would take care of that, and when they were done idolizing Roxanna, they’d pity Vonny. They already *did* pity her. The gentle tone of Miss Mary’s voice told her that. All Vonny’s efforts during Liam’s absence—bright smiles when people walked in the salon, flattering photos posted on Facebook—had done nothing. She was no survivor. She was deluded. A sad woman who’d wasted her twenties pining for a man who had literally forgotten her.

Vonny bit her lips. Of course there would be comparisons—people couldn't avoid it. Her own body matched against the girl's impossible eighteen year-old frame. Vonny's face against her dew-fresh smile. Liam had always been one to take everything to extremes. Vonny should've known he wouldn't be satisfied with twice exploding the path she had set for herself, once when he came into her life, and once when he departed. No, he had to take even the self she'd pieced together in his wake.

She sighed and rolled over, picked at a loose thread in her sheet. It would be like when he'd moved to Texas, and Vonny had to defend herself against questions people had no business asking. Why didn't she file for divorce? Why didn't she go after the money? Liam's brother and his wife would open their mouths again, all over town—*Vonny would divorce him and get support, if she knew he wasn't right about those kids not being his.* This, even though the youngest, Darby, was more of a blonde and blue-eyed Cother than the brother's girl ever thought of being. Vonny registered that fact each time she picked Darby up from school and saw her husband's niece, waiting in line with the rest of the class. *Still true. Suck on that.* And Ellyn had the pout of Liam's lips.

Maybe Vonny should have done the DNA testing. She'd looked into it. There were places to go, within a few hours' drive, and there were home testing kits. She might not even need Liam, if his brothers were willing. But Vonny had read about other things, people who had more than one set of DNA, or people with other mix-ups. Chimerism and Mosaicism. She had never cheated on Liam with Jacob Rodak, at least not the way some people assumed. The girls were Liam's—she'd had them for him, Ellyn especially. Liam had been everything, the light and reason for the world. Vonny had understood what a perfect pair they'd made, how together they could have the life that most people only

dreamed of. She was worth his sacrifices, she'd known it; she could fulfill him, if he would let her. But there had been other women, from the beginning. Liam cheated with everyone from strangers to friends. Who could blame Vonny, if by the end of her senior year, she'd begun to consider possibilities—what might happen if her period was late? She'd stopped insisting on condoms, had let there be nothing between them whenever Liam reached for the button of her jeans. Ellyn had been on the way before she had time to really consider consequences. What it would mean to be eighteen and pregnant, no money for an abortion and a boyfriend who wasn't sure. Jacob had been so kind, while Liam made up his mind, and after. They had gotten so close, and there had been *something*—. In her bed Vonny squeezed her eyes shut, remembering. A night when she was pregnant with Ellyn. Eight months along, fat and uncomfortable, and alone—Liam gone off somewhere. She had been low when Jake stopped by to sit beside her on the couch where she'd curled with the remote. They talked for a time about nothing, and then almost absently he'd taken her feet in his lap. He rubbed them, delicious pressure in slow circles, while *Dateline* played on the television and Vonny chattered, not letting herself think about anything. She remembered the feeling of that moment, like balancing on a float in water. There had been many moments like that. Vonny had wanted them. She'd gathered them up like sand dollars, never considering what she might be doing, to Jake or to Ellyn, who watched. Now, whenever Claire Cother spread her rumors, smacking gum in her lipsticked mouth, Vonny talked about her girls, how she didn't want to put them through something so ugly and upsetting, having to prove who their daddy was. And this was true. She knew her fear was unreasoning, motivated by guilt. All the same, there was the rare mix-up with testing. Vonny would rather not risk it.

Even now Miss Mary was making other calls. Vonny could feel it happening, an ever-branching flowchart of knowing lighting up the town, spreading through houses, workplaces and schools. *Darby's school*. Vonny remembered the field trip that Darby had been so excited about. A drive to see the lock at Spring Dam. She rubbed her temples, where the beginning twinges of a headache flared. Abruptly she wanted her children—wanted to touch their solid bodies and hide them away, warm and safe in her house. The bus to the lock would leave at half past nine. She had to get Darby first. Vonny wiped her eyes on the bed sheet and got up.

**The clock tower** on Unida High's campus told the time, as Vonny hurried into her car. In class, Ellyn counted the chimes, coming faintly through the brick and cement of the windowless room reserved for Health. Fifteen after nine. Forty-five more minutes of hell. She slouched in her desk, scribbling hairs onto the cartoon penis and balls some previous student had left and wishing she could explain to someone that the windowless room only exacerbated the awkwardness of everything, the way that the position of the inner thigh machine at the gym she sometimes attended—turned diagonally so it faced a corner—made it feel like you were doing something dirty. At the front of the room Coach Walker sweated dark splotches in the armpits of his blue button-down, smacking a pointer into different areas of cross-sectioned female sex organs projected from the overhead.

“Ah, Coach Walker?” A senior near the front of the room raised his hand. “Is it safe for girls to have sex with two guys at once? Like, one in the front and one behind? Because there doesn't seem like much room in there.” The boy's face was solemn and

inquisitive. All around him, students put their heads down and convulsed. Ellyn felt her ears ignite. Why couldn't the man see how they were fucking with him? Anyone with half a brain cell could understand that no one was laughing because they were embarrassed by sex. Every day was like this—the mortification of the simple, round-bellied man whom Ellyn had never even liked becoming so palpable she felt ill. And this wasn't even the worst of it. For the millionth time she wished for her friend Chelsea, or at least for a roomful of dorks or freshmen, instead of seniors who'd never bothered to take health before. Because the worst part of health class was that every day, through a blush or gesture, some fumbled answer to a question or failure to get a joke, Ellyn felt the truth lifted like a banner over her head: she was the only virgin in the room.

Not that she hadn't had one sexual experience serious enough to count. It had happened, of course, at a party, the first night she discovered how easy it was to lie and do as she pleased. Two phone calls, and just like that neither she nor her best friend Chelsea had to leave the rowdy game of flip cup happening on the dining room table, or, good God, the boys. Beautiful shoulders and slouched jeans and smiles. Guys drunk enough to talk to Ellyn and Chelsea the way they never did at school, and Ellyn and Chelsea drunk enough to talk back.

Ellyn didn't understand the chain of events, could not piece together how, exactly, it had happened, but she did remember the taste of the guy's mouth in the dark, oh yes, her limbs sliding over the cool leather couch and the warmth of his smooth skin, snores from some floor sleeper drifting to her ears. She knew who he was. She whispered his name as he kissed her neck. Ben. Ben Lessinger. A senior varsity swimmer, and Roxanna Kelly's boyfriend. Ellyn had known this, and known it was wrong, but in the moment her

only worry came from the terror of knowing his hands had enjoyed the perfection that was Roxanna, even as she let them move over her body. She didn't know what might have happened if it weren't for his penis. There had been some gentle shifting of her torso, a wriggle or two from his hips, and suddenly there it was. Right in her face. She froze. How, exactly, did one do this part right? It stood, waiting on her, strange fleshy thing smelling of sweat and crevices. Was there active sucking involved? Or just a kind of movement? He wriggled his hips again, probably wondering what was wrong with her. Hurriedly she brushed her lips against it, felt something warm and wet smear her skin. Too much. She jerked upright, wiping her mouth. In an instant he was beside her, saying *hey, are you okay?*

Sitting up, he was more clearly visible. His perfect, leanly muscled body. The curve of his cheekbone and jaw. Chelsea's voice sounded in her head. *What the fuck do you think you're doing?* Ellyn put her hands to her face, closing her elbows together over her chest.

*Hey.* He touched her shoulder. *Do you feel like you just woke up?*

She nodded. What other answer was there?

*Okay.* He rubbed her arms briskly, as if she were cold. *I'm sorry, Ellyn,* he said, and to her amazement it sounded true. *I didn't mean to... Look, do you want some water?*

She nodded again, and then he was gone. She squeezed her eyes shut tight to keep from crying. Could she have done anything stupider? He'd come back to set the glass down beside her. With her face pressed into a pillow she'd heard a gentle clinking—he'd bothered to put in ice. She was still, feeling him stand there. He cleared his throat.

*Ellyn... I just wanted to make sure—I mean, I'm still with Roxanna—*



A bolt of something flashed through her. She cut him off.

*Don't worry. The last thing I want is for the whole school to call me a slut. I won't tell on you.*

For a moment he lingered, and a tingle of fear and want stirred her stomach. What if? But he'd left without touching her again.

At least Roxanna was absent today. Ellyn looked through her dark bangs, eyeing the empty desk five rows up. Ever since the Ben incident, Ellyn dreaded the sight of her. The morning after, she'd woken up ill with worry, stumbled outside and thrown up in the host's pansy bed. Not speaking about kissing Ben might not be enough. There were important questions: who'd seen them together before the night ended, and how had Ellyn been acting? What could she say to Chelsea, who would hate her for a mistake like this? *Social suicide*, her friend would call it, and Ellyn knew she'd be right—crossing Roxanna would mean ostracism, for her and for Chelsea, by extension. She'd pulled herself up and gone inside, found her friend nestled in a pile of laundry on a spare room bed.

*Hey, Chelsea said, stretching. Where did you go? You were right there with me, and then bam! You were gone.* Ellyn swallowed.

*Did you look for me?*

Chelsea yawned and sat up. A pair of red panties clung to her static-wild hair.  
*Yeah, I asked all around. No one could tell me anything.*

Memories floated back to Ellyn in fragments—talking with Ben somewhere in the dewy grass, kissing him on a leather car seat. She giggled.

*What?* Chelsea frowned. Ellyn pulled the underwear from her friend's hair and threw them at her face.

*I don't know,* she said. *I think I was outside somewhere.*

She'd walked back into school on trembling knees, but Ben surprised her. The first time they crossed paths in the hallway he turned and spoke to her, a friendly hello. And then Ellyn had surprised herself. In the face of his puzzled group, Roxanna and her friend Shari and others, Ellyn spoke back. *Hello, hello.* They'd kept it up, this greeting habit, as her fear of being found out faded. No matter who was around him, he spoke. And no matter what glares it earned her, Ellyn spoke back. It was a small rebellion, a sally against fear. And Ellyn was not above a bit of private gloating at Roxanna's expense. They had their own history.

But there had been consequences. The waves from Ben put Ellyn back on Roxanna's radar, and she'd let Ellyn feel it right away. They'd been hearing a lecture about abstinence that morning, when Roxanna's hand shot up and waved.

*But Coach!* she'd said, her eyes wide and her voice urgent, *If you only do anal, you're still a virgin, right?* The room exploded with snorts and giggles, and just when Ellyn was thinking that maybe Roxanna was all right, after all, to make a joke like that, Roxanna turned to face her.

*Well, I still think you're okay,* she'd said, interrupting Coach Walker's sweaty fumbling. Ellyn had sat, stunned silent, while the class fell apart.

Now Roxanna's friend Shari raised her hand.

"Coach Walker, I heard that sex feels like—"

A knock at the door stopped her. The guidance counselor stepped in on a wave of flowery perfume.

“Shari,” she said, “I need you to come with me please.”

The class made the appropriate *ooooohing* noise, laughing, but within a few seconds there came a wordless cry, and then Shari’s voice, wailing, “*No, no!*” People shut their mouths and leaned forward as her voice faded, cut off by the slam of the office door. After that there was only anxious texting under desks, and when the clanging bell released students into the halls the news spread like electricity through the crowd. Ellyn leaned into her locker, remembering all the times she’d wondered what might happen, if Roxanna didn’t exist.

Already the youngest boys whispered jokes that made them laugh a little too hard—what was there to hope for, now that Foxy Roxie’s fantastic ass was gone? All through the hallways the girls mourned; even the ones who’d disliked Roxanna wrapped their arms around one another and wept, newly bound together, somehow, by the horror of her tragedy. They did not quite meet Ellyn’s eyes.

## **Chapter 2**

**They buried Roxanna** the following day. At half past three the first mourners filed into Calvary Baptist, whispering over the way the Kellys had broken with tradition. The evening before, with the help of their pastor and certain other friends, Roxanna’s parents released a statement over social media and into the email accounts of students at Unida High. *Please join us for a ceremony celebrating the life of Roxanna Laine Kelly, it read. Four o’clock, at Calvary Baptist Church, on the corner of Gloster and Main.* In lieu

of the usual visitation, an informal reception would follow the burial, the doors of the Kelly house thrown open to welcome those paying respects. *The Lord giveth and taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.*

In the church, opinions on the haste were divided. Some people said it showed a coldness, to entomb an only child so quickly. Not to allow the usual three days to pass. To let her go without a nice obituary. Others were more sympathetic. There could not, after all, be any kind of viewing; a reception after burial was the same as a visitation before. And almost all extended family lived within an hour's drive. *Let it be done with,* people said. *Let poor Ally and Caleb Kelly have peace.* At least the service would be beautiful, lit by sun through stained glass windows.

Ellyn had not wanted to come to this funeral. Before breakfast she had raged and then begged, while her mother stood with a flat-pressed mouth, ironing her navy dress. Why did they have to make a spectacle? Couldn't they just send flowers, and stay away? Her dread of what might happen had made her cruel. *You just don't want Liam to think you care. You're willing to hurt me and Darby, for that.* And now Liam wasn't here. Ellyn gripped her seat, scanning the room. Hair and weight changed so much with time—anyone could make a mistake. Down front, with Roxanna's family, was Ben, bent forward with his elbows on his knees and his chin resting in his hands. Behind these first pews were Roxanna's friends, people Ellyn saw every weekday looking strange in their quiet rows of black. But nowhere was there a face that might be Liam's. He had not brazenly taken a visible seat, or slipped quietly in back. He hadn't come to mourn Roxanna, or to see if his old wife and children cared. He wasn't going to face up to anything. The realization came to Ellyn with a strange feeling like surfacing, and all at

once she felt the vastness of this room. Anyone who misstepped on the blue balcony carpet would tumble, gathering momentum, until her body soared over the railing and into open, empty space.

Ellyn's insides were made of cotton batting, collapsible and dry. She licked her lips. *Calm down. Calm down.* Naturally Liam wouldn't come, out of respect for Roxanna's family. Or maybe he was just too distraught to drive. Maybe he was sick with chagas, the disease she'd read you got from bugs. Maybe it had exploded his heart. Would Vonny make them come to *that* funeral, too? Ellyn looked over Darby's blonde head, where her mother sat folding and smoothing a tissue in her lap. Her eyes were downcast; Ellyn could see the careful lines of her makeup, the way the curled ends of her hair trembled when she breathed. When had she started taking so much time with her appearance again? It had happened slowly, over a period of weeks. Before that there were only ponytails and plain makeup, all the way back to Ellyn's youth. An image filled her mind, unbidden—her mother kneeling in their driveway, her cheeks streaked with black mascara. Ellyn had been torturing her over a fuzzy caterpillar, the kind people said predicted harsh winters. She'd seen it the day before, wandering their concrete patch. *What if it gets run over?* Ellyn worried. But her mother, harried and stressed, said no, it would crawl away. Of course Ellyn wouldn't let things be. She'd searched the driveway for a flattened corpse, and that afternoon she'd confronted her mother. *You said he'd be all right!* she wailed, all the while relishing a quiet triumph at the sight of Vonny's tears.

Now Darby reached over and took their mother's hand. Vonny wrapped an arm around her shoulders, drawing her close. Ellyn looked away. Her mother was angry, she knew, for the things Ellyn had said this morning, and during all the fights before.

Somehow, Ellyn had gone wrong with her a very long time ago. They had come to live apart from each other in the same house, and Ellyn couldn't seem to do anything but scream across the gap. It made everything worse, she knew. No wonder Darby was her mother's favorite.

The coffin, of course, was closed. At the front of the church its silver surface gleamed from the edges of a letterman's blanket, Roxanna's due as a varsity athlete. They should have gone ahead and cremated her, Ellyn thought. Spread the ashes someplace nice, with sunlight and growing things. She counted to fifty, trying not to think about what must lie beneath that silver lid. Behind the pulpit, a huge screen flashed with pictures, a slideshow of Roxanna's life. For several moments Ellyn watched it, transfixed. There were no awkward pictures—not even one shot of Roxanna with features she hadn't grown into, or with metal-covered grin. Some of the last photographs showed Ben and Roxanna together. Ellyn rubbed a finger over a hole in her tights, a tiny snag ready to pull open and run. She did not need to be presented with how happy those two had been, snuggled into a hammock together, or the way he'd smashed his nose into her cheek, kissing her in front of a Christmas tree.

On the church floor Shari put her head down on her friend's shoulder, her body shaking. In the front pew Roxanna's mother sat stiff inside the curve of Mr. Kelly's arm, a handkerchief pressed over her mouth and nose. Dimly Ellyn heard the preacher, talking now about mansions in the Father's kingdom: *I go to prepare a place for you.* Roxanna as a happy angel, safe in the arms of God. Under the stream of his words there was another sound. Hushed weeping, building like the shush of rain in a rising storm. Hot rebellion tightened her chest. She would not cry over Roxanna Kelly—not here. She

would not buy into this slideshow and preacher, this whole ceremony that was setting down an official version of who Roxanna had been, and who she had the potential to be. Ellyn could tell a different story. In her mind she saw herself rise to her feet in front of her chair, call out so that every head swiveled toward her, a sea of faces listening. She could hear her voice take on the cadence of a Southern sermon. *Blessed, brethren, are the hungry. Those that hunger, and those that thirst.* That would be the right place to begin—Roxanna despised wanting of any kind. It was what she'd hated in Ellyn. The plain wish for friendship when they were girls together in middle school. The appetite of Ellyn's thin body. The first time Ellyn earned Roxanna's special notice was at dinner, the first day of soccer camp away from home, when both girls were eleven. Hours of intense practice made Ellyn devour the noodles and beef set before her at dinner. She'd looked up, when her plate was clean, to see Roxanna's disgust, the rest of the table silent and staring. *Um, are you hungry?* Roxanna had said, and Ellyn burned with shame, understanding without words the difference between them. Roxanna was unassailable, the master of herself. Ellyn was ravenous. A girl who craved acceptance like chocolate frosting she could lick from her fingers. A girl who wolfed her meals and went for seconds.

And what had Ellyn wanted most? She twisted in her chair, trying to push away a vision. Roxanna in the school parking lot, her hair glinting fire in the sun. Biting her pretty lips and shading her eyes as she scanned cars in the farthest spaces. Ellyn had heard the rumors. Roxanna was seen on Friday afternoon, riding in Liam's truck. She'd told her friends she had to do something with her family, and her family she would be staying with friends. She'd ridden with Shari to school that morning, which meant that

Liam must have picked her up, must have waited for her in a back corner where no one would see. Roxanna had gone out to look for Liam that afternoon, and she had found him, the way that Ellyn had dreamed of doing, every weekday afternoon when she walked out to the line of vehicles come to pick up children from fifth and sixth and seventh grade, those years her hope tore her apart. *Too bad! Too bad for you all!* Preaching Ellyn shouted into the gorge of upturned, horrified faces. She was awful and she did not care. It was too bad that all these people had found out what it was to hurt for someone gone. But Roxanna being dead didn't make her any less vile. No, Ellyn would not cry.

The service ended with songs and prayer. Suddenly Ellyn was nauseated. She barely waited for the preacher's *amen* before she was up and crawling over knees, desperate for the aisle, the bathroom. Even rudeness couldn't help her beat this crowd. From every row they swarmed, blocking her way to hug and chat. It took an eternity to make the doors. Before she left the auditorium, she looked back and saw her mother, talking through a stretched smile. She was surrounded by acquaintances, a horde of black-draped bodies closing in. Ellyn thought of vultures surrounding something frail, the small figure of Vonny's body asleep in Liam's T-shirt. Then a surge of people carried Ellyn into the hall. To her left she spotted the nearest ladies' room, a string of women already waiting outside it. She broke from the river of people flowing toward the main stairwell and ran down a side corridor, searching. Relief had to be here—it was. An enclosed fire escape, blessedly empty. Down she went, the heels of her boots clattering on metal, until there was no farther to go. When she stood still the noise of people talking was a quiet burble above. She was underground. *Buried*. Ellyn sat on the bottom step and



curled her arms around her knees. She would not throw up if she stayed here; she did not want to go inside the basement. Why hadn't she brought her cell phone? If she had it, she could call Chelsea, see if the two of them could get out of here for a long ride on some back road. But the phone was where she'd left it, on its charger next to her bed. Ellyn bit the back of one knee, gently rocking herself.

A clang from overhead startled her. The door. In a panic she slipped around the railing, ducking beneath the stairs. She crouched against the cinderblock. Above, a body banged down to the last landing before her level. Here, the footsteps stopped. Ellyn held her breath, cursing to herself. Why the fuck hadn't she gone into the basement? Now she couldn't leave without the person on the landing seeing her. Knowing she'd been hiding, like a freak. And what the hell were they doing up there? For a long time the stairwell was quiet. Ellyn strained her ears—beyond the drum of her own pulse there was only the drone of fluorescent lights and the faraway stream of voices. An ache began in her shoulder blades where her weight pressed against the wall. Could the person have left without making noise? Slowly she counted to one hundred, and then slowly back down again. *All right.* On her tip-toes she eased forward, pausing at every step. She set her teeth and peeked around the railing. On the landing, sitting cross-legged against the wall, was Ben. Ellyn's stomach dropped. Her throat let out a noise, a tiny sound between *uh* and *no*. He turned his head and saw her.

“You!”

“I'm sorry, I was just—” She scrambled for a word. Her mind was a blank chalkboard, gray and smooth and empty. “I'm sorry.”

She darted for the exit, but Ben was faster. He hurtled down the stairs and slammed his weight into the door, tearing the knob from her hands.

“Why did you *tell* her?” He pushed the words through clenched teeth, leaning into Ellyn’s space. His breath was a cloud of whiskey. She backed toward the stairs. The metal hand rail knocked into her butt, surprising her. She gripped it with both hands.

“Tell who what?” she said.

He laughed, his head thrown back and his mouth wide. With a sinking feeling she understood—*drunk*. He was way too drunk. He pushed off the door and came toward her again. She slid past the railing and up two steps, her eyes fastened on his.

“Yeah, right. You have no idea. You were jealous of her, of what we had—is that it?”

Ellyn stopped. *Jealous of Roxanna. Jealous, because of Ben.* So that was what he thought. The florescent lights buzzed, loud flies in her ears. Here in the stairwell things were too bright; Ben’s white shirt, the splotches of red on his cheeks. He took another step, moving slowly. This time she did not retreat.

“You thought that what we did meant something?” He sneered. The twist of his lips made him ugly. “Because I have to tell you, that’s pretty—”

Ellyn’s palm popped against his cheek. He lifted a hand to his face, open-mouthed and surprised as a toddler. She stood feeling the tingle in her hand, a rage that made her loose at the joints. He would hit her now, she was sure. He might beat her to death, stomp her head against the floor. Nothing mattered as long as she could hurt him too.

“Fuck you, asshole. I didn’t say anything. I don’t even know you.”

But he wasn't going to punch her, she saw. He stayed there with his hand on his face, all his anger drained away. Ben, the confused victim. Ellyn was sick again. *Out, out*—she had to go. Upstairs was no good, upstairs was the crowd. She dodged past him toward the basement, but he grabbed her elbow, jerking her back around.

“I *know* you told!” Now his voice was trembling, and tears clumped on his lashes. “Why else—*why else?* Why would she call on Saturday, say out of nowhere that it's over? Why would she be with your fucking *dad*, except to get back at us? Tell me!” He shook her. “*Why?*”

Ellyn jerked her arm as hard as she could, pulling for the door.

“I don't *know!* I don't know anything!” She was screaming, she realized. Screaming in church at a funeral. She couldn't stop. “Leave me *alone!*”

She was away from him—she was going to escape. But now the basement door opened inward. Someone else was walking in.

“Ben?” A girl's voice echoed in the sudden silence. Shari and the friend she'd been crying on, a girl named Heather, stepped into view. Heather was talking. “Um,” she paused. “We saw you head for the stairs. We thought you might be in the basement...we were checking...” She looked at Ellyn, who looked at the floor. “Okay, anyone here need a drink?” She pulled a silver flask from her purse.

“No.” Shari seemed to wake from a stupor. “Just—no! What the hell is going on here, Ben? What is this, some kind of private chat?”

He rubbed a hand over his face. “We were just talking, Shar.”

“*Talking?*” She swayed on her feet, and Heather moved to steady her. Ellyn suppressed a wail. Was everyone in the place tanked? “No. You cannot talk. You cannot be *just talking*.”

“Hey, come on,” Heather said, but no one was listening.

“How dare you stand there, having a little chat with *her*—” she jabbed a finger at Ellyn. “When you’ve been ignoring all of us? We’re your *friends*, Ben. We’re Roxanna’s friends. Remember Roxanna?”

“Shut your mouth, Shari.” His voice was low, carrying a real threat. Heather stepped between them.

“Okay, okay, everybody just—”

Ellyn didn’t wait to hear the rest. Crowd or no crowd, she was leaving. She scrambled up the stairs and out the door, shoved her way through the last attendees still gathered in the church. There was a blur of dark clothes and disapproving faces, a voice saying, *now look here* as a hand grabbed at her shoulder. Then, blinding sunshine and crisp air. She was out. She could breathe again. Nearby, someone was burning leaves; the smoke smell of them filled the parking lot. Ellyn slowed to a fast walk and swallowed her hitching breath, moving toward the silver Pontiac where her mother and sister waited.

**Sometime after midnight** Darby rose and went to her mother’s bedroom door. The darkness of the hall yawned, open and cool against her face, and through the thin wood her mother’s snores came in gentle waves. Still breathing. *You’re an idiot*, Ellyn would say. But sometimes bad things happened, when people weren’t watching out. And Ellyn was angry at their mother. Tonight she had scowled while she rifled through

the trash, pulling out the single-shot vodka bottles and slamming them down one by one on the white counter top, to glare at Vonny in the morning. *There's leftover pizza in the fridge.* Ellyn had called over her shoulder to Darby while she gathered her coat. *If you want it hot, use the microwave, not the oven. And don't touch the stove.* She'd let the screen door slam behind her when she left. Now it was the deepest part of night, and still Ellyn had not come back.

The hallway floor chilled Darby's bare feet. She padded back to her room, her head swirling with thoughts like birds shifting places on a wire, never settling in line. Kate Cother, the round-cheeked cousin who rarely spoke. The red sparkle of Roxanna's dress, when she waved from a convertible in the homecoming parade. The way that all afternoon Darby had been too large in the house, taking up too much space. Of course behind it all was her father, the invisible reason for everything. Liam Cother—the face that hung on her home's walls and the name that had to be included in her prayers. The reason her mother cried, some nights, wrapped up on the sofa with a wine-red mouth, and why Ellyn curled in a tight, sullen ball when anybody asked her a few reasonable questions. (Why wasn't their father in the hospital, if he was hurt? Why did their cousin's family hate them, just because Liam had lost his mind?) Darby's science textbook was wrong. At the center of the earth there was no squishy hot rock, only Liam. You found him any place you scratched. And the key to understanding Liam, Darby knew, was the river.

In her bedroom Darby unearthed a flashlight from her pillowcase. Crawling into her desk chair, she shone the yellow eye over the top shelf of her books. She pulled a thin, green volume from its place, flipped it open to look at what was hidden there. It was

a picture, found in Ellyn's room, one day when boredom had sent Darby poking around in bureau drawers. A snapshot of people on a dock—Ellyn, young and smiling, and Liam; the face was the same one in her mother's picture, although here he had a cap and short beard. In the background there was something else. A mail truck, rusted and ancient. Just like the one driven by Darby's neighbor, old Mr. Brinker. Holding the picture and flashlight close to her face, she checked the vehicle again. Yes, it was Mr. Brinker's. She was sure. And this was where things got interesting.

For as long as Darby could remember, Mr. Brinker had lived down the road, past the boggy land people called *the bayou*, but Darby's mother said was just a low area that flooded when it rained. You could see him, every day, sitting on his porch overlooking his yard full of junk; or, if you timed it right, driving past Darby's house in the mail truck, his white beard flying in the wind. Every day he went to the river to fish, and every evening he drove back. To go with Mr. Brinker's presence, there were Ellyn's stories. Stories that, by the time Darby found the picture, she hadn't thought of in ages. *Mr. Brinker Battles a Mermaid*, *Mr. Brinker and the Three-Eyed Fish*. All Ellyn's stories involved magic and danger on the river, Mr. Brinker making mistake after mistake but somehow coming out on top and retiring to his porch, alive another day. Ellyn told them when Darby got scared in the night and came to crawl in her sister's bed. She told them when Darby was sick on the couch, taking away aches and pains with her Ellyn way of telling, the voice that could be anything but always ended gentle as fingers stroking Darby's hair. In all that time, Ellyn had never once let on that she herself ever fished, or that she saw Mr. Brinker with Liam.

Darby sighed, returning the picture to its hiding place. She was eight years old now, old enough not to be silly. There were no talking fish with sapphire scales. No mermaids or magic water spouts or Santa. But sometimes stories could mean more than one thing, like parables in church. Some part of Liam that had been good—that had been the father Ellyn now missed—had been out there on the Tombigbee, having real life adventures with her. And before the fire he'd moved back to it. Darby had heard people talking. She listened, to them and to her gut, the inner voice that knew the value of trying and belief. If she could just get out there to the river, she could know the feeling of what had taken place there. She could understand something about Liam, something important she couldn't quite name. She felt it. And maybe, just maybe—in her deepest daydreams the idea glimmered—she could find him there and help him. Shine a light into the blind-dark caves of his brain and let him see his family again. She could find a way to visit him and bring him slowly back to health, like Colin in *A Secret Garden*. That was the kind of magic you could maybe believe.

But of course he'd thwarted her. The morning Mrs. Eskridge called her name, pulling her from the line of excited students standing in the exhaust of the waiting bus, Darby had known it was because of him. He'd felt her coming, figured out how to escape again. On the way to the office that day, with Mrs. Eskridge clicking along beside her, not hurrying with little prods and sighs, Darby had realized two things: whatever had happened was bad, very bad, and Liam had already been almost killed once. *So he's dead this time, then.* The thought had come to her as gently as a leaf hitting the ground, and she saw the lock, that vast gate to the river and all it meant, slip from her reach. She should have known better than to want it too much. At the door to the office she'd felt very old,

and it came to her that she'd traded her river dreams for the peace of not having to dream them.

Darby checked the glowing face of her bedside clock. 1:15. In a little while she'd check on her mother again. Her poor mother, so pale and drawn. In the principal's office Darby had been shocked to see how frail she looked, folded toward her knees on the blue striped chair. Her glasses were crooked on her face. She'd taken Darby by the hand and almost whispered—*no, thank you, we don't need a counselor*. She would prefer to deal with her daughter alone. Darby had buried her face in Vonny's rough coat, smelling her sweet mother-smell, laundry and lemon spice. Her mother needed protection, to be kept close and shielded in a sparkling veil. Now that Liam was dead it was time to be brave, to look stoically at the gray linoleum. Now was the time to prove that they would be just fine together, to say, without talking, *See? We are a family, all by ourselves*. Darby had readied herself for the walk outside, where her mother would find a bench for them, and wrap her arms around Darby, and rock, and whisper the words in her ear. But Vonny had needed a kind of defending Darby hadn't prepared for. When Mr. Stone opened the door, a woman's voice came past him into the office.

*Tom, I'm taking my child home.*

Mr. Stone shifted his weight.

*Mrs. Cother, he said. Please step inside for a moment.*

*This is an emergency.* The voice was louder, angry now. Darby recognized it—Claire, her father's sister, the aunt who hated them. Darby squeezed her mother's hand.

*I'm taking Kate home. Right now.*

Mr. Stone sighed.



*Claire, we have rules. Come into the office and a teacher will bring her.*

Darby's mother was pushing Mr. Stone out of her way, pulling Darby after her.

*Excuse me, she said. We have to be going.*

Looking up, there was a flash of the aunt's pink lips, opening, and red fingernails pressed into a brown leather purse.

*That's not even her kin!* She'd screamed, and then Darby was almost running to keep up with the arm that dragged her. In the car her mother had explained about Liam's new cabin home burning. The fire that was an accident, and Darby's father being okay, and the best cheerleader not being so. Darby had leaned back in her seat, letting the sunlit glare from other cars burn shiny holes in her vision. So he wasn't dead, after all, only gone as before. But Roxanna, who had waved and smiled at Darby from the top of boys' shoulders beside the football field, would be buried soon in the town cemetery. Darby had questions—*why?* Three times she'd asked, shaking her mother's arm, while her mother only wept as though she'd dropped something she loved down an open grate in the sidewalk.

In her bed Darby listened to the creaking of the house; *the way it talks*, her mother said. Far away a dog barked and whined in its yard, wanting in. Everyone was sad, Darby knew, about Roxanna, but to Darby it didn't seem possible that the girl would not be at the next home game, flipping across the field before the stream of football players that tore through a paper banner. More than anything, Darby felt lonely. She tried to stay awake till time to check on Vonny, but she was almost asleep when a new sound roused her, the clinking of keys. It was Ellyn, home at last. Darby got up and stole down the hallway. From the entrance to the kitchen she watched as her sister eased the back door

shut and slid the bolt soundlessly in place. Ellyn turned and then jumped, staggering back into the door with a thud.

“God, Darby!” Her voice was an angry whisper. “Are you trying to kill me?”

Her irritation was real, solid and hot. Darby threw her arms around Ellyn, inhaling cold outdoors and cigarette smoke. Icy hands patted her back. When Ellyn leaned down and spoke her breath was a puff of sharp sweetness. Alcohol.

“Hey, it’s okay. Did you wake up and get scared? Come on, let’s not rouse the Kraken.” Ellyn was drunk. You could tell from the way her tongue caught on her s’s, and from the slight extra sway in her walk. It didn’t matter. Darby could keep a secret. Her close mouth was one thing she knew Ellyn appreciated about her. One of the things that kept them close. And sometimes Ellyn was nicer this way—softer around her edges. Darby took her sister’s hand and let Ellyn lead her down the hall, even though Darby would have made a much better guide. In her room, Ellyn relaxed. She flipped on the nightlight Darby loved, a butterfly with deep red wings. The pink light it cast made her face beautiful as she unzipped and dropped her jacket.

“Come on,” Ellyn said. She stepped out of her shoes and into the bed, scooting close to the wall to make room for Darby.

“What about your teeth?”

“I’m not worried about them. Are you sleeping here or not?”

Darby crawled in and snuggled close to Ellyn’s bony shoulder. “Will you tell me a Mr. Brinker?”

“Hmm? No, shh. Let’s sleep.”

Almost immediately her breathing slowed. Darby felt a flutter of panic. She could not be alone again so soon. Her elbow shot out before she thought.

“What?” Ellyn was annoyed. “I’m sleeping.”

Darby licked her lips. “What was Liam doing with the cheerleader from your school?” She used his first name on purpose, hoping that would be enough. Ellyn hated for her to say *Daddy*. Under the covers she held her breath.

Ellyn sighed and turned over, facing the wall.

“I guess he liked her, Darby, the way boys and girls like each other. Sometimes men like girls they shouldn’t.”

“You mean like sex?”

“Yeah.”

Darby considered. “But did she like him?”

Ellyn sighed again. “I guess so. She was with him, wasn’t she? Now, no more questions.”

Darby couldn’t stop herself. “Why does Aunt Claire say we’re not kin? Ellyn?”

“No more, I said, or you’re going to your room.”

Soon Ellyn was snoring. Darby stayed awake, thinking of the houses on her street, in the whole town of Unida, and all the cities far beyond. Thousands of huddled houses, separated by the dark. She curled her body around Ellyn’s and held tight.

**Early sunlight gleamed** on the hard curves of Vonny’s tiny vodka bottles, lined up in a neat, passive aggressive row on the white counter. Vonny sighed, dropping the bottles back into the trash. *Ellyn*. So typically self-righteous at sixteen. So irritatingly sure

that she was not typical. Of course Ellyn would be angry. Never mind all the times *she'd* been caught drinking. In Ellyn's world, anyone over thirty should have transcended human weakness. Especially Vonny. *People don't grow up; they just get old*—this was what Vonny wanted to explain to her daughter. Some things never changed; the shocking glimpses of self in mirrors or windows, the jolt of knowing *there's me in the world*. The sense of some far away time when happiness and fulfillment would spread out before you like a lush valley. That stayed. Only at some point, the direction of longing reversed. *You look forward, girl, until you look back.*

But enough of that. Vonny wiped down the counter and dusted and watered the Wandering Jew in the window. Today was a new day, a new start. The first thing to do was comport herself. She opened her pantry and considered. What could she put together to take over to the Kellys'? Something that would freeze well would be best—something that could be heated up, warm and comforting, in the quiet weeks ahead when winter set in and all the casseroles were long gone. Her mother's favorite soup, of course. What she sometimes called "funeral soup"—a concoction of beans and vegetables, ground meat and pasta shells. It was hearty and would keep. Vonny just needed the recipe. She rubbed her temples, thinking. At some point she'd have to call her parents anyway. Now was as good a time as ever. She sat up straight and picked up the phone.

Her mother answered just before the machine.

"Oh, so you *are* alive."

"Hello to you, too, Mom." Vonny kept her voice light. "The phone works both ways, you know."

Her mother let this pass. "How are the girls?"

“They’re fine. We’re all fine, thank you.” A pain stirred in Vonny’s head. She opened a high cabinet and rummaged in the plastic bin there, hunting aspirin. “How are you and Dad?”

“You know we heard, Vonny. You don’t have to pretend.”

“Pretend? I’m not pretending.” Vonny stood on her tip-toes, cradling the phone with her shoulder. Nyquil, Pepto-Bismol, Sudafed. Where the fuck was the aspirin?

“How’s Ellyn? Is she talking? You know we were so worried when she lived with us, because she hardly—”

“Lived?” Vonny bristled. “We’ve been over this, Mom. She did not *live* at your house. She stayed for two weeks after Liam left. Two weeks while I took a rest.”

“Well, lived, stayed, same difference. I’m just saying, she barely—”

“It is not the same.” Vonny came up with the aspirin at last. “*Lived* implies that I just dropped her off to stay forever, like I quit being her mother.” She shook the bottle. Empty. “And I don’t know why you have to bring it up. I know how she was. You tell me all the time.”

Her mother sighed. “Don’t twist my words, please, or accuse me of saying things I didn’t. I’m not going to get dragged into a fight.”

“Dragged into—what are you talking about? I called for your soup recipe, the one you make when someone dies. You’re the only one fighting.” Vonny flung the empty canister back into the cabinet. “I’m not *twisting* anything.”

“Oh please, Vonny. All right, fine. Your father and I love you. All we’ve ever wanted is for you to see you don’t need a man to make you happy—”

“Oh God. Please not this lecture, okay? Please.”

“—that you don’t need *that* man. You can walk away. Set a good example for your daughters for once.”

“Walk away? You mean like you walked away? That kind of good example?” Her anger caught and swelled in her throat. Her parents had moved to Arkansas on a bitter morning in March, when the buds of too-hopeful trees glittered with ice. Two months after her courthouse wedding. Two months before Ellyn was due. Vonny had hugged them goodbye on their lawn, feeling the way they only lightly gripped her shoulders, leaning forward to avoid her belly. At home, she’d decided to reorganize the closet. She’d pulled everything off the shelves before she sank down and cried, the heel of Liam’s cowboy boot digging into her butt. “You never liked Liam—you wouldn’t even pretend. You always had to make it harder—harder even than it had to be.”

“Vonny!” Now her mother was crying. “How can you say that to me? After everything we’ve done—only wanting the best for you—” Her voice broke on a sob.

Vonny sat at the table, one hand twisted in her hair. Here it came, the massive guilt. In the face of it Vonny was helpless. When Liam left and Vonny, overwhelmed, had put her children in the car and driven up to the lovely glass cabin near the Little Red River, she’d walked into the house and said: *go ahead and act happy. I know you are.* Her mother looked at her as if she’d lobbed a grenade. *How could you think such horrible things?* It was true that they’d never been overtly unkind to Liam. What they wouldn’t admit was that they hadn’t needed to be. From the very beginning their feelings were clear. *Of course if you love him, we accept him,* they’d said. And *your family is always welcome in our home.* They’d said these things, and then they’d managed to spend every holiday of Vonny’s marriage on some visit or trip out of the country, and they never

visited when Liam was in town. Vonny's mother refused to be interested in the classes Vonny put herself through at community college and then cosmetology school; she made sure to tell Vonny how the money they'd saved for her college education went into a fund for Ellyn and Darby. *It's our pleasure. We want them to be able to make something of themselves.* After their phone calls Liam was distant. For days he'd speak to Vonny like he was angry with her. *When are you going to stop wasting your time, find a good man to take care of you?*

“Okay, Mom, please. Please just tell me how to make the soup.”

“How can you be so cruel when you know how much you love your own daughters? Your father and I would do anything for you.”

“Will you tell me how to make soup?”

“Why can't you see that you always deserved better than him? That you deserve to be treated the way you want to be treated?”

Vonny slammed a fist down on the table. *“Goddamn it, mother! How do you make the goddamn soup?”*

“One goddamn can of diced tomatoes!” her mother screamed. Vonny lunged for a notepad and pen. “Twenty-eight ounces! One onion, sliced! One and one half pounds of browned ground beef!”

She went on this way, shouting ingredients and procedure while Vonny scribbled. At the end of it, Vonny hung up and closed her eyes, taking deep, composing breaths. After a time she peeked at the clock. Nearly six. She still had forty minutes, before Ellyn and Darby needed to be up, to get to the store and back. It could be nice, the three of them in the kitchen, the girls eating breakfast while Vonny cooked. They could have eggs

or waffles, or buttered toast with honey in the shape of a smile. Vonny opened the cabinet again and found some Tylenol, swallowed three pills with a mouthful of water from the faucet. In her room she threw on jeans and a sweatshirt, pulled her hair into a ponytail. She was almost out the door before she thought to scribble a note, just in case. *Gone to get sustenance. Love you.* She dangled it from the middle of the doorframe on a long piece of tape.

At Big Star she moved quickly through the aisles, ignoring the wheel of her cart that wobbled and turned the wrong way. By the drive home her energy had flagged. She went slowly, thinking about her mother and her marriage. Her life. The problems with her parents weren't only due to Liam getting in trouble, Vonny knew, or treating her badly. Or even because she'd shamed her family, getting pregnant and not attending a university. It was the act of choosing that her parents couldn't seem to forgive—the fact that she'd grown into a woman instead of staying a little girl. She remembered an afternoon at a bookstore, when she was twelve, pointing out books in a series that she would like to get for Christmas. They were harmless light reading—the adventures of two high school girl detectives with pastel covers. But they were also about the girls' adventures with boys, and Vonny's mother had grabbed her brother by the arm when she didn't know Vonny was watching. *Vonny likes those stupid, smutty teenage romances, if you need a present for her. You know, those ridiculous books.* The words were edged with vitriol Vonny hadn't understood. She'd backed away, humiliated, reminding herself to be more careful.

On her right Shipley's Donuts came into view, the cheerful neon sign her father had always hated. *It's dough, not do,* he'd say, disgusted, if anyone mentioned how good



the place smelled, sugar glaze and fresh pastry drifting through the open car window. *D-o-u-g-h. Like bread.* On impulse Vonny pulled in. Ellyn and Darby deserved a treat. Hell, Vonny did, too. Who cared if the girls were a few minutes late today? She picked up a dozen, half chocolate topped, half plain, and the rest of the way home she sang along with the radio, banging her hands on the wheel. She was gathering everything from the trunk when she heard the jingle of a dog's collar. *Shit.* Trista Simon, the woman across the street, was letting out her Labrador. Vonny could imagine her peering through her plantation blinds, waiting for the Pontiac to pull back in. She probably had five cardigan-wearing, nonworking friends waiting to hear how Vonny was *holding up*. That was Trista. Always she had the newest gossip about people or their children. Their wives or their alleged pill problem.

“Come on Webby! Such a good dog! Such a handsome—Webby, *no!*” Trista's coos became shouts as the dog bounded into the street, just like he'd done since he was a puppy, every single time both he and Vonny were outside. Instinctively Vonny ducked behind the Pontiac's door. As if it weren't already too late.

“Vonny!” Trista was jogging over. Vonny held the box of doughnuts above her head and out of the reach of Webster, who jumped up and balanced two muddy paws on her chest, tail wagging. “Webby, down! Webby, get *down!* Vonny, how are you?”

Vonny smiled tightly, conscious of her rough ponytail, her lack of makeup. A *naked face*, her mother would have said. Fucking dog. She pushed at Webster with her knee and tried for a plastic bag, the doughnuts hoisted with one arm.

“Here, let me help you. Webby, I said *down!*” She took the doughnuts from Vonny, looking her over. Of course Trista was perfectly groomed, even though she was

dressed for exercise in spandex and close-fitting cotton. She probably woke up with makeup and sleek hair. Vonny looked past her, fighting bitter thoughts. *Of course Trista never fights with her mom about soup! Trista would never serve a sugary breakfast!* Across the street the Simons' elderberry tree held a strange cloud, a flock of robins fluttering and calling. Up the curving drive was Trista's white columned house, beautiful and rambling as ever. Trista often complained how much of a chore it was to care for a house like that. How she could never make money, selling it in this area. But she had been a friend too, in her way, keeping the girls when Vonny was in a bind, and picking up newspapers and mail on the rare occasions when Vonny was out of town. In the summer Trista brought over extra vegetables when her organic garden produced too many—tomatoes and squash, which Vonny cooked; and eggplant, which she didn't know what to do with, and guiltily pressed beneath layers of trash in her garbage bin. Once, when Vonny had the flu, Trista had sent her yard crew over to rake up the leaves, then claimed to know nothing whatever about it when Vonny tried to thank her. It wasn't fair to be rude to her now. Even if she did want to pry.

“Thanks, Trista, you're sweet. But I can get everything.”

“Oh no, I'll carry half. That way we'll only have one trip.”

Webster had calmed down. He wandered Vonny's small lawn, sniffing, then squatted to do his business beside the azalea bush. Vonny couldn't hold back a small sigh as she turned toward the house.

Inside, Ellyn sat at the kitchen table with a glass of water and a magazine.

“What's all this?”

Vonny was first through the door. “Breakfast, dear one. It’s the meal people eat when they’ve been sleeping all night.”

Ellyn watched Trista come inside. She looked back at Vonny with wide, indignant eyes. Vonny smiled, a warning smile. *I know she’s annoying. But be nice.*

“What would you like? A delicious doughnut, perhaps?”

Trista took the items out of her bags and stacked them on the counter. Ellyn narrowed her eyes. “A can of kidney beans,” she said. “That’s what I want. For breakfast.”

“All right, Ellyn.” Vonny couldn’t keep the exasperation from her voice. “The doughnuts are for breakfast, for a treat. All the other breakfast options I provide for you on a daily basis can be found in the usual places.” She opened a drawer, looking for things she’d need for the soup. Her measuring cups and a can opener. The long wooden stirring ladle.

Ellyn stood up, nodding at the doughnuts. “Is that to make up for passing out drunk before dinner? Or so we won’t notice you’re not cooking for us now?”

The wooden spoon was in Vonny’s hand. In an instant she was around the table. She popped her daughter hard across the top of her buttocks.

“You don’t speak to me that way, young lady.”

For a moment no one moved. Then Ellyn slammed her glass down on the table and rushed from the room. A second later, the bang of her bedroom door rattled the dishes in the cupboards. Vonny was suddenly exhausted. She looked at Trista, not caring anymore what anyone might say.

“Mama?” Darby stood in the doorway, her round belly poking out of her pajama top.

Trista stepped forward suddenly, squeezing Vonny’s arm as she passed. She bent and ruffled Darby’s yellow hair.

“Your mama’s gonna come over and talk with me. Just for a minute or two. Here, you want some milk and a doughnut? You sit right there and have that, and she’ll be back now, okay?”

Vonny could not speak. There was the misery of Trista’s company, trying to dodge questions in her white marble kitchen. Or there was the misery of this house, the lead weight crushing her chest. She turned and walked outside. Across the street, Webster played a game with the robins, rushing the tree and bounding away, each time sending up a small storm of birds that settled at his retreat.

“I’m sorry,” she said, when Trista joined her. “Teenagers. You know.”

“Come on.”

Trista led the way into the kitchen, where she disappeared behind one door of her double-sided fridge. Vonny sat down at the table, examining at the salt and pepper shakers. Cut crystal, small columns of angles and planes. If you held them to the window, maybe they would make rainbows, like the prism Ellyn had loved when she was small.

“Hey,” Trista said. She stood at the counter with orange juice and a fifth of potato vodka. “There’s coffee or screwdrivers,” she said. I’m having one of these.”

Vonny stared. Was Trista that desperate for information? For the first time she noticed the pallor of Trista’s face, the skin under her eyes caked with concealer.

“Coffee’s fine.”

“Suit yourself.” Trista made her drink in a milk glass, filling it halfway with vodka. She took a long pull before pouring Vonny’s coffee. “Trust me, I know about the kids.” She moved to the table and sat down heavily. “Mine are in college and still giving me hell. Because Shane and I are divorcing, I mean. Here’s your coffee.”

Vonny blinked. “You and Shane are—what?”

“Oh yeah, it was a long time coming. He has someone else. You know.” She took another drink. “Sugar and cream are right there by you.”

In the sunlight the kitchen gleamed, all marble and glass and stainless steel. At the head of the table Trista seemed small, her body too fragile for such a hard place.

“I’m so sorry,” Vonny said, embarrassed at the weakness of her voice and the phrase. Her words limped across the room.

Trista shrugged. “Like I was saying, the worst part is the kids. I thought they’d be old enough now to understand, even if they weren’t happy. But no. They think I drove him to it.”

Vonny reached for the sugar bowl, thinking of Trista’s twin boys, both in college out of state. Many times she’d wondered what it was like for them, growing up where no one shouted or ran. It came to her that Trista must have wondered something else of Ellyn and Darby, when she looked out the window at the small, bedraggled home across the street. And Shane? Every time Vonny saw him he looked tired. A dumpy man with glasses and a Cabbage Patch face, sometimes Vonny had wanted to wrap him in blankets on the couch. To bring him Goldfish crackers swimming in tomato soup, like he was a child himself. Trista was watching her, a dark expression on her face. Vonny cleared her throat.

“That’s not true. A marriage always takes two—”

“I was never a good mother,” Trista said. She launched into a story of when the boys were children, a fourth of July when their father took them swimming. “They went to the country club,” she said. “And they came home all loud and laughing, and got water all over the foyer rug.” Her face crumpled. She drained the last of her screwdriver and took a deep breath. “I was furious. I yelled at them, and put up big fans to blow on the rug all day. I saw their faces and how the fun just left them, and still I couldn’t stop.” She looked at Vonny, almost pleading. “They got water *all over* the rug. And it was his one day off. None of them had thought to invite me. They would rather I didn’t come.”

Suddenly Vonny wanted out. She looked down into her coffee, praying that Trista couldn’t see. *I am nothing like this woman. I’m not.* But some other part of her, relentless, turned her thoughts like two hands forcing her head. Poor Ellyn, her firstborn. The one who had shocked her, uncovering new capacities, stretching her body into something foreign and deepening her hatred with her love until both were terrifying, bone-driven and fierce. Vonny saw Ellyn as she must have been when she heard about the fire. A slender girl standing in a long hallway, surrounded by people, and totally alone. Vonny had needed to get Darby first, yes she had. Just like she’d explained to Ellyn that day. But the thing went deeper than that—farther. Back to a little girl in Vonny’s rearview mirror, screaming for her mother on Vonny’s parents’ porch. It was Ellyn whom Vonny had left with them. Not Darby. Ellyn who was doubly betrayed, a child old enough to feel keenly, to mourn without understanding. And if Vonny went farther, deeper still, there was Ellyn crying in her crib. Liam slamming out of the house, and Vonny walking slowly to the nursery, resentment bitter as crushed pills in her mouth. *You came to think of her as a*

*curse—your curse, because you'd had her to keep him. Yours—as if she weren't a person.*

Trista drew her legs into her chair and folded her arms around them. “I guess it always comes back around,” she said.

Vaguely Vonny thought that this comment should make her angry. But something inside her had toppled, when she smacked Ellyn in the kitchen, and here in Trista's house the remaining foundation was swept away. She could not muster anger.

“I've been seeing a therapist,” Trista said. “He says I have to let go of the guilt. Make myself happy. That's what I'm trying to do now.”

Vonny wiped her eyes on her sweatshirt sleeves. She looked at Trista, her thin cheeks flushed with liquor. The clock on the wall read seven a.m. Vonny giggled.

Trista sat up straight, looking hurt. “Fine. Go ahead and laugh. At least I'm not afraid to say I'm sad, or that I'm trying.”

“God, Trista, I don't mean it like that. You're right—I can't laugh at anybody. It's just-” Vonny stopped.

“Just what? What is it?”

Vonny got up and went to the counter. She opened the vodka and lifted it, letting a big swallow slide down her throat.

“To happiness,” she said, tilting the bottle at Trista.

In another second they were both giggling, then laughing hard, Vonny doubled over and Trista with her face hidden in her arms. When they regained control, Trista said, “You know, it can help to get out. I'm going to my running group tonight. The pace is however slow you want, and there's drinks afterward. You interested?”

Vonny hesitated.

“Come on, Vonny. Live a little. Think about what you really want now. For you. You don’t have to be a martyr forever.”

“Well, I’ll think about it. Okay?”

“Good!” Trista clapped her hands.

Vonny stood up. “I have to get back.”

Trista saw her out. With the door almost shut she paused, putting her face near the crack. “Jacob Rodak comes sometimes,” she said, and the door clicked shut.

Vonny walked slowly back to her house, passing Webster, who now lay panting on the sidewalk, his paws coated with mud. Inside, Darby was still at the table, her doughnut and milk untouched.

“I waited, Mama,” she said. “To eat with you.”

Her deep blue eyes were wide and worried. Vonny wrapped her in a hug. She wanted to lift her and take her to the old rocking chair, to hold the warm plump body forever in her lap. Instead she kissed the top of Darby’s head.

“Isn’t that sweet of you,” she said. “Why don’t you have that doughnut and tell me what you dreamed about while I scramble some eggs.”

Telling dreams was an old Vonny and Darby tradition, one that usually pleased them both—Darby chattering about things she thought would be nice or interesting to dream, and Vonny smiling over her daughter’s imagination. But today Vonny’s mind drifted while Darby talked, picking at her doughnut and swinging her legs. It didn’t seem appealing, this morning, to talk of dreams. Vonny and Liam had been a dream. Painting Ellyn’s nursery, that had been dreaming. Like feeling Darby kick inside her, thinking that



this time she could do things right. Make up for her mistakes. Well. Maybe it was time for Vonny to be done with dreams. *Think about what you really want now*, Trista had said. *You don't have to be a martyr forever.*

Vonny was squirting ketchup on her finished eggs when Ellyn came back into the room.

“I'm not going to school today,” she said.

The ketchup bottle was cool under Vonny's hands. Her fingers trembled as she reached for the cap. Her belly was a jar of marbles, ready to tilt in any direction.

“Okay then,” she said.

### **Chapter 3**

**Ellyn might act** like she thought her family didn't have enough trouble, but Darby would not. After breakfast, she'd marched upstairs and gotten dressed in a hurry, and she was on time to homeroom. It was the right thing to do, to show some solidarity with her mother. Plus, she'd remembered the nonfiction section of the library. Liam not being dead meant that Darby still had work to do, and the way things were going it looked like she'd better move fast. Liam had gotten worse—this Roxanna thing proved it. And it might take a while for Darby to find another way to the river. In the meantime, however, there were other ways of finding things out, even if your mother and sister did keep you locked out of their computers. Darby had found her book in free reading time after milk break, a frayed thing called *Mississippi's Other Rivers: The Tenn-Tom Waterway and the Tombigbee Basin*. Carrying it outside after lunch, she'd been happy.

But she hadn't planned on ending up where she found herself, stranded in the open in the middle of hide-and-seek, with Kate Cother counting down from fifty by the wall.

The invitation to play had come from nowhere, interrupting Darby on her way to the bench where she usually read, alone. She'd accepted without thinking, and now there was no way out. She looked frantically for options. The fort! That sad block of logs on the edge of the playground—it had been old and gross when Ellyn was in school here. No, she couldn't go there. The oak tree! Yes, yes! In the yard there was no oxygen. Darby reached the fallen tree with her breath burning in her throat. She staggered forward, scanning the boughs. Two freckled faces frowned out between the brown leaves. Loribeth and Sherilee Meadows, the twins.

“Thirty!” Kate sang out. “Better hurry up!”

Darby took a tentative step towards the twins' enclave.

“No!” one or the other of them said. “There's no room! Go on somewhere!”

Before the large splintered trunk the dusty earth stretched vast and bare. Darby could not make it to the shelter of hedges, other trees, or tube slides. Kate would turn around and catch her, still puffing along, her big belly stuck out and her thighs wobbling.

“Twenty-five!” Kate said.

“Don't just stand there!” a twin said. “Go on—get in the fort!”

For a second longer Darby hesitated. An image of spiders flashed into her mind, red hourglasses painted on puffed black abdomens. The kind she had to call her mother to kill.

“Twenty!” said Kate.

Darby was running again. There was a scuffing sensation on her palms as she clambered on the fort—skin knocked against rough wood—and then she dropped through the hole in the roof, down into a world of gloom and rotting leaves where the sunlight fell in slender chinks, striping the ground and her body with thin lines of gold. The ceiling was lower than she'd expected; the ground was damper, and more spongy. She squatted, wheezing, on her heels, absently taking in the specks of blood which popped up on her raw hands.

“Ready or not, here I come!”

Darby felt a pang of misgiving. Had Kate really meant for her to play? It had all happened so fast—one of the Meadows' girls tapping her on the shoulder, saying, *Come on, she doesn't mind*. In the fort the seconds crawled. Despite the damp cool, Darby was sweating. She shifted her weight, flapping her arms to try and keep her armpits dry. Already she could see the girls in science class, looking away and touching the base of their nostrils, as if they didn't want to be rude, but some smells were past bearing. They would do it to make Kate laugh. Far away, near the building entrance, the bench where Darby should have been reading was dry and safe and cozy. Why had she agreed to this? Darby took a deep breath, shut her eyes, and counted to sixty. Still there was nothing but the silence, the smell of mud and sweetish decaying wood. She counted again, fighting off a new fear that bloomed inside her. What if they stopped playing and didn't tell?

*Wham!* Something metal slammed down over the hole in the fort's ceiling. In the sudden darkness Darby blinked. The world exploded in a frenzy of giggles, voices coming through every wall. Panicked, Darby tried to stand, knocking her head, hard, into

the ceiling. She fell down flat on her butt, bright orbs flashing in her vision. What were they doing? She should have known. *Stupidstupidstupid...* She bit her lips.

“Hey Darby, is it lonely in there?” Kate’s voice was high-pitched and strange.

“Don’t worry—we’re bringing company!”

New shouting rang in Darby’s ear, and underneath it, another sound—a sort of strange scuffling. She crept close to a wall and put her eye to the crack. Two boys from her class were approaching the fort. In between them, they carried a smaller boy—a second or third-grader. He screamed and jerked frantically, trying to get away. For a moment the cover—a garbage can lid?—was lifted, and the boy tumbled inside in a shaft of light before the metal slammed down once more.

“Have fun lovebirds!” someone shouted.

The boy scrambled up and clawed at the obstruction above him.

“Let me out! Please let me out!”

Darby moved from her position by the wall.

“Shut up!” she said. “Don’t yell. They’ll never let us out if we—”

At her approach the boy went crazy. He flung himself headlong into the wall, screaming like no one Darby had ever heard before. She turned and crawled as far away as she could, heedless of the spider webs that caught on her arms and cheeks. She sat and buried her face in her knees. Outside the mob of children shouted almost as loudly as the boy. Near her ear a single voice came through the beams. Kate’s voice, speaking low so only she could hear.

“You liars should have something real to cry over,” she said. “Mom says.”

It was a long time before Ms. Eskridge got up from her chair and came down to see what all the fuss was about.

**The first Facebook** message about Liam had come before seven that morning, after Ellyn's mother decided to try and pull rank in front of the neighbor. *So, do you think he did it?* The question came from a quiet girl Ellyn barely knew. They'd only become Facebook friends when they were partnered for a history project last year—a presentation about the Great Wall of China. *I won't tell if you do. I just want to know.* Ellyn read the message and shivered. Right then she understood—she could not go to school. All day, the updates she got proved her instinct was right. She stayed in her room, watching old DVDs and periodically checking her account. *People say he kidnapped her,* Chelsea wrote at nine. *Shari's telling everyone she would have known if Roxanna really planned to go with him.* By lunchtime she heard that Liam had murdered Roxanna to get away with raping her, and burned her to cover up the murder. By three, Roxanna's body had been found tied to Liam's bed. *But not everyone blames him,* Chelsea added. *Some people are calling her a slut.* Roxanna got killed, they said, because she liked to be choked. She was secretly a prostitute—*maybe Liam was just her john.* Ellyn turned off her movie and crawled into bed, pulling the covers over her face. This was not what she had wanted, when she cursed Roxanna in the church. Everyone around her was caught up in lies, driven along by nothing, like trash swirling in wind. Her mother and sister. People in town and the student body of Unida High, all idolizing and hating when they had no business doing it. Stirring up something dark and ugly. It was four o'clock before she

wrote Chelsea back, her fingers trembling on the keys. *My father is an asshole and Roxanna was a bitch. That's all there is to it. That's it.*

There was a knock at Ellyn's bedroom door. Her mother opened it before Ellyn could respond. She leaned against the doorframe, dressed in a track suit and running shoes Ellyn recognized—they'd been in a box in the closet for a year.

"I'm going to jog with Miss Trista," Vonny said. "There's soup in the fridge for you guys, for dinner. Heat it up for your sister, please."

"To jog?" Ellyn glared over her bedspread, frightened by the anxious flutter in her chest. She wanted her mother to be normal tonight, to fix dinner and try to make them eat as a family. Not doing it was like not caring that Ellyn didn't go to school, after Ellyn had geared herself for a fight, planning as a last resort to go limp as a corpse on her bedroom floor. Or to jump from the car at a red light and run. "So you just assume I'll babysit?"

"No school, no going out. You know that."

Vonny bent forward and reached for the floor, almost touching her palms to the ground. Years with barely any exercise, and still Vonny could probably do a back handspring if she wanted. Irritation made Ellyn feel stronger.

"Since when do you jog, anyway?"

"Since now. There's going to be some changes around here. Me getting in shape is one of them."

Ellyn could not stop herself. "Gotta get back on the market, huh?"

Vonny turned away. "I'll be home around nine to tuck Darby in. Call my cell if you need me."

Ellyn listened to her mother's steps creak down the hallway, hitting all the spots Ellyn knew to avoid, when she came in past curfew. Vonny was really leaving. Ellyn couldn't make her feel bad enough to stay. Suddenly the sunny house seemed to press in on her, looming with dangers. Vents leaking carbon monoxide. Darby reaching quickly into the dishwasher for a clean spoon, her hand sticking on the blade of a paring knife.

"Mom?"

"Yes, Ellyn?"

*Don't leave. Please don't.*

"What?" Vonny's voice was cross. "I'm late."

"Nothing," Ellyn said. She listened as the Pontiac fired to life in the driveway and motored into the street. Vonny must be picking up Trista, to take her on this amazing run. Maybe the two of them could be friends. Vonny could hang out all the time, pretend her own kids were already gone to college. Ellyn threw off her covers and went down the hall to knock on Darby's door.

"Come in." Darby's voice was muffled. When Ellyn opened the door she saw why. She'd used her quilt to make a tent, pinning it to the wall behind her chest of drawers and letting it drape down to the foot of her bed. The rest of it covered something bulky. Beneath the hanging edge Ellyn spotted the curved wooden feet of Darby's desk chair. She knelt and lifted a quilt corner. Inside, Darby sat wedged between the chest of drawers and the bed, a space about a foot wide. She looked at Ellyn with round blue eyes, her face lit from beneath by the flashlight in her hand. In her lap she clutched an open book. Ellyn lay down on her stomach, keeping her head and shoulders inside the tent.

"Hey. What are you reading?"

Silently Darby held up her volume, a worn book, something about rivers. Ellyn nodded.

“What are you learning?”

Darby shrugged, rubbing her fingers over the creased spine.

“Hey.” Ellyn reached to touch her shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Darby shrugged again. “Why are you so mad at Mom?”

“I’m not mad! Is that what you’re worried about?”

Darby pulled away, leaning back against the wall. She shot Ellyn a disbelieving look.

“I’m not stupid,” she said.

Ellyn sighed. “Look, Mom just needs to get her shit together. Start thinking about someone else for once. When she does that, everything will be fine.”

Darby was watching her. “You wanted him back too,” she said. “When we were younger. I remember. When I was in kindergarten—”

“When I was younger I didn’t know better. Mom is a grownup. Or she should be.”

“You’re mad again.”

“I’m *not* mad.” Ellyn sat up. “Just let me know when you want dinner.”

Darby threw her book to the carpet. “You’re the one who should think about us! All you want to do is go out!”

Ellyn stood, flinging the edge of the quilt down behind her. “That’s good, Darby. What else of Mom’s can you repeat? I don’t know why I can’t remember what a baby you are.”



She went back to her room and the tail end of *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*. Some minutes later she heard the screen door slam, and through the window she watched her little sister's stocky form trudge down the walk, the hood of her purple coat inside out. Where was she going? Ellyn felt a flutter of worry again, and raised her hand to rap on the glass. She could call Darby back, sit her on the couch and tell her everything would be fine. Vonny would regain her senses. The baby fat Darby hated would vanish, like Ellyn's had, at age thirteen, without her having to do anything about it. But promises like that were thin ice over water. They were deceptions. Sometimes adults didn't come around. Sometimes things went from bad to worse. Besides, Ellyn was nobody's mother. She was still at the window, thinking, when Ben's silver Chevy pulled into the drive.

In a flash Ellyn ducked to one side, scooting close to the wall as if he might come press his face to the glass. In a moment the doorbell rang, two insistent notes that sent the blood draining to her feet. *What the fuck could he want?* She put a knuckle in her mouth, hesitating. The doorbell sounded again, followed by three short raps.

"Ellyn?" His voice came loudly through the walls. "Can we talk? Chelsea said you were at home."

*Shit.* Ellyn forced her feet to move. In the living room she paused before the wood-framed mirror. Face okay. Hair in a sloppy bun. Nothing to be done about it now. Through the cloudy glass of the front door she could see his waiting shape, made dark by the slant of the afternoon light behind him. She cracked the door and gasped. Ben's face was pale, and under his eyes the skin was purplish. He licked his lips twice before he spoke.

“Look. I’m sorry for what I said—for everything the other day. I just came to—can I—” He motioned at the house. Ellyn did not move. “Ellyn, I can’t talk to anyone else. Please?”

Even in this state, he was beautiful. The down fuzz on his pink earlobes made something inside her break open and hurt. On automatic pilot she turned and walked to the living room sofa, leaving the door wide behind her.

“There’s no one here,” she said, and blushed. Did that sound like some kind of hint? He ran a hand through his hair, looking at the couch. An unbelievable thought dawned on her: he was nervous. She cleared her throat. “You can sit anywhere.”

He nodded, then sank quickly on the crack between two cushions, not beside her, but not quite a whole seat away.

“You weren’t at school today,” he said. He looked down at his hands while he talked, picking at his cuticles. “I wasn’t either, but I asked about you. I saw your mom leave, a little while ago. I waited.”

Ellyn was silent, taking this in. *I saw your mom leave...I waited.*

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “About the funeral. I believe you didn’t say anything to Roxy. I just wanted, you know, for there to be a reason. Why she died, I mean, and why...” his voice trailed off. He pulled at the skin near his thumbnail, the muscles in his jaw working.

“Why she picked him instead of you,” she finished in a whisper. “Why she stopped loving you. Why she left.”

He turned to look at her. A change came over his face, as if he’d just discovered something unexpected, a treasure unearthed in a dusty attic.

“Yeah,” he said. “You understand.”

She nodded. For a moment the silence drew out. He leaned toward her. Ellyn felt her heart pause and then pound hard in her chest—a water bird taking flight. Something was starting, she knew. The two of them, breathing together in her mother’s house, the seconds on the clock and the synapses jumping space in his brain—all of it was gathering to lift. She was caught up in the ascent. Any second now, he would kiss her. She would stand and lead him into her bedroom, where pale yellow flowers scattered the walls. *Cold water*, she remembered. She’d need cold water for her sheets. Later, at the washing machine, she would plunge her arms in to the elbows, submerging the stains of her blood. On the couch he moved closer.

“Ellyn,” he said. “Would you tell me about him? Your father?”

“What?” She blinked. This twist didn’t fit. “You want to know about *Liam*? Don’t you hate him?”

“No. Or yeah. I don’t know. Just please.” He touched her shoulder. “Just—anything you remember. I think it would help me to know.”

Ellyn sat still, considering.

“Once I saw him rescue a bird,” she said, and then the words tumbled out in a rush. “It was stuck in our garage. It flew in but was too stupid to turn around and fly out, so it was banging over and over into the back window. My mother was crying, saying it would break its neck. I was scared—its little feet and eyes bothered me. It was so unpredictable, zooming every which way. Anyway, somehow he caught it in his hand. He had it in his fist, so that only its little head looked out. He held it out for me to touch; told me about its little heart, buzzing under his fingers.”

Ben nodded. He sat staring at the floor for a moment, then nodded again.

“I have to go,” he said. “But would you mind if I came back? I mean, could you tell me some more? I’d like to talk to you, Ellyn.”

His face was imploring. In the quiver of his mouth, she saw that he might cry again.

“All right,” she said gently. “Come back any time. I’ll tell you whatever you need to know.”

He lurched forward and hugged her, a tight hug that crushed her arms to her sides, so that she could not return it. Then he was up and gone, striding out the front door without a goodbye. She stayed on the couch, watching him leave. On the table her phone vibrated. She hadn’t realized she’d brought it from her room. The text was from Chelsea. *Shari just hit one of Ben’s friends in the face in the Sonic parking lot. For saying something about Roxanna. His face was pouring blood. I think she has gone crazy.* Ellyn pulled the back from the phone and dropped the battery to the carpet. She thought of her fable, the story of the bird in the attic. From some far distance in her mind she wondered why she had lied.

**Darby knew the** way of the rivers. In the safety of her blanket fort, she’d traced her fingers over the smooth maps in her book, following the sprawl of blue lines. Pathways of unthinkable water veining the land. The Tennessee furred out from the northern-stretching Ohio right around Paducah, Kentucky, just before the Ohio met the Mississippi and went on down to New Orleans. On the other side of her state was the Tennessee-Tombigbee waterway, the man-made channel that branched two hundred

million gallons from the Tennessee every year. *To support navigation and wildlife*, the river book said, although it didn't mention what had happened to things that lived on the land the Tenn-Tom covered over with water. Darby imagined submerged houses and buildings, whole underwater cities with fish swimming in and out of windows and turtles hiding in drawers.

The Tenn-Tom cut its slow way through the part of Mississippi the maps labeled *Pontatoc Ridge* before winding south to become Darby's river, the Tombigbee, which curled through Alabama and into the Gulf at Mobile Bay. Mississippi waterways had a long past. At Pickwick Landing, Darby had learned, the Confederate army had camped in the woods, teenagers firing at other teenagers who floated on boats down the Tennessee. Now, the rambling miles of coastland were dotted with cabins, marines, and sometimes bars, but even today, most of it was wild. If you wandered long enough, you could find a Civil War bullet, a missile intended for splintering bone now lying inert as a rock, enduring the passage of time. To the south, on the Tombigbee, steamboats had moved cotton from as far north as West Point before the water grew too shallow. Now that the Tenn-Tom was there, connecting the two rivers, the whole passageway floated with barges. Huge vessels carrying timber and coal, petroleum and heaps of iron and steel through locks like huge metal elevators. The locks groaned open to let water in, boosting an enormous barge up to the level of water upstream. They groaned open to let water out, draining it down until the boat could go out on the level of the lower river, downstream. Either way, there was suction. If you were swimming in the lock, or just outside it, when they opened the gate, you would be swept along with all that water, pulled under and held

there and drowned, no matter how hard you struggled and kicked. The water was stronger than your will for air. The water was stronger than anyone. It went its way, alone.

Darby thought about all this as she walked down the side of her gravel road, smelling the sharpness of woods in autumn and feeling the sun on the back of her head. She held a stick in her hands and knocked it against trees and mailbox posts as she went, or whipped it through weeds and brush. To an onlooker she would seem scrappy. A girl with a purpose, and unafraid. Darby's road was not crowded. Until just two years ago it had been made of red dirt so fine it rose in clouds, and coated cars so that you could write things on the back windows. Now the large gravel stones crunched beneath her feet, and when she kicked them she felt *Mississippi's Other Rivers* shift against her belly, nudging farther into the waistband of her jeans. Darby had learned a lot from the book, but what she really needed was for it to prove her worth to someone who could take her where she needed to go. That person was Mr. Brinker.

She approached his house with caution, using oak trees as cover. She peeked around a huge trunk and saw him, sitting motionless in his rocking chair on the porch. His eyes were closed and his hands folded in his lap. He appeared to be sleeping. Darby studied him, digging her nails in the rough bark. She couldn't wake him. That would make her an annoyance, a child who needed to learn manners. Maybe if she waited, he'd get up on his own. She stood still for a time, watching. Was his large belly rising and falling, after all? She squinted. From her vantage point he appeared perfectly still. Her tongue was thick in her mouth. All at once she wanted badly to be gone. But she was here now—she was involved. What if he was dead, and she abandoned him here? It could be days before someone else noticed. Birds would peck his eyes to holes. Or worse, what if

he weren't dead, but hurt? She could hear the evening news, the turtlenecked woman saying that *he appears to have laid on his porch for hours before anyone called for help*. Old people were like that, Darby knew, always seeming just fine and then having strokes or falling, somehow breaking their bodies for good. Like overripe peaches, too soft at the skin.

Darby took a deep breath and moved closer, picking her way around the junk in the yard. Old tires and engines and a rotting coffee table. A large aquarium, upside down and coated with dirt. She'd just make sure he was alive, then creep away, letting him sleep. At the bottom porch step she stopped. Here the air seemed unbearably stagnant, the only sound in the world the far away rat-tat of a woodpecker. Darby held her breath. Suddenly the large body shifted and spoke.

"State your business," it said.

She stood frozen, one hand gripping the porch railing. She could not actually be caught like this. He could not be talking to her.

"That's right, I mean you. What do you want?"

Darby opened her mouth and then closed it, her ears filled with the rush of her own blood. Up close, Mr. Brinker's beard wasn't white, like Santa's, but edged in dirty yellow around his mouth. His eyes, blinking open in cupped folds of wrinkles, were two marbles, cloudy and blue. He looked her over.

"Are you dumb? What are you doing in my yard?"

"I'm sorry. I thought maybe—" she swallowed. He was waiting. He wouldn't let her off the hook. "I thought maybe you were dead," she said.

His laughter startled her. It came out in wheezing gasps, with his head tilted back and his mouth wide open. His teeth were horrible, brown and jagged.

“Dead, huh?” He plucked a Skoal can from somewhere beside him and scooped out a pinch. Darby wrinkled her nose, remembering the time one of Ellyn’s friends had let her smell his can of dip. Like a dirty port-a-john in summer.

“You’re not so lucky. You a Cother? From on down the road?”

Darby nodded. He was tucking tobacco in his lip, and his nails were longer than his teeth, and dirty. She could not take her eyes from them. *My what sharp nails you have*, her brain offered, but no—hands hadn’t been part of that story.

“Well,” he said. “Do you like cats?”

This was unexpected. Darby nodded without thinking. But the truth was that she did like cats, purring soft things that batted at toys or stretched prettily when tired, their tails quirked in the air. Her mother was always saying they could have one, at some unnamable future time.

“Do you want to see mine?” He leaned forward and huffed, not moving. He tried again and slowly rose from the chair. Upright, he was larger than Darby had thought. Despite the season he wore shorts, and his calves stuck out from them like pale logs. He opened the door and stepped inside, holding it wide for Darby. “Right this way,” he said.

Now two forces tugged her powerfully in opposite directions. On the one hand there were the things learned from school and television—what happened to little children dumb enough to trust strangers. The room she peered into was cluttered and dim. What if Mr. Brinker grabbed her, locked her in a spidery basement? The police would never think to look for her here. At night her mother would clutch Darby’s baby blanket



and cry. She'd turn frail and crumpled as an old leaf, like Roxanna's mother at the funeral. All of it while Darby clawed her fingers to bloody nubs on the cool cinderblocks of her prison, trapped forever away from the light.

On the other hand, you couldn't just be rude. Especially not to old people who were trying to be nice. You accepted things from them, kisses and presents you pretended to like. You endured stories that had neither point nor end. She could see her mother, hands on her hips and a frown creasing her forehead after Mr. Brinker called, upset that he'd upset Darby. Mr. Brinker was not a stranger, exactly. He'd been their neighbor for years. He looked at her around the door.

"I don't bite," he said. His eyes crinkled—he was laughing.

Darby came up the steps in a hurry, her face hot. Inside, she couldn't keep from gasping. There was more junk here than in the yard, more furniture and random things than seemed possible inside a house. She followed Mr. Brinker through a narrow path, stepping around recliners piled with boxes and stacks of couch cushions, chest-high. In the kitchen, there were dishes. Mounds of coffee cups and leaning columns of plates on the table, and on the counter heaps of pots and pans. Darby was quiet, trying not to stare. Trying not to imagine her lungs closing up. A person could get stuck in this house—could make a wrong move and be buried alive in a landslide of china or silverware. Mr. Brinker rummaged in a low cabinet and came up with a bag of dry cat food. He held it toward Darby, smiling.

"There you go. Just take that on outside the back."

Sweet Jesus, she would live. She grabbed the bag and headed for the back door, reminding herself not to run. Outside, she stopped, confused. There was no sign of cats,

or any food dish. Only an open space with a dirty, rotting picnic table, surrounded by thick brush on all sides. The bag crinkled under her tight fingers.

“Um, Mr. Brinker? Where should I put it?”

He spoke from inside the house, through the screen of a window Darby hadn’t noticed was open.

“Just walk out and dump some on that table there. They’ll come.”

Darby swallowed. Inside her stomach she felt something cold and sour and quivering, as if she’d downed a mountain of lemon Jell-O. There was something wrong here. The space in the yard seemed too open, too empty. Why wasn’t he outside with her? She hugged the cat food and squinted at the screen, a blank, black square in the peeling white siding.

“Go on, go on! You’ll see!”

The voice from inside was amused and impatient. Darby turned toward the picnic table. She crossed the yard with a sinking dread in her chest. *Something* was coming, something hungry. There was no clear path to the front yard—her only escape was back inside. A new thought made her sway on her feet, *what if he’d locked the back door?* She reached the table and opened the bag. Inside was a plastic scoop. She’d just gotten a grip on it when she heard the rustling. Quiet at first, and then growing, a swish and crackle that shook the brush on all sides. Darby heard her own voice, a whimpered *oh no*, and then she saw the cats. Black and orange, gray and striped, they came crashing from the weeds and bushes, rushing at the picnic table. At her. Lean bodies and lean, sharp faces—not like the rounded, soft cats she knew—they stampeded close and then shrank back,

yowling an urgent chorus. From the house she heard laughter. For a moment she could not remember who it was that might be there.

“Aren’t they beauties?” Mr. Brinker said. “Aren’t they great? Go ahead, girl. Pour a few scoops on the table. They’re telling you it’s dinnertime!”

Terrified, Darby scooped and flung two heaps of dry food on the old table. In waves of fur the cats leaped up, settling themselves into a line that hissed and growled whenever someone got too greedy. Darby stood limp, watching them. An unexpected breeze chilled her—she was covered in a fine sweat. Behind her she heard the back door fall shut. Mr. Brinker was coming across the yard.

“My colony!” he said. “Isn’t it grand?” He beamed at her, his cheeks surging upward so that she could hardly see his eyes. “Dinner is my favorite time of the day.”

Darby was silent, dealing with her relief. A wash of something so sweet and so total it wiped her soundly out—joy without the bubbles. Mr. Brinker circled the table, pointing.

“This is Franklin Roosevelt, and this is Budweiser. Here are Bunny, Moses, and Tiny Dancer—they’re siblings. This girl with one eye is Pickles, and here’s...”

He went on. Darby let the names slide by her, looking over the cats. There were less than she’d thought at first—only fifteen. They all ate warily, popping their heads up at intervals to look around them, at the yard and at her. They let Mr. Brinker touch them, but only after they’d slunk their bodies as low as they could beneath his reaching hands.

“They’re wild,” he said, still smiling. “But they know who their daddy is. Want to pet them?”

Darby did not. In fact, she wanted deeply to be back in her room, snug in her tent at the foot of her bed. But Mr. Brinker's face was open and excited, the way her mother's was when she got Darby something new to wear, something that was inevitably too frilly or too young. *See?* A face like that said. *Here's this thing I love, for you.* She reached a hand toward a small orange tabby, a pretty animal with a ringed tail. For an instant there was fur, thick and sleek under her fingers, and then the cat slipped liquidly to one side.

"Thank you," she said. "I should probably go."

She was almost back on the street when he shouted after her.

"Cother! Wait! You left this!"

She turned and saw him hustling down the steps, his round belly wobbling beneath his grey t-shirt. In his right hand he held *Mississippi's Other Rivers* over his head. Darby touched her middle—she hadn't realized the book was gone. He came toward her waving it at the sky.

"You forgot this."

The wheeze of his breath frightened her. He was winded—a hurried walk from his front porch to the yard had winded him. She took the book and he bent forward, resting his hands on his knees.

"You learning about the river?" He cocked his head and stared at her with one milky blue eye, fierce beneath its hairy brow. She nodded.

"I know more about that river than any book," he said. "I fish on it, every day. Have fished every day, most of my life."

Darby hugged her book, staring at the dapples of shadow and light the setting sun threw on the ground. Here it was, the opening she'd been waiting for. She could not have

imagined a better one. And all she could do now was try not to cry, force herself to nod at the huge man before she sped away down the street.

“Come back and see me!” He shouted after her. “I’ll tell you all about it! I used to fish with your father, you know! Ask that big sister of yours!”

Darby did not stop. She ducked her head and moved as fast as she could without running, down the mile-long stretch of gravel to her house. She burst through the door shouting.

“*Ellyn!* Ellyn?”

The house was silent, its rooms waiting and empty. Darby ran to her bedroom. She dropped to her knees beside her desk chair, ripping the blanket away. She groped along its underside, the place where she and Ellyn left notes for each other, when they didn’t want Vonny to see them. Darby found the Post-it and pulled. *Darb, out with Chelsea. Back before Mom is. Dinner in the fridge. You know what to do. XO. E.*

Darby sat back on her heels, crumpling the note to a small, sticky ball in her hands. She took deep breaths, biting her lips. Blinking back tears and something else that welled and welled within her.

**On the streets** of a neighborhood thirty minutes from Unida, Vonny stretched her legs, finding a rhythm for her stride and searching the pavement for marks of colored chalk. The run, it turned out, was more like a game. A chasing game for adults, a sort of fox hunt, where two designated “foxes” ran off and left a trail, marks of colored chalk designed to mislead the hunters, as well as to show them where to go. The hunters gave

the foxes ten minutes to run, before setting out in pursuit. During those ten minutes, to Vonny's surprise, everyone drank beer.

She'd accepted the can Trista gave her, returning the smiles of the crowd. Here were people she knew and didn't know—faces from work and church and even high school. Some runners were older, with gray hair and lined faces, and some seemed barely out of college, but most of the group appeared around Vonny's age—in their thirties. And they were primed for a good time. Before Vonny knew it she'd been laughing and chatting, the cold beer sliding easily down her throat.

On the road Vonny peeked down at her own legs, pleased at their slim curves. She was not old—none of these people were, though they had jobs and kids and mortgages. Her feet bounded along the pavement. Out here, running in the dusk, she was Vonny Mayfield, the girl who'd been captain of her varsity cross-country team. Who her coach had called *a natural athlete*. Trista appeared beside her, playfully nudging her ribs.

“See? It's fun, isn't it?” she said.

Vonny laughed. Yes, it was.

“I'm sorry Jacob isn't here.”

Vonny made herself laugh again. “Oh, that doesn't matter,” she said.

She felt Trista looking at her. Examining, the way she'd done in the driveway that morning.

“You're not disappointed?”

“Please.” Vonny snorted. “Why would I even think about him?”

“Well good—I'm so glad you're happy!” Trista squeezed her arm, her voice suddenly buoyant. Vonny let her jog ahead, watching the swing of her ponytail. The truth

was that Vonny had panicked on the drive out, the reality that Jacob might be here crashing in on her in wave after wave as Trista screamed along with the radio, dancing in the passenger seat. It was all well, she'd realized, to daydream. To dig out the album she kept under folded sweaters and look at the picture she'd snapped at seventeen, Jacob bending toward her on a friend's boat on the river, his shoulders tan and the sun lighting his hair. It was all well to close her eyes and smell sunscreen. To imagine of a different ending to that night and many others, the way she'd done long ago, in the guilty satisfying hours after Liam came home late and fell immediately to snoring beside her. Actually seeing Jacob would be quite another thing. After the way they'd parted! She remembered the hard line of his jaw, his face turned away from her on her couch as she explained about people talking, how she didn't want Darby and Ellyn to hear. Her Jake had said all the right things, about wanting the best for her and the girls, and walked away without touching her or even looking in her eyes. When he was gone Vonny had shut herself in her bathroom and cried, hugging her chest to keep her body from flying apart. And that was when she'd still believed she could have everything back. Her family and Jacob too. What would happen if he still couldn't look at her? If she saw he hated her?

Trista hadn't told her how far the run was from Unida. In the Pontiac the miles of highway forty-three had spread out behind them like an ocean. Already night was coming on. Vonny's mind had swirled with vague fears from childhood, half-remembered warnings from fairy tales. *When it gets dark little girls lose their way.* Ten minutes from town she'd turned down the music.

“Trista, where are we going? I don't think this is a good idea.”

Trista whipped her head around, her eyes wide with indignation.

“What do you mean, not a good idea? We’re just going for a run, remember? We’ll be back in just a few hours.”

Vonny heard her own voice shake. “I really shouldn’t leave the girls.”

Trista laughed, reaching over to squeeze Vonny’s thigh. “Honey, you’re already gone. Come on, we talked about this. Ellyn is sixteen. She knows what to do.”

“But they’re trying to cope with this thing—”

“And you’re taking care of yourself so you can help them. You have to put yourself first sometimes, so that you...”

Here Vonny had stopped listening. She watched the movements of Trista’s face, its bowed mouth and upturned nose. This was therapy-speak, she knew, and the problem was that Trista believed it. She wasn’t about to take Vonny home, because she, Trista, wanted a buddy with her. This was Trista putting Trista first. By the time they got to the house where the run began, Vonny almost hated her. But then she’d combed the crowd, slowly realizing that Jacob wasn’t there, and her relief and disappointment were so total she felt ashamed. Part of her had wanted to see Jacob. Just as part of her was desperate to keep avoiding him, keep treasuring her selfish dream like a shining onyx stone in her heart. Neither of these things was Trista’s fault.

Like other runners had told her she would, Vonny learned the rules quickly. For the first twenty minutes she hung back, watching, till she saw that a green sign like a capital “T” or a plus meant the trail could go in any of the three or four directions indicated, including back the way the runners had come. At each intersection, scouts took off in all directions, calling back to the group when they discovered a red “x,” indicating a false trail, or a blue arrow, indicating a true one. White arrows were ambiguous—the



trail could still be false or true. As the sun set, the group turned on flashlights. Teasing and laughing increased with the deepening twilight. Vonny felt her own spirits leap, remembering games of spotlight in the evenings of her childhood, the excitement of creeping out to roll yards in the chill nights around Halloween.

Less than a mile from the starting point, she saw why people had warned her she'd get dirty. With whooping shouts a scout called the group into a side yard of an abandoned house. Around back was a chain link fence with blue yarn tied above a gaping hole in between the last links and the ground. The only place to go was down. Vonny followed Trista, gripping the fence tight and sliding, feeling mud crumble against her back. Then she was running again, splashing through a ditch after the flashlight that bobbed ahead, trying to keep up. Once she fell, her toe catching on a root and sending her sprawling, but in a second she was up again, laughing. She ran on with mud clumped to her new shoes.

The group clambered out of the gulley into a more commercial area, dashing through the back parking lots of strip-mall offices and an Arby's. Near a dumpster they came upon another intersection marker, a plus.

"You." A blonde man whose arms were sleeved with tattoos pointed to Vonny. "Check left."

Vonny ran, scrambling through a hedge and up a small incline, where a pool of yellow street light dropped off into a concrete drainage ditch. A wide, flat space, perfect for running, with a trickle of water streaming down the center. Vonny hesitated. From far behind her she heard voices.

"Not this way!" A woman shouted. "What about left?"

“Hang on!” Vonny called back. She scooted down the concrete slope—a much steeper grade than she’d realized from above. The ditch stretched away in both directions, with no marker to indicate the trail. Vonny turned to the right and set out, racing down the trough. She ducked beneath a low-hanging branch and stopped, a pain pulsing in her side. Straight ahead was a gaping black cave—the ditch headed under a train trestle. She thought uneasily of transients, hobos who might pile up in a place like that to sleep. She held her breath, listening. Behind her there were no more voices. Had they found the trail and moved on? Called to her without her hearing? She backed up a few paces. Surely, this wasn’t the way. But on the side of the underpass something caught her eye. An arrow, drawn in white chalk. A sign that meant she might be on the right track. She inhaled deeply, calming her nerves. If the trail was laid this way, things had to be safe. The foxes must have been through here, only a few minutes before, to draw a red “x” or an arrow on the other side of the cavern. She balled her hands into fists and jogged silently into the darkness.

The underpass was longer than it had looked, and she could sense the concrete ceiling hanging low above her. Vonny ducked her head and slowed, feeling her way with hands outstretched. Three fourths of the way through she saw the mark on the other side, a blue arrow, plain and bright in the glare from another street lamp. True trail. She pumped her fist, smiling to herself, and turned to run back for the others. It was a good feeling, to be the new girl who found the way. She took two steps and stopped again, goose bumps rising along her arms. Something was wrong. She felt it—the creeping horror of a dream becoming nightmare. Somewhere close by her there was a sound, a shifting movement in the dark. Vonny lunged toward the tunnel’s end, the start of a

scream ripping from her throat. From nowhere a hand clapped over her mouth. Behind her a voice whispered, “Gotcha.”

She struggled desperately, kicking and clawing at the body that held her. Her mind reeled with disbelief—this couldn’t be happening. *No*. With all her might she slammed her elbow backwards, felt it sink into soft flesh. Hot air puffed in her ear: *oomph*. The grip around her waist loosened and fell away.

“God!” a man’s voice gasped. “I’m kidding! You don’t have to kill me.”

Vonny did not feel herself run. In an instant she was at the end of the tunnel, bursting into the light. She was in the middle of the drainage ditch, in the stream. Her feet lost touch with the slick concrete and the ground rushed at her face, crashing into her shoulder and side.

“Wait!” the voice called. “It’s just me! I caught up in my car—I just wanted to scare you!”

He was coming at her, coming closer. *Get up, get up*. Vonny flailed, her shoes refusing to grip. She stumbled and fell again. Strong arms wrapped under her armpits, pulling her up.

“Trista! Are you all right? It’s me! Tris—”

Vonny turned. There, in the dim glow of the streetlamp, was Jacob. His dark hair was short now, and the scruff of his beard, she saw, was peppered with gray. But his eyes were the same—amber eyes, kindling with warmer brown near the center. Sad eyes, just like before. And his body was long and lean.

“*Vonny*.” He said her name in a half-whisper. His lip curled—with amazement or disgust, she didn’t know.

“Jacob. What are you doing?” Vonny was conscious of her soaked clothes, her shirt and shorts dripping with ditch water. She looked down and gasped—her elbows and knees were covered in blood. It trailed over her shins and blotted her socks.

“I was hiding,” he said. “It was a joke. I thought you were someone else.”

“Trista,” she said.

“Right. I’m so sorry.” In an instant his demeanor changed. “Well. Let’s get you fixed up. Come on over and lean against the wall. Are you broken or just skinned?”

Vonny rested her butt against the concrete slope and leaned forward, clenching her teeth. Here was Jacob, after all. And he didn’t care enough even to hate her.

“Ankles okay? What about knees?”

Vonny couldn’t speak. She kept her head down while she rotated her ankles, then bent both her legs and arms. Everything moved as it should.

“Hey!” Trista’s voice echoed down the ditch. “Why didn’t you yell for us? We’ve been going the wrong way for like half an hour!”

The group clattered toward them, talking together. Vonny stood up straight and wiped her eyes.

“Uh-oh!” the blonde man shouted. “Blood on trail!”

“Oh Vonny!” Trista said. “Are you all right?”

They stopped around her, peering at her wounds.

“It’s fine,” Vonny managed. “I’m just banged up.”

“That’s a trooper!” the blonde man said. He held up a hand for Vonny to high-five.

Behind her, Vonny heard someone cooing: “Hey, you.”

She turned and saw Trista wrapped like a starfish around Jacob's waist, her head nestled under his chin. He returned her embrace and swayed, the two of them rocking from side to side.

"Everybody ready?" the blonde man said. "Let's go!"

The group began to move again, through the dark tunnel and out the other side. Vonny ran behind, letting the gap between her and the other runners stretch. All through her body the pain grew, shooting through her stiff limbs and swelling in her heart. How much could a person hurt in three days? There was nothing to do but keep on. Just get through it and know she'd be home, sometime. She set her mouth and kept moving, forcing herself to keep someone in sight.

The rest of the run was interminable. A mile of ditch and a mile of road, the blood drying on her legs and crusting in her clothes. When at last the driveway she'd set out from sloped under her feet, Vonny nearly sobbed with relief. She found Trista by the cooler, drinking a beer with Jacob. Vonny interrupted, speaking only to her neighbor.

"Trista, I'm leaving now."

"What?" Trista sounded dismayed. "But we can't leave now! The slow people aren't even back!"

"Well, you can't leave like that anyway," another voice said. A woman had walked up behind them. She held out an open beer, smiling at Vonny. "Come on. This is my house. We're going to get you cleaned up."

Vonny wanted to protest, to tell Trista she could leave now or get bent. To thank the woman for her offer and stride off to the car. But the woman's voice was kind and understanding, and suddenly Vonny knew she couldn't save face any more. The tears

were coming fast—she had to escape somewhere alone. She let herself be led away into the house, to a bathroom of Pepto-Bismol tile. The woman disappeared briefly, then returned with a clean gray sweatsuit.

“Just get cleaned up and put this on,” she said. “You can bring it to the next run, or give it to Trista. Neosporin’s in the medicine cabinet, if you want it.” She patted Vonny’s shoulder. “Everyone falls sometimes on trail. It’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

When she was finally, blessedly alone, Vonny locked the door. She shed her clothes and got in the tub, not looking at herself in the mirror. Under the cover of rushing water she let the tears come, past caring what the nice woman might think of her wastefulness. How stupid she had been, to think she could matter to Jacob after all these years. Who knew if they’d even had something special, really. It could have all been in her head. Vonny had thought she was done with delusions. But here in the pink tub another one fell away from her, revealing more guilt she hadn’t wanted to own. Her fixation on Jacob had all been about Liam—the things Liam was and wasn’t, the endless ways he let her down. Making herself come to fantasies of Jacob while Liam slept beside her. Running off to see Jacob just as soon as she realized Liam was never coming home. It was all the same, and it was all unfair to the man she had once called a friend.

Vonny stayed in the tub until the water ran cold, and then she took her time washing the blood from her limbs, and gently cleaning the grit from her scrapes. She was almost finished before she realized she was talking to herself, gentle nothings she’d murmured to Ellyn and Darby, whenever they hurt themselves playing. *See? It’s nothing—you’ll be okay. You’re a big girl and you’re tough.* The gray sweat suit hung

loose on her frame, but it was soft and comforting. Vonny helped herself to Neosporin, Band-Aids, and the makeup bag she found in a drawer. When she exited the bathroom, she was shocked at the numbers on a bedside clock. Eight thirty. She'd been in the bathroom nearly two hours. It was past time to be home.

Vonny hurried into the kitchen. The crowd, she realized, was more lively. At the table a group of people played a loud game, rolling dice and shouting. Near her elbow a young man poured vodka into a row of shot glasses. This was not an end of the night, farewell drink. This was gearing up for a party. She tapped the shot glass man.

“Hey, have you seen Trista Simon?”

“Who?” He smiled at Vonny, a nice smile, she noticed. Just crooked enough to be interesting. “I’m sorry. I don’t know that many people here. Shot?” He gestured at the glasses. “It’s vanilla flavored.”

“No thanks, I’m good.” Through the window she saw people milling outside, around the orange glow of a fire pit. Probably Trista was there.

“Hey wait!” The shot man caught her wrist. “Don’t I get an introduction? I’m Derrick. Derrick McCord. I live here in Fulton.”

“Vonny Cother,” she said, pulling away. “It was nice to meet you.”

“Vonny—wait!” The grip on her wrist tightened. “*Cother?* Do you—do you have kin around Unida?”

Vonny stared. The young man’s skin had gone dough-pale. He was pulling her too hard toward him, his eyes avid and hungry. *Ambulance chaser*. Already it was starting. Perfect strangers wanting gory details on the fire. Vonny jerked her hand away.

“Let go of me.”

“Wait, you don’t understand! I’m Derrick McCord. I’m a sheriff’s—”

A group of people burst through the back door, carrying the sweet stench of pot.

Trista was with them. She staggered into a chair, giggling.

“I think I gotta go home,” she said. “Where’s my keys?”

Vonny grabbed her. “I drove, Trista. We’re going home now.”

She yanked Trista’s arm around her neck and stepped forward, but the woman was dead weight at her side. Vonny staggered.

“Here, let me help!” The shot man was back, pawing at her.

“Get away from me!” Vonny used her free hand to push him. Other people were starting to notice. They were beginning to draw a crowd.

“Hey, man, I got it.” Jacob Rodak stepped between Vonny and the stranger. In one heaving motion he bent and lifted Trista at the waist, letting her body drape over his shoulder.

“I can walk I said!” she shouted, convulsing with laughter.

Wordlessly Vonny walked outside. All the way down the driveway and to her car, she did not look behind her. Jacob opened the Pontiac’s back door and eased Trista onto the seat.

“Thank you,” Vonny said. She was already shoving the key in the ignition.

“Wait.” Jacob opened the passenger door. “How are you going to get her in the house?”

Vonny looked over her shoulder. Trista was curled in a ball, already breathing heavily.



“Vonny.” His voice was soft. “Just let me help you. Okay?”

When she didn’t answer, he climbed inside and shut the door.