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THE HOOK: STORIES

by

Jenny Miranda Lederer

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis

December 2012

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For my sister, champion, and editor, Molly Louise Lederer, the one who made me want to write in the first place.

ABSTRACT

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The nine pieces of short fiction in this collection feature a group of characters in transition: some caught between the easy magic of youth and the often painful discovery of complexity, others between willing stasis and queasy action. Their decisions in these moments will prove pivotal, with ramifications that echo for the remainder of their lives. The settings of these stories range the length of the East Coast from New Hampshire to Florida, often visiting places where the border between the wild and the tame becomes blurred: a campground, a rural farmhouse, a stretch of moonlit beach sand with the boundless ocean beyond. The indistinct delineation of civilization mirrors the chaotic internal worlds of these characters, at war with their own obsessive desires and fears. Although each of the individual pieces in the collection deals with disparate relationships and circumstances, the stories are unified by overarching themes of disillusionment and mortality.

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Basil Loses His Virginity

Basil Ellerton was eighteen years old when he left his home in Takoma Park, Maryland, to study geography at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. A week later, his father came home early from work at the hospital, pulled the Walther P22 from its hiding place in the garage, and shot himself through the brain stem. Basil drove home, away from campus, away from the students playing Frisbee in the fading light and calling to one another across the quad. He drove seven hours through the night, the very same trip he'd taken in reverse with all his boxes and bags a week and a half before. The highway's yellow lines unspooled before him, on and on and on. Every time his car crossed another state boundary he held his breath for as long as he could, until black orbs started to crowd the edges of his vision. Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania. Each time he did this, he remembered that drive north to school. It had been exhilarating, that freedom of starting fresh somewhere completely new, as someone unknown, far away. He could be better than he'd been, more sure and outspoken. Braver. But as the sign welcoming him to Maryland slid past and his brain buzzed with exhaustion and dread, he knew: The thing you most fear will find you. *This* thing, that felt unreal but was real. He knew it was real, because of the wheezy hitch in his uncle's voice when he'd given Basil the news. *Your father*, Uncle Craig had said, and stopped, unable to continue for a moment. *Your father—*

In the gray light of morning Basil arrived home, where his uncle and Aunt Irene greeted him at the door and led him to the couch where his mother was. He put his arms around her.

*

The next few days were surreal. He sat at the dining room table with his aunt and uncle while they planned the funeral and reception. He was one of the grown-ups now, asked to weigh in on logistical issues as though this was how it had been done for years, as though this was how it had always been done. He nodded when his aunt showed him the obituary in the local paper, listing the facts: Lawrence Ellerton, doctor, father, husband, brother. The word used was *passed*, as though it was something you glimpse from a train. Basil was the one who stayed home while his aunt took his mother out on some invented errand, to let in the men that were coming to clean up the mess in the garage. When the two of them arrived, they stood awkward in the foyer in their blue plastic suits, white surgical masks dangling from their hands. Basil asked them what the “CTS Decon” logo on their van stood for.

“Crime and Trauma Scene Decontamination,” the taller one told him. Basil nodded. He led them around the house. He showed them the scene.

At night he had trouble sleeping. He sought out the dim shapes of countries in the maps that covered the walls and ceiling of his bedroom and mouthed their capitals. *Hanoi, Helsinki, Kampala, Berlin.*

At the funeral he stood in his graduation suit between his mother and his aunt and thanked people for coming, one after another. He couldn't cry. He felt as though he was full of sand. He imagined a beach without an ocean, dunes like shoulders rolling up out of the ground, as far as he could see. Beside him his mother wept harder and harder until his aunt took her by the shoulders and steered her away, leaving Basil standing alone. The men shook his hand. The women kissed him dryly on the cheek. *I'm so sorry*, they said to him. And to each other: *what a shame. He was a wonderful man, a wonderful doctor; what a tragedy, what a shock.*

The surviving Ellertons had known it could happen. Basil's father had been in treatment for depression for as long as Basil could remember. He had dark mornings, plenty of them, when he wouldn't get out of bed; he exhausted all the vacation and personal days the hospital gave him, and when those were gone he took a leave of absence. Then in the last few months he'd started seeing a new therapist and he'd seemed to be getting better. He'd gone back to work. He started making plans again, talking about taking a couple days off when Basil came home for Thanksgiving so the two of them could go fishing on the Potomac. Fishing, as though that was normal, though Basil had never fished before in his life. But Basil was happy to go. To do whatever, really. His father had even booked a little cabin for a couple of nights. After the funeral Basil found the confirmation email lying in the printer tray on his father's desk. Nonrefundable, it said. But there were worse things than some wasted money. Obviously.

After one of the dining room table meetings, Basil was put in charge of going through the stuff in his father's office and on his home computer.

"Is that cool, big guy?" Uncle Craig asked him. "You think you can handle it OK?"

Basil said, "Yeah. Yes. I can do it."

Uncle Craig stood and clapped a hand on Basil's shoulder.

"We need your help now, buddy. Your mom especially."

Basil nodded that he understood, that he would do whatever had to be done.

He couldn't actually sit down at the computer until days after the funeral. On the fourth day he made himself do it: enter the study and hit the power switch and then sit there waiting the excruciating moments it took the computer to power up.

What had paralyzed him with hope and dread was the thought that there might be a note on the computer. A document labeled *For Baz*, maybe. But when he looked there was nothing. The last website his father had visited was the *JAMA* archive, an article on psoriasis. Basil opened the webmail and scrolled through the list of messages, pausing to forward money-related stuff to his uncle who was handling all that, and deleting junk. There were very few personal messages. Basil's father had not been a big email user; he preferred to send real letters, written out longhand in spiky cursive. Basil highlighted one email he himself had sent to both his parents, photos of his new dorm room and the view of the woods from his window, and deleted it.

As he scrolled down, an older, unread email caught his attention. He opened it up and read.

Dear Larry,

How are you? Do you remember me? My last name was Molina when we knew each other. I'm writing because I saw your name in the physician search on my insurance website (to make a long boring story short—ha) and thought that it might be you who I went to school with. I asked Sandy Spence (she was a grade above me, two below you at Barrow) and she told me yes, you had moved back here after medical school and that you were working at St. Elizabeth's. I would really love to catch up with you over coffee or a drink sometime. My office (I'm a CPA) is near Manor Circle but I can come nearer to the hospital if that would work best for you. Let me know when you get a chance!! Looking forward to hearing from you Larry, better late than never :)

Marta

Basil drummed his fingers on the desk, considering this. *Marta*, he typed in response and then stopped. He thought of the polite blandness of the obituary and began again.

Dear Marta,

Lawrence (my dad) passed away last week and so did not receive your email. Unfortunately the funeral already took place last Saturday the 3rd. He is interred at Grace Episcopal Cemetery in Silver Springs.

Sincerely,

Baz Ellerton

He read it over. Was there anything else to say? He wanted to write something like *I'm sorry*, but that seemed backward. He changed *Sincerely* to *Best Wishes* and then back again and then pressed *Send*.

*

That night he went out with some friends from high school who were still around, Curt and Leo and Mark. Curt had deferred going to school for the year to work for his dad's landscaping business. Leo and Mark had no particular plans. The four of them drove to the bar in Adelphi that didn't require any ID, a bar where Leo said there might be a waitress, Brianne, who could hook them up. Basil remembered Brianne from school. She was two grades ahead of him, imperious in her beauty, untouchable. He scanned the crowd bar several times before he determined with a sharp mixture of disappointment and relief that she was not working that night. They ordered pitchers of Yuengling and played pool on a table

with peeling red felt that sent the balls spinning in unexpected directions. Basil and Leo kept winning. Curt, usually so competitive, didn't really seem to care. He'd finally had sex the weekend before with Liza, the high school senior he was dating. He kept checking his phone for messages from her. In the blue light of the cell phone screen, Curt's face looked frightened and happy.

Basil searched in himself for some kind of response to this. He should feel envy or begrudging admiration for Curt or a mixture of the two. He could remember having those feelings about other friends, their sexual conquests. But there was nothing in him now. He lined up his shot and sunk the eight ball.

Then Mark found a friend of his brother's with some pot they could buy and they went out and smoked a joint in the parking lot beside Leo's truck.

The air outside was still as warm as it had been in August and Leo was still into the same Spanish guitar album he'd been listening to all summer. Basil listened intently to the music; it sounded silvery, pure, even through the truck's crappy speakers.

"Hey listen, man," Mark said. "I wanted to tell you. I'm sorry I couldn't come to your dad's funeral."

"Yeah," said both Leo and Curt, even though Leo had actually been there with his parents.

"It's OK," said Basil. "It was just kind of weird. All those people, most of them I'd never met before in my life." He coughed and spit on the ground. "It was fucking weird to see people crying that I didn't even know." He had felt angry, seeing those people crying for his father. Who were they? What did they care?

He remembered scrutinizing their faces to see how much they knew. He'd wanted to say to them, *Did you know he used a gun? Did you know they wore suits and masks to clean it up?*

"How long are you going to be home for?" Leo asked, and Basil shrugged, because he didn't know.

*

When Basil got home later that night, he slid his shoes and socks off in the front hall and stood for a moment, letting his eyes adjust to the dark and feeling his bare toes against the rough shag of the carpet. There was a finger of light under the door to the living room. When he pushed open the door he saw his mother asleep, half upright on the couch in front of a muted TV. He padded across the room and switched the power off.

"Baz," his mother said behind him. He jumped.

"Hey," he said. "You scared me."

She sat up and reached for the lamp on the side table. Basil looked at her in the sudden light. Her clothes and hair were ruffled. She looked very tired. She patted the couch next to her and Basil sat down carefully beside her, conscious of his breath and the faint murky smell on his clothes and his hair. His mother put her arm around his shoulders and leaned her cheek against the top of his head.

“I’m so sorry, buddy,” she said. Her voice was muffled against his hair. “I’m sorry about school. I know how excited you were. I wish—”

“I’m OK,” he said. He realized he hadn’t thought about school, not once all night. Classes would be starting on Monday. “I want to be here.”

She squeezed his shoulder tight and then let go. “I’m proud of you,” she said. “You didn’t give up on him. He—he made it so hard. You know.”

Basil closed his eyes. He remembered the drawn curtains and stale air in his parents’ bedroom when his father had been in there for days. His father asking to be left alone, *shut the door behind you, please*, the note of apology in his voice that made Basil helpless with fury every time.

His mother went on. “But he did love you. He did. He loved us both, as much as he could. He was just in so much pain.”

Basil knew what she meant, what she was trying to tell him. The rough push and pull of his father’s sickness and recoveries, the exhaustion that came with loving him. She was trying to give Basil permission to feel relief. He couldn’t feel it.

She kissed his temple and said, “It’s late. What time is it? You should go to bed, don’t you think?” She stood up and looked around for a moment as though she was unsure of where she was.

“Yeah. I will, soon. I just want to check on the computer.”

“OK.” She stood a moment in the doorway. “Goodnight. I love you.”

“Love you too,” he said, and she turned and went. Here, too, was something strange and new. In high school his mother had interrogated him

mercilessly when he'd returned home from his friends' houses. She was sharp-eyed and thorough. He wondered if this was another privilege that came with being suddenly grown-up. The simple alternative, of course, was that she had been too distracted to notice. Or that it didn't matter, now.

*

There were two new unread messages in his father's email account. One was junk and the other was from the woman, Marta.

I feel so terrible to have learned of your loss. I hope this is not imposing on you, but would you have time to meet me and talk for a little while? I can leave the office any time after four. Please let me know if that would be possible. I'm sure you are very busy. Baz, thank you.

Marta

Basil leaned back in the chair and rubbed the bridge of his nose. His head still felt muddled from the beer and the weed, and he didn't know what to think. This woman, who was she? He imagined a plump, dough-faced person with cat hair on her sweater, like his seventh grade French teacher, Miss Feldmen. A sad woman, this Marta, alone, asking for his help. But his help with what, exactly? He

couldn't imagine. He wondered what his father would've said about her. And then he knew: he would go.

He could hear his mother moving around upstairs; she would stay up until she heard him go to bed.

He typed quickly,

Dear Marta,

I would be happy to meet with you. I also will be free tomorrow afternoon after four. Where would you care to meet?

Sincerely,

Baz Ellerton

By the time he got up the next morning there was a reply from Marta: *How about the Olivio cafe on Carroll at 4? Thank you, again!!* Basil read it with a cold feeling in his stomach. He couldn't recall his certainty from the night before, why this had to happen. But it was happening now; it felt obligatory, like a job interview, and so he wrote back, *You're welcome, See you then*, and he showered and shaved and found a clean blue shirt to wear.

"Hello, Marta," he said to the bathroom mirror. "My father spoke very highly of you. My father spoke often of you. My father Larry spoke of you often,

highly.” But he knew he wouldn't lie. He would let her shake his hand and say *I'm so sorry; he was a wonderful man, a wonderful doctor; how awful this must be for you*. He would do this last thing, just as he'd done everything he'd been asked to do since he'd gotten that phone call from Uncle Craig, and then, maybe, all of this could begin to be over.

When it was time to go, Basil found his mother on the screened-in porch with a newspaper spread open on her lap. She was wearing an old, loose-necked t-shirt and her shoulders looked thin, which surprised him. He had never thought of her as thin or fat before.

“Mom, I'm going out,” he told her. She nodded and smiled up at him. Without makeup her face seemed blurry, her eyes soft and small. “I'll be home for dinner,” he told her, and she nodded again.

*

Basil parked around the corner from the café. There were tables and chairs in front but few people at them, even though it was warm outside. A dark-haired woman in sunglasses sat alone at one small table, reading a book. As he approached, she looked up and said, “Baz?”

He nodded. “Hi.”

She folded her glasses on the table and stood. “Hello, Baz!”

“Basil. Well, Baz,” he said. He held out his hand to shake, but she just gripped the tips of his fingers and squeezed. They sat down facing each other at the little table. He was shocked by how pretty she was.

“I’m so glad you could come,” she said. “It’s strange to think that—”

The waiter appeared at her elbow, smiling, and she turned to him. “Just an espresso, please,” she told him. She had an accent, just barely, that made her words sound kind of furry. The waiter looked down at Basil.

“An espresso. Too. Please,” he said, and felt immediately stupid. He’d wanted a Sprite.

Marta smiled at him. One of her teeth on the top row overlapped with another. She had a long neck, and large breasts under a tight red sweater. “Basil,” she said, as though she could taste the word. “What an unusual name. Beautiful.”

“Thanks, um. It’s from that show *Fawlty Towers*. It was my dad’s idea. He likes British comedy. Liked. He used to really like that show.” He winced, hearing himself. But she was still smiling at him with her strange, thrilling smile. Everything he’d thought about her had been wrong. He felt a little dizzy.

The waiter returned and placed two ice waters and two small cups of fragrant coffee down on the table. Marta wrapped her hands around her cup.

“Your father,” she said. “Your father and I were in school together. I guess you know from the email.”

Basil nodded. She went on, “I moved here with my family from Havana when I was sixteen. From Cuba. I stayed back a year when I went to high school,

as a freshman, because my English was not very good. We didn't know anyone here. We were given political asylum, but we couldn't leave the state. It was a very hard time for my parents. For all of us.” She picked up her spoon and then put it back on the saucer. “I just sort of kept my head down and tried to work as hard as I could, to get an education. Which is why my parents wanted to come here, to the United States. Are you in college, Baz?”

“Yeah,” he said. He thought about qualifying the statement and then decided to say nothing. He took a sip of his espresso and then a sip of water to clear the bitter taste.

“I thought so. You look so much like your father when I knew him, except older. A little bit older. We were in a class together when I was in my second year at Barrow. Chemistry. By then I knew a lot more English, but I'd started hanging out with a group of kids—I guess you'd say they were burn-outs. I never really did drugs much in high school. But I liked that they didn't—expect much from me, I suppose. I wasn't doing so well in school then.

“Larry, your father, he was assigned to work on a project with me. And I know he must have been annoyed, because he was a very serious student, preparing for college, and I had a not-so-good reputation.” She leaned forward. “Am I boring you?”

“No,” he said. He had been watching her mouth as she spoke. “No, you aren't. Not at all.”

She smiled again. “OK. Well. So we worked together, and maybe it wasn't as bad as he thought it was going to be. And we became friendly.

“Well, he was being kind to me, anyway. But I was—I liked him very much. I thought I was in love with him, at the time. So dramatic! But that's what I thought. I wrote him all these letters to try and tell him how I felt, but I never gave them to him. Anyway, I think he must have known. He had a girlfriend then, a very beautiful girl named Ronnie. Veronica, Veronica Sayres. Do you know about her? No? Well never mind.”

She went on. Basil listened, leaning forward for every word. She told him about one day toward the end of the school year, when the weather had grown soft and dreamy and the students would drift out of class before the school day was over, transfixed by the sun. A group of kids skipped the last two periods of the day and drove out to Chesapeake Beach. Marta was among them, because Larry had told her he was going, and she wanted to be where he was. They piled in tangles into cars, legs over legs in the backseats and drove for an hour with the windows down.

When they got to the beach, empty except for a couple of dog-walkers, some of the boys stripped off their shirts and pants and ran hooting into the water. Marta rolled up her jeans and walked barefoot along a spit of algae-covered rocks that jutted out into the water, alone. She sat down on a dry patch and dangled her feet in the water.

“Marta,” she heard and looked up. Larry was picking his way across the rocks to her, holding his shoes in his hand. He sat down a small distance from her and they watched the others splashing and shrieking for a while.

“Should we go in the water?” she asked him.

He looked at her, not smiling. "Let's just sit here for a little bit," he said. She rolled a clumsy cigarette on her thigh, lit it and offered it to him. He took a drag and squinted against the smoke. "I never smoked before," he said, handing it back to her.

"Really?" she said, and he smiled and lay back with his head cradled in his hands.

"This sun is nice," he said. And they sat there together watching the sun break into crystals on the water, passing the cigarette back and forth.

Basil could see it, a Marta with longer hair and softer features, younger than he was now. His father, younger too. A person with secrets and troubles and dreams that Basil would never know, with a whole history in place before Basil had even existed. But Marta had been there. He was suddenly so grateful to her, for this gift of a glimpse into that one perfect afternoon.

She said, "This was in May, and he graduated at the end of the month. I never saw him again after that. I did think about him, though. I thought about him a lot but I never—I was too shy, I guess. But then when I saw his name on that list, it seemed like a sign. I wanted to tell him that it had meant something to me. His kindness. And if I couldn't tell him, I wanted at least to tell you." She reached across the table and took Basil's hands in hers. "Do you understand what I mean?"

Her hands were warm and dry. He nodded slowly. He did understand—she needed something so she could begin to end it, too, a marker to divide the

old part of her life from everything that would come after. It was too big for her to do alone. Her eyes were searching his face.

“Yes,” he said. He squeezed her hands. She was crying without sound, like something overflowing. He watched it happen for a moment and then he went to her and she stood and clutched at him, pulling him to her, twisting the fabric of his shirt in her hands. She pressed her face against his neck. Her breath smelled of liquor, something strong and sweet. She was so warm in his arms and he thought of the condom, the condom he had in his wallet right at that moment, *because*, he'd told himself when he put it there, ages ago, *you never know*. Where could they go from here? Maybe she lived nearby. The logistics weren't important.

She pulled away from him at last. “I'm so glad,” she said, “just, so glad—he had a happy life, didn't he? With you, you and your mother?”

His mother, at home. Basil looked into Marta's face. And what if he had been his father instead? Would he be plotting to leave this café with her now, together in one car, his hand curled expectantly on her thigh? Basil felt sick. He remembered why this had happened, all of this. He began to talk, to tell her anything she wanted to hear. He told her yes, they had been very happy. He told her his father had died of a heart attack doing what he loved, saving lives at the hospital. “He spoke very highly of you,” he told her, and watched her face brighten and flood again with tears, mercifully, before she could think to ask *how* or *when*.

Again Basil held her while she cried. He could feel the soft swells of her breasts under her sweater and he felt himself growing hard and was ashamed. After a bit she pulled back and held him at arms' length, her hands on his shoulders. Her eyes were red. "Well," she said. "I'm sorry to—for making a scene."

He shook his head. "I don't care."

"I should go, let you get back to your family. But, Baz, thank you. Again. For coming. This was... Please give your family my condolences."

"I will," he said, but he knew he wouldn't. How would that conversation go? "I will," he said again.

*

He never saw Marta again. But he knew that those two things, what had happened to his father and what happened to him that day, would orbit his life like twin moons, each of them following the other, always. He sat in his car around the corner from the café and he leaned the seat all the way back and cried until his eyes felt squeezed raw. He felt everything at once and he understood: there would be more pain like this, for as long as he lived, and he wanted it. He wanted it all.

That evening he went out with Curt and Leo to Leo's cousin's beach house in Chesapeake, and Brianne was there looking beautiful and ferocious, but he was unafraid, still thrumming inside from what had happened that afternoon, and

when Brianne looked at him he stared right back into her jade-green eyes, invincible, and in a little while they were play-wrestling in the sand and then Brianne took a bottle of Old Granddad from inside and they walked down the beach together, trading sips. *This very same beach*, Basil thought, *this town, in this country*. His father, a boy like him once, with his own sadnesses and joys. Basil took Brianne's hand. Somehow they started playing this game where they both pretended to have just learned about sex for the very first time, and Brianne stopped him in front of the porch of a house shuttered for the off-season and kissed him, and their hands were fumbling through clothes, and he whispered, *OK?* And she said yes.

“I'm, uh, pretty sure this is how you do it,” he said and she laughed in her lovely hoarse way against his neck and on the angular wooden steps of the house they moved together in the dark.

Beasts

Last summer, it was sharks and carnivorous whales. The summer before that, in '91, the first after the divorce, Neil's son Marcus was seven and his obsession had been dinosaurs. This summer, it's all Native Americans: bows and arrows, long houses, petroglyphs, and tomahawk battles.

The obsessions trouble Neil. He worries that they are a symptom of divorce, that ever since their family dissolved, Marcus has been grasping for a fixed purpose, a focus, something to bury his head into and hide. Lately Neil keeps looking for signs of things going wrong. He wants to identify and isolate something fixable, and then fix it.

This is the summer when Marcus comes to stay with Neil—to live with him, not just for the brief visits allowed by the custody arrangement. It's what Neil has wanted from the beginning. At the custody hearing, Melanie and her terrifying lawyer had explained the situation to the judge. Neil was a drunk, a smoker, and a musician. He forgot appointments and disregarded schedules. He'd once left a three-year-old Marcus unsupervised on the swing set; Marcus had fallen and knocked out four of his baby teeth. Neil was not mature enough to be a husband or a father. Not fit. Neil couldn't really disagree with anything they had said, at the time. It was all true.

“But I *am* his father, still,” Neil said, and Melanie's lawyer had looked at him with something like pity.

That was three years ago. Neil has been trying. He quit smoking and moved into a bigger apartment, one with an extra bedroom, just in case. He kept asking for Marcus, and at last, this past May, Melanie finally said yes.

Now Marcus sleeps at Neil's apartment during the week and goes back on the weekends to Melanie's new house—Terry's house. It's a trial period, Melanie has made that clear, to see how things go.

During the day, while Neil is at work at Guitar Center, Marcus goes to camp in a park on the edge of the Kirby Tillman State Forest: Osweegee Day Camp for Boys. It's eight weeks long, with a sleepover on the final night in August. Marcus is ecstatic. The campers are divided into groups named after Native American tribes. They go on nature walks, make crafts, and play Predator-Prey and Capture the Flag. Marcus is in the Iroquois tribe. He brings home treasures from the woods to show Neil: feathers, smooth stones, and once, an owl pellet wrapped carefully in Kleenex, with little wisps of yellow bones inside.

*

On the Thursday morning of the last week of camp, Neil drives Marcus out to the campground. Marcus is explaining about the 17th century Beaver Wars, which relate somehow to yesterday's game of Capture the Flag. The campers are taking these long-ago tribal rivalries and alliances very seriously. The Iroquois

and the Algonquians, Marcus tells Neil, have joined forces to defeat the Mannahoac tribe.

“In the game or in the Beaver War?” Neil asks, struggling to keep his face serious.

“In the *game*,” Marcus says. “In the war in real life the Algonquians made a truce with us but we didn’t need any of their help to fight the Mannahoac.” He pauses and takes a bite of his breakfast, a blueberry Pop-Tart. “We *crushed* them!” Purple crumbs spray from his mouth and pepper the dashboard, and Neil’s love for him feels huge, too big to live inside his chest.

They exit from the highway. Marcus has finished his breakfast and is telling Neil what he’s learned about Iroquois rites of passage, about vision quests out into the wilderness.

“Oh, I did something like that,” Neil says.

“You did? When? What happened?”

“When I was thirteen,” Neil says. “And I became a man. Just like what you’re saying. Except it was called something different back then, when I did it.”

“What? What was it called?”

“A bar mitzvah.”

“Dad. That’s not what I’m talking about *at all*.”

“No? Huh. It sounds exactly like it to me. And how would *you* know, anyway? You weren’t even there.” In truth, Neil’s bar mitzvah was drably ordinary. His mother had put him in a starched suit and made him stand by the door and thank everyone who had come, one by one. He’d been sweaty and

uncomfortable, but he'd stood there, ramrod-straight, thinking any moment now he'd feel it—adulthood, settling over his shoulders like a heavy cape. But it never came.

“You never told me you did that,” Marcus says. He waits for Neil to go on, eyes wide.

Neil clears his throat. “Well, it was a pretty unusual bar mitzvah. We set up a big tent in a canyon out in the desert near Grammy and Pops's place in Arizona, and after the dancing and cake and everything everyone went home, and they left me to stay in the canyon alone. With just a compass and a canteen and the clothes on my back.”

“How come?”

“Because—because I had to be alone, of course. You have to be totally alone or else you'll never have your vision. The vision of your spirit animal. Don't you know all of this? What are they teaching you at this camp anyway?”

“Yeah, I know it! I *do* know it,” says Marcus. “What did you see? What animal?”

“I can't tell you *that*,” Neil says, and *tsks* his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “It's a very private experience. But every good warrior gets to see his own, when he's ready. If he's truly brave enough.”

“Yeah,” Marcus says. “Yeah!” He's fidgeting, fiddling with his seatbelt, full of eager sugar-energy.

They pull into the gravel drive of the park. One of the camp counselors is walking on the shoulder of the road, an overweight guy in an embroidered polo

shirt and khaki shorts.

“Hey!” Neil slows alongside him. “Can I give you the permission slip for the sleepover? It’s for Marcus Heiberg. Here.”

The counselor turns. “S’ supposed to be handed in last Monday, you know.”

“I know, I know,” Neil says. “I’m sorry, and I appreciate it.”

Marcus had brought the permission slip home to Melanie’s last weekend but she’d forgotten to sign it. Neil had to call the camp and have their office fax a copy to Kinko’s for him to sign and fill out, the whole time feeling a sour pleasure at her carelessness.

The counselor takes the form and folds it in half without looking at it. “Hey there, Marcus,” he says.

“Hi Casey,” Marcus says. “I can get out here, Dad, OK?” He pulls his backpack up from between his feet.

“OK,” Neil says. “Have a blast, buddy.”

Marcus jumps out and follows the counselor down the road.

“Hey, I love you,” Neil calls after him and Marcus raises a hand in farewell without looking back, a skinny kid, tall for his age, shoulders pitched forward under the weight of his pack.

*

Neil drives straight to work. He has worked at Guitar Center for almost a year now. At night he still writes music, though he doesn't have a band anymore. When he first met Melanie after college, when they fell in love, he was playing drums with a group called Featherweight. The band was signed to a small label and had a decent local following. Melanie came to all of his shows. She was working as a manager of a little bakery then, before she got her real estate license, and sometimes they would get drunk together on the bakery roof until dawn, when the amazing, life-affirming smell of fresh bread would waft up to them through the vents. She had loved his music then, all of it, from the band's serious stuff to the nonsense songs that he would make up and sing to her in bed. But later, when they'd started talking marriage, he mentioned law school as an idea and she heard it as a promise. They got married and had Marcus and her disappointment grew and grew. Neil kept playing music and drinking, and one night he came home and she had taken his son and left. It was that same old stupid story.

At the store Neil does inventory and sells a practice amp to a teenage kid who comes in with his mother. The air conditioning is blasting; outside, the parking lot shimmers in the heat. It's a slow day. In the late afternoon some older musicians come in, regulars, and Neil talks to them for a while.

"How's your kid?" one of them asks, a skinny bass player named Stu.

"He's good, real good," says Neil. "He's at summer camp right now. Pretending to be an Indian warrior."

"You gonna teach him drums?" Stu asks.

“Yeah, maybe,” says Neil. He’s tried before; Marcus was politely willing but not really interested. Marcus is into books and science and sports, not music. It perplexes Neil but makes him proud, too, that Marcus is so very much his own person.

After work Neil goes home to an empty apartment; he makes a turkey sandwich and eats it on the couch in front of the TV with a couple of Budweisers. When the sandwich and beers are gone he pours himself a neat bourbon and drinks it slowly on the patio. The night air is warm. He thinks about Marcus, what he’s doing at camp—probably sitting around a fire, listening to an Indian legend. He should take Marcus camping himself, he decides. Maybe bring a couple of Marcus’s friends too. Neil can picture a ring of faces lit by firelight, singing along as he plays guitar, good songs for camping like Dylan or Creedance. Or maybe—even better—the faces are wide-eyed, listening rapt as he whispers a classic campfire horror story, like the one about the man with a hook hand. Marcus loves it when Neil tells him stories, how Neil can deepen his voice for some characters and squeak shrilly for others. Neil swirls the bourbon in his glass. He knows he’s delaying and Melanie will be pissed if he calls too late. He downs the rest of the drink and then he goes back to the couch, picks up the phone, and dials.

“Is everything OK?” Melanie says sharply when she hears his voice. “Is Marcus OK? You got the forms in?”

“Yeah, he’s all set. Really excited, too.”

“Great,” she says. “That’s great. Look, Neil, I’m kind of in the middle of something right now.”

“Sorry,” he says, “I just was—well, I wanted to talk to you about what’ll happen with Marcus when school starts.”

He can hear her open a can of soda, the long *shhhh* of escaping air. She’s always drinking Diet Coke now. “What are you thinking?” she says.

“I thought maybe we could work out some kind of schedule, so he’s with you half the time and with me half the time. I mean, he’s been here at my place for the majority these last couple months and everything’s been going well. *Really* well.” He hates the sound of his voice, pleading.

“Mm,” she says. “Yeah, I’m not sure about that. I think it’s important for Marcus to have a home base in one place, during the school year. He’ll have so much going on—it’ll help him focus.”

“He can focus fine here. Better, even. I can help him with his homework and stuff. With his school projects.”

“Kids need consistency, Neil. They don’t do well being shuttled around, constantly back and forth—”

He cuts her off. “Consistency? That’s bullshit. Kids are adaptable. They’re incredibly adaptable. *Consistency*. Who told you that, *Doctor* Terry?”

She’s quiet for a moment. Then she says, “You should be thanking Terry. He’s the one who convinced me to let you take care of Marcus this summer. To let him go to that camp.”

“Why would he do that?” But even as he asks the question, Neil has this feeling, as if he already knows.

“You should hear it from me, I guess. We're having a baby. We've been trying this summer and, well. Now it's happening.”

Neil isn't sure what to feel. “Congratulations,” he says.

“Thank you.” There's a long pause. He remembers Melanie, a younger, sweeter Melanie, yelling the results of her pregnancy test to him through the bathroom door. He remembers the joy and the terror of it. The possibility of a brand new person. He misses that moment with a ferocity that startles him.

“Let me ask you something,” he says. “You still think I'm not ready to be a parent, right? Even now?”

She sighs. “Neil. I don't want to do this right now. I'm tired, really tired. I should go.”

“Never mind,” he says. “Okay? Forget it.”

“I'll think about it some more,” she says. “About Marcus's schedule this fall. We'll talk it over.”

“Great, yeah, let's talk,” he says. Then he realizes she meant she'd talk it over with Terry.

“I'll call you,” she says, and hangs up. Neil replaces the phone in its cradle, and for a few minutes after he sits watching the muted television without really seeing it. *Ready or not*, he thinks, *he's still my son, my son, mine*. He should have told her *that*.

*

It's three in the morning when the phone wakes him. It rings and rings and when the answering machine message starts to play, the caller hangs up and calls again. Neil struggles out of bed and picks up the receiver.

"Mr. Heiberg? Mr. Heiberg?" The caller is a young man. "This is Ray from Camp Osweegee." He sounds as though he's been crying or he's about to cry. "I'm calling about Marcus."

Neil's stomach drops. "What about Marcus?"

"He—he's not in his tent. He's not here at the campgrounds. We're looking for him, but—we think he might've gone into the woods and gotten lost."

"Lost?" Neil's mind is racing. He thinks of kidnappers, shadowy men with black gloves. "When did he leave? When did you last see him?"

"I don't—we don't know. He could've gone just a little while ago, or anytime. We were asleep. We don't know."

"Have you called the police?" Neil can hear his own breath in the receiver, harsh and ragged.

"Dan—he's the director—he's calling the police. The other counselors are looking around in the woods."

"OK," Neil says. He has to think. "I'll be there in thirty minutes," he says and slams down the phone. He pulls on jeans and sneakers. His hands are shaking on the laces. When he turns on the car, the music from the tape player is stupidly joyful, major chords. It takes Neil a moment to realize it's Featherweight, his old band. He hits the eject button with his knuckle. Marcus had put that tape in on the way to camp that morning.

Neil drives fast, too fast, but the roads are nearly empty. Near the highway exit to the camp a doe runs across the road, her white belly glowing in the headlights. He swerves to miss her and the tires scream against the asphalt.

By the park gates, two camp counselors with flashlights are talking. Neil parks in a spray of gravel and goes to them.

“My son,” he says. “My—Marcus. Have you found Marcus?”

The counselor who speaks is young, with long reddish hair under a baseball cap. “No, we haven’t found him yet,” he says. “We’re about to go check the bathrooms again, in case.” His face is soft and terrified, really just a kid himself, and Neil thinks, *you?* You were in charge of my son? Of all those children, other people’s sons? The urge to hit this callow boy is almost overwhelming.

Neil asks, “Where’s the director—Don, where’s Don?”

The other counselor speaks up. “I’ll take you to his office. He’s waiting for the cops. There’s a ranger from the park service there too.”

He leads Neil to a cluster of dark buildings; one window is lighted. The camp director is standing out front with a third counselor—Casey, from that morning—and a small blond boy.

Neil stops in front of them, breathing hard. “What the fuck is going on? Where are the police? Are they on their way?”

“Mr. Heiberg?” says the director, holding up a hand. “Mr. Heiberg, listen, please, this young man has some information about your son. Tell him,” he says, taking the boy’s elbow. “Tell him what you just told me.”

The boy looks embarrassed. “Marcus told me he was gonna go into the woods to find his spirit animal. He snuck out.”

“Thank you, Jeremy,” says the director. “Mr. Heiberg. I’ve spoken to the Park Service, and they have six men out right now, two of them in ATVs on the roads. And under the circumstances, I feel it’s best to wait until morning before we involve the police. He can’t have gone far.”

“He’s nine years old,” says Neil, and he steps forward and slaps the director across the mouth. The man’s eyes go wide and he cups his face and chin with both hands.

Casey takes one step forward and then stops. Neil’s palm tingles. It’s all oddly calm.

Then the boy Jeremy starts to cry, little hiccupping sobs. Everyone looks at him, even the director with his wounded mouth.

Jeremy says to Neil, “*You* told him, he said. He said you’d done it before, when you were a kid. That’s why he said he wasn’t scared to go.”

Now they’re all looking at Neil with wondering eyes. Neil feels a flush on his face and his neck. He wants to explain the lie, why he did it, how small it was. He wants them to know enough to tell the right story to Melanie and Terry, the true one, where he’s a father who tries the best he can, always.

But there isn’t time for that. He says, instead, “Somebody give me one of your flashlights. I’m going to go look for him. And you’re going to call the police, now.” The two counselors glance at each other. “Give me your fucking flashlight.”

Casey hands it over wordlessly.

“Take this too,” says the other counselor. He holds out a mobile phone.
“So we can reach you if—when we find him. Or when you do.”

*

Neil walks quickly, sweeping the flashlight from side to side. He passes the huddle of tents, the canvas glowing white in the moonlight. Beyond is a trailhead leading into the woods, a signpost with different trails and distances marked on it. Which one would Marcus take? One says *Briar Rock 2.8 mi*, another *Orange Loop 8.1 mi*. Marcus would pick the hardest trail, the longest distance. He would be brave and tireless. Neil turns onto the path marked *Washburn Notch 12.6 mi*. He has to keep moving.

The woods are pine forest. Under the clean scent of the needles is a smell of rot. The moon barely filters through the branches. Neil's flashlight makes a thin tunnel of light; he follows it. He yells “Marcus! Marcus!” again and again until his throat is raw. The green numbers on the phone say 4:17 A.M. Pale boulders snaggle up between the trees, more and more of them, until there's rock on either side of the trail, canyon walls, and trees leaning in far above.

“Marcus!” and there's an answering cry that makes his heart clench in his chest. “Marcus? Marcus!”

He keeps yelling until it's unmistakable: his own voice echoing back to him.

It's 4:40, then 5:00, then 5:35 in the morning. The sky is washing gray through the trees to the east and there's tentative birdsong. A cold breeze troubles the branches overhead.

Ahead of him is a clearing. At the far end is a massive rock shaped like shoulders shrugging; a broken-off tree trunk rests on top of it. And on top of the tree trunk something is moving.

Neil rubs his eyes until they sting and looks. A large feline, a bobcat, is stepping silently along the length of the fallen tree. Neil freezes, watching. It jumps from the tree down onto the rock, smooth as spilled water. He can see the muscles moving under its silver coat. Its ears are forward, alert; they are outlined and tipped in black fur. It bunches up its body and jumps again, landing soundlessly on the dirt of the path. The birds are silent.

Neil lets his breath out in a shuddering sigh. The cat looks up and sees him. He can see its pale eyes. *Moon beast*, he thinks. He is crying without realizing it and shaking with fatigue. There are animals in these woods. Hungry things. His son is still out there somewhere, thin and vulnerable. Neil will keep walking, he knows, until he finds Marcus or until he collapses. There is still that much he can do. The breeze rattles the dead leaves in the undergrowth. The bobcat is motionless for one moment longer, looking at him, and then it lopes off the path into the shadows.

Somewhere in these woods is a lost boy, feeling the first fingers of panic creep over him as the trail disappears under his feet. There are deer and rabbits,

still asleep in their secret places. There is a father hunting for his son, struggling under his terrible burden of love.

The bobcat pads back toward her den and her kittens with a limp field mouse in her mouth and darkening flecks of blood on her muzzle. She knows the way by smell. Nothing in these woods is a mystery to her.

Famous Friends

Audra and Brittany are taking a trip for the weekend. They are going, going, going. The drive from New York City to the beach house on the Cape will take about five hours, six in traffic. Brittany has rented a bright red convertible for the trip. She drives it too fast. Brittany isn't afraid of the police. She can talk her way out of every ticket because she's a beautiful famous actress. Audra is an ESL teacher; only her students are in awe of her, and then only until their English is good enough to get them a job. She is paranoid about being followed by unmarked police cars or being radared from the bushes beside the road. Once, in the city, she rear-ended an actual cop while scrutinizing the Taurus behind her in the rearview mirror. It is because of this and other reasons that Brittany is driving.

This weekend is part of the vacation Brittany is taking between movies, between the last one that won awards and the next one that may, fingers crossed, win her one of her own. Before she was in any movies, she played a cop on *Rough Justice*, a network TV show that was not known for its acting. She is ready, now, to be taken seriously. She wants to do adaptations of Brecht and Shakespeare. She is going to completely different parties these days.

"Everyone just knows me as a nice rack," she tells Audra. "I do still want them to think of me as a nice rack, but, you know, one that can *act*."

When they pass through the tollbooth off the Cross Bronx Expressway, the teenage boy making change leans out after them, his whole upper body sticking out of the booth window, almost parallel to the pavement.

“Nina, I love you!” he shouts. Nina was the character from Brittany's cop show, her first big break.

“Oh, he loves you,” murmurs Audra, who twists around to look back and make sure he hasn't fallen.

“Yeah?” says Brittany, who doesn't look.

“Yeah,” Audra says. *Yeah, yeah, yeah*, they sing together, voices tiny in the wind. *With a love like that, you know you should be glad.*

They stop at a diner off 95 in Connecticut for lunch. It's called the Shoreline Vegetarian Enclave. Every normal diner food has a soy- or gluten-based equivalent on the menu. There is a tempeh Philly cheese steak. There is bulgur wheat. In defiance, they both order bacon. Audra points down at her Cobb salad: bacon, egg, chicken, and cheese nestle in the curls of lettuce.

“Look what I have! The whole farm,” she says. “Everything but the farmer. And his little lamb.”

“Let's get some!” says Brittany, “Souvlaki! I bet you they have it, they have a ton of Greek stuff.”

She's not joking; she pushes her bacon cheeseburger platter aside and disappears behind the menu. She is supposed to gain thirty pounds for the serious movie role. She seems to relish the idea of getting bigger and bigger. Of

biggening. She finishes her burger and the souvlaki when it comes, and picks the hard boiled egg off of Audra's plate.

The young waitress brings them a towering piece of banana cream pie and two forks. Compliments of the kitchen. She produces a digital camera from the pocket of her apron and asks shyly for a photo. Of course! Of course! Brittany waves her in, bracelets chiming. Audra slides out of the booth and takes the camera so the waitress can sit across from Brittany, the two of them leaning in and smiling over the dirty plates, as though they'd just finished having lunch together.

Audra and Brittany drive on, through endless Connecticut and quick Rhode Island. At sunset they cross over the Sagamore bridge that divides the flexed arm of the Cape from the rest of the Massachusetts. The light is gold on the bridge cables and the sails of the boats in the water below.

*

A little after nine, they arrive at the beach house in Wellfleet. The house is weathered gray shingles like all the other nice houses in the area. There's a wide sweep of deck and beyond it, the dark gray ocean. To the east, a flash of light every minute or so from the Provincetown lighthouse.

Inside the house is clean and spare in a stylish way that just looks empty to Audra. There is a glass bowl of smooth black rocks on the mantel, a glass vase of bare branches for a centerpiece on the table. A blank plasma TV hangs

over the fireplace like that Malevich painting. There are no real pictures at all on the walls. This kind of decorating makes Audra anxious; empty corners need furniture, to her, they cry out for it.

Whenever Brittany came to visit her in New York she always said something about how it amazed her, the amount of *stuff* Audra had managed to fit into such a tiny space. This is an insult, translucently veiled with admiration. Sometimes Audra minds. Other times she lets it go, easy as drawing and releasing a breath: Brittany didn't mean anything real by it.

*

They leave their bags on the neatly made beds and get back in the car to go to the store for groceries. Brittany pulls items off the shelves for her thirty pound diet: bright orange chips, purple soda, and strange plant/animal hybrids, such as Clamato juice and Chicken-in-a-Biskit crackers.

"I always get these at the beach," Brittany says, rattling the box of crackers. "They're so delicious and salty. The more salt you get, the more you want. It's because of the salt in the water and the air, all around us, salt begets more salt."

"Begets?" says Audra. She reaches for a bottle of Stolli up on a high shelf. Then she reaches for another. "White Russians," she says. "Those are fattening. And we can make Bloody Marys in the morning."

They make many White Russians that night and pattern the marble countertop with brown rings of Kahlua. When they're drunk enough they run down the wooden steps to the dark beach and jump in the ocean in their underwear. Then they run out again screaming. The ocean won't be comfortably warm enough for swimming until August.

In the morning Audra blinks awake. Her head is throbbing faintly like a poked bruise. She shudders the covers off and pads downstairs to the kitchen where she eats a bowl of cold cereal at the counter. She finds her tote bag and spreads out the essays her students wrote for their final project on the dining room table. The prompt she gave them was this: *When people try to solve problems, they are hoping to affect change. Write about a problem that you have. What change would you like to occur?*

The first essay she reads makes her smile: "The Raccoon Problem." Her student Inez has written about the creatures that are terrorizing her neighborhood in Glendale, and the steps that she plans to take to remedy the situation. These steps are neatly laid out in a list, with headings in bold: Repel, Remove, Prevent. Audra writes *A thoughtful response--good luck!* and a circled 'A' on the back page. Reading on, she finds that all of the students' essays have a cheerful bravery in detailing their problems and solutions. The world's obstacles are many but surmountable, like raccoons beguiled into wire cages.

In the afternoon, Audra spreads the heavy curtains in Brittany's bedroom.

“Light, no, no,” Brittany mumbles into the pillow. She rolls over onto her back and smiles, eyes closed. “Does everybody still love me?” She’s doing Whiny Starlet.

“Everyone loves you,” says Audra absently, looking out at the water. “Do you want to get up and come for a jog?”

“Good god, don’t say jog,” says Brittany, “it hurts me. I’m going to lie on the deck and eat waffles.”

*

Running on the beach, barefoot, Audra feels like an unleashed dog. She runs past families clustered under bright umbrellas, she jumps over the pits and castle moats children have dug in the sand. She breathes a hard huff of air out of her nose whenever her feet hit the ground. She can’t remember the last time she did this, ran on the beach.

Audra never tried to be famous. She can’t act or sing or play any instruments. But she still felt, in a secret dark pocket of herself, long before Brittany’s Hollywood experiment went so terribly right, that it could happen somehow. Somehow, she would be recognized. Maybe in an airport. A casting agent or director would stop and stand there, gaping at her, and say, *you! You’re the one we’ve been looking for!* And they would take her hand and lead her into a life of easy adoration.

When they were first in school together, Brittany was no prettier than Audra, just as lost and unknown in the teeming mass of students. Audra thinks maybe the only real thing that separated her from Brittany back then was that Brittany wasn't afraid to do something completely, objectively ridiculous like move to Hollywood after college to become an actress. She did do it. She bleached her hair and waited tables for two years at a steakhouse in Beverly Hills, met an agent, got auditions, landed small parts and then bigger and bigger ones. Now she can be seen in those magazines almost every week, eating sushi or pumping gas, under that absurd headline: "Stars! They're Just Like Us."

Audra runs. She veers close to the water where the sand is hard and shiny. She licks her lips and tastes salt: her sweat and the sea.

*

Back at the house Brittany has dragged one of the curvy leather chairs out onto the deck. She's braided her hair and made an early dinner: boiled corn, potato chips, and hot dogs. They eat on the deck and throw the gnawed corncobs down into the bushes.

After dinner, Brittany wants to drive to Provincetown. She wants them to put on high heels and lots and lots of makeup and put the drag queens to shame. But when Audra comes out of the bathroom with tall teased hair and turquoise shadow up to her eyebrows, Brittany is at the hallway mirror, streaking a light

khaki powder on her lids. She looks normal. Well: her movie star version of normal.

“What?” she asks. Looking at Audra behind her in the mirror and then turning around to face her.

“What?” says Audra. “What? Nothing.”

“You look great,” Brittany says. “You should always wear your hair like that.”

They drive twenty minutes to the very end of the Cape, to a place called Wave Bar at the Crown and Anchor Hotel. The hotel is a crumbling Victorian building, but the inside is full of smooth black leather couches and angled mirrors. Outside is a patio with a dance floor and a pool with video projections flickering on the bottom. They order tequila shots followed by strong drinks, and go sit by the pool.

Audra watches the sparse crowd; everyone in her range of sight is a man. “I feel like an endangered species,” she says. “I feel like we're going to get bounced for being gender-inappropriate.”

“This is called a Cape Cod, did you know that?” Brittany holds up her glass of vodka-cranberry. “I couldn't be any more appropriate.”

Audra finishes her drink and wobbles upright in her heels. “OK. I'm getting another. Come?”

“In a little while, you go ahead.”

When Audra returns, Brittany has taken off her sandals and is dangling her feet in the pool, smiling up at a tall dark-haired guy in a baseball cap.

“Oh! Audra,” Brittany says, “let me introduce you to my new friend, Dean. Dean, this is Audra.”

The guy turns to Audra and smiles. “Hi,” he says. He looks handsome and dim. “Oh, and don't I know *you* from—”

“No.”

Brittany has to go to the bathroom. She stands and whispers something into Dean's ear that makes him laugh and redden. Then she teeters off toward the hotel lobby.

“I just can't believe it,” he says, watching her go. He takes off his hat and runs his hand through his hair. He replaces his hat.

“Yeah, it's pretty crazy,” says Audra. Everything is making her tired: the day spent in the sun, the run, the vodka, and this guy, his naked, fervent hope.

“There's a lot of gays in this town,” Dean says after a long moment. “It's more gays than I've ever been around, at one time.”

Audra stirs her drink. “So, what are *you* doing here, then?”

“I came in to use the bathroom,” he says, “that's the craziest part! Me and some buddies are doing a fishing charter from here first thing tomorrow, so I came in tonight. And when I came in here, after I came out of the bathroom, I saw her and I was like, is that—? And so I had to ask her, are you her?”

“Yup,” Audra says, “she's definitely her.”

Brittany returns and they all get up and dance for a while to David Bowie and The Supremes. It begins to rain, just a little more than mist.

Audra tugs Brittany gently to the side of the dance floor, leaving Dean bobbing in place alone.

“Brit, hey, I think it might be time to go.”

“Yeah, no, you should go if you want to. Take the car. I think I'm gonna fuck this guy,” she says.

“Which, this guy? Dean Red Sox guy?”

“Yeah! Yeah,” Brittany says, liking the idea more and more, “Red Sox hat, Budweiser breath, such a Boston *guy*, you know? A real *guy* guy.” Brittany is shining, sweating from the dancing. One brown curl sticks to her face like a sideburn.

“I don't know, really, but enjoy yourselves,” says Audra and gathers up the long straps of her purse in her fist.

Brittany stares for a moment. “Are you mad at me?”

“No,” Audra says. “I'm just tired.”

“No, you are! You are mad. OK. So what is the problem, exactly?”

Audra twists the straps of her purse around her wrist. She watches Dean throw his head back, his mouth around the neck of his beer, Adam's apple bouncing. He seems more comfortable in the crowd, now that he's drunk.

Brittany says, “What the fuck, Aud.”

“OK, you know what?” Audra knows what to say, suddenly. “Here's what. I'm not a bit player in your big fabulous life. That fucking *guy*, that—Dean, he isn't either. We're not here just to give you your cues, you know? We're not extras, Brittany.”

“I know you’re not extras,” Brittany says. Her eyes are wide and blank.

Audra knows that what she’s saying is wrong, or mostly wrong, but it feels good to say it anyway. “Why did you even invite me along on this trip with you? Because you needed an audience or something, someone to watch you enjoying yourself so much? Eating whatever the fuck you want, fucking whatever—*whoever* you want? It definitely *looks* like fun, from over here where I am. But I don’t really know, do I? I’m just the spectator. You’re the star here. You get to do whatever you want. It’s all your storyline.” Audra can hear herself losing her momentum. She closes her eyes for a moment. The bass from the dance floor thrums underneath her breastbone.

“Audra. Jesus. It’s not like if *I’m* enjoying myself, you can’t have fun too. We’re *here* to have fun. I want you to have fun. It’s not like there’s only a little tiny bit to go around. It doesn’t work like that. I mean, fuck. Why would you think that way?

Audra shakes her head. She can’t say. It’s everything, their whole history. Their inverse proportion: Brittany growing ever bigger and Audra shrinking and shrinking, running out of space. They were the same, once. Back when Brittany had called to tell about how she’d gotten the role on *Rough Justice*, Audra had lavished her with praise and then when the call was over, she’d cried and cried. She’d felt so small. She doesn’t know how to explain this without it sounding petty. It is petty. She gives up.

“Just—go and do whatever you want with that guy, but I’m going home.”

Brittany, still blank and glassy-eyed as a doll, jangles the car keys at her, and Audra takes them.

*

Audra drives with laborious care. The rain drums on the canvas roof. At one turn in the road, the car's headlights pick out the shape of a deer moving behind the salt-twisted trees, gone so quickly it seems a ghost.

When Audra gets back to the house she finds they'd left the sliding doors open. There are puddles on the floor and the curtains are swinging damply, dark with rain. She closes the doors and windows, sops up the puddles with handfuls of paper towels, and washes the dirty dishes in the kitchen sink. She looks at her reflection in the window over the sink. She'd told her students, *Pick a problem to solve. Make a list. Change your life.* And they'd done it. She fills her hands up with cool water from the tap and splashes her face and her neck. She's so tired.

When she opens her eyes she sees headlights; a taxi is crunching up the gravel road. Brittany gets out and barefoot picks her way carefully across the gravel, her shoulders slumped against the rain. Then she sees Audra at the window, grins and waves her sandals in a big wild arc over her head.

Inside they laugh about poor Dean, trying to banish his friends into the rain so he could have the privacy of the boat and its tiny cabin, too low even to sit up in, and at the same time Brittany slipping away from him a little bit at a time until

she was all the way gone, dry in a cab and giving crisp directions to the driver in her best British Schoolteacher.

Audra and Brittany make sandwiches, the kind they made in college when they'd come home in the hours between dinner and breakfast, a compromise: grilled cheese, dipped in egg and fried in a pan with butter. Outside the sky is dove gray and lightening little by little, a new sky for today but also the same sky as it always was, as it always is going to be.

Nobody Knows

Around ten-thirty the lights went off in the cabin, and after a few minutes of whispering and small adjustments in position, there was nothing but the sounds of measured breathing: sixteen twelve-year-old girls and one young woman, all of them asleep, or else pretending to be. Outside, furry moths blundered softly into one another in the cone of light on the porch. Beth watched them through the window screen. She was waiting for a signal. As sleep was tugging her eyes closed, she heard a metallic creak of bedsprings and opened her eyes wide in the darkness. Mandy slid out from under the covers on the lower bunk and stood.

“Are you ready?” Mandy whispered.

Beth nodded. She had gone to bed in her jeans, as instructed. She looked around the cabin at the still, huddled shapes of the girls in the five other bunk beds. Under the window, their counselor Evie was sleeping on her back with one pale arm thrown across her eyes. The only sounds were the soft rises and falls of the girls' breath, and an occasional nose-whistle from Sarah J., who had asthma and snored. In the stillness, every movement Beth made seemed shockingly loud: the screech of her sleeping bag zipper and the rustle of her thin plastic mattress, the creak and groan of the bunk bed frame as she climbed down.

“Quiet,” hissed Mandy. They both looked over at Evie, still asleep. Beth felt a pang at the thought of Evie worrying if she woke up to find them gone. Evie always played guitar and sang to help them fall asleep, “Golden Slumbers” this time, and, because the girls insisted, every single night, “Sweet Baby James.”

But Mandy and the blue-black outdoors were waiting, waiting for her, and now that she was up, on her feet on the cold wooden floor, it felt impossible not to go.

The girls had no flashlight but the moonlight was strong enough to cast crisp shadows on the floor and the walls. They crept out of the cabin and down the steps to the path up the hill.

Back in the cabin, Evie propped herself up on her elbows and watched them through the window screen. The white of their t-shirts glowed in the darkness, almost phosphorescent, and then they were gone. Evie tilted her watch to the light to check the time. She settled back onto the bed.

In Evie's last year as a camper, when she was thirteen, she had snuck out at night to meet a boy from her swim group named Gabriel. They held hands as they walked, speaking in whispers. He told her about how his father had left that past April, and how his mother had to stay in the hospital afterward. Secret things that he'd never told anyone else, he said. When they got to the lake, they stripped down to their underwear and went swimming. The water was much colder than it was during the day, so cold it left her breathless. She rolled and floated on her back. There was an almost full moon, with a silver shawl of cloud draped across it. Gabriel floated nearby. The gently moving water brought them close to one another and when she turned her face to look at him he kissed her on the mouth. His lips were cold. His tongue was very warm. It was over too quickly.

When they returned to shore, Evie pulled her t-shirt and shorts on over her bra and underpants, and splotches of lake water seeped through her dry clothes,

a spot on each breast and between her legs, marking her: here, here, and here. Gabriel did not look at her. They walked back to the cabins in silence. When they came to the field that separated the boys' side of camp from the girls', Gabriel kept walking. In her cabin, Evie stuffed her wet clothes down deep in the trash can and put on her pajamas. She slipped between the sheets of her bunk feeling like a brand new person.

But the next day, when she saw him at morning swim, he acted as though they barely knew each other, turning away to horse around with the boys from his cabin. So she did the same, laughing extra loud so that he would know she didn't care. She felt nauseated with confusion. They ignored each other like this until the end of camp, and then he was gone.

Over time, her confused hurt grew smaller and the shivery romance of that kiss grew bigger. She remembered the way the water brought them together, a force beyond their control, but not the strangeness that drove them apart. Now, as she watched Beth and Mandy disappear into the dark, she felt a stab of longing. To be one of them, sneaking into the woods, with everything they still had to discover.

*

Outside the air was fragrant with pine and cool enough to raise goose bumps on Beth's arms. The branches overhead made complicated patterns against the sky. The girls were barefoot, their steps silent on the thick carpet of fallen needles.

Beth felt invincible, and lucky, that the warm light of Mandy's attention had fallen on her; normally Mandy would've snuck out with Claire, but Claire had pinkeye for the last few days and was sleeping in the nurse's hut. Tonight they were going to meet the boys at the sauna building. Joel and Connor, from their swim group. This was the whole plan. Beth hadn't asked *why* they were meeting the boys; it seemed stupid to ask. It seemed enough to her: to just be going, pressing into the darkness like scouts on a mission, and she wished the distance to the sauna was longer, that they'd told them instead to meet at the lake.

*

For two years now, since the divorce, Beth's parents had sent her to Abnaki Arts Camp in the township of Newbury, New Hampshire, a little pine valley in the foothills of a mountain range that stretched from the town of Goshen to Mount Sunapee. In the valley was a lake, and in the lake was a small island with a tuft of trees on it like unruly hair. A weather-beaten dock jutted out into the water, and a short swim out was a raft with a low diving board. The camp buildings were set further back in the woods. A sawdust path led from the water to the camp buildings, with vaulted pine branches overhead. Beside the path was a field of blueberry bushes that ripened explosively in August; the campers could pick and eat as much as they wanted on their way to and from the lake. The camp's founder had an older brother who'd drowned as a child, so the swim test was the only mandatory physical activity at Abnaki. There were no horses, no archery

range, and the cabins didn't have the expected Native American names. They had been named according to the whims of teenaged counselors from years past: Dragonfly, the Shire, Zephyr, the Shaq. Beth's mother called it Camp Hippy-Dippy Do-Nothing, but when the end of the school year loomed she wrote out the check and mailed it to Beth's father, who always handled these kinds of arrangements.

*

Beth drove up to Newbury with her father on a Saturday in June, a three and a half-hour drive. Beth navigated with a printed out map. Halfway there, they stopped at Burger King as a special treat. As the car turned into the grass parking lot of the camp, she rubbed vigorously at her cheeks and chin with a waxy paper napkin. She felt hot and greasy after the ride.

"Are you ready?" her father asked. He reached over and squeezed her shoulder with one hand, then patted her shoulder lightly, then brushed invisible specks of something off her sleeve.

"Ready," she said. She crumpled up the napkin into a little ball.

A counselor in a tight green polo shirt and patchwork skirt waved them through the gate. Beth recognized her from the summer before.

"Hey, guys." She leaned her elbows on the edge of the passenger window and smiled into the car. Her arms were very tan.

"Hi Sass," Beth said.

“Hi! Oh heeeeeeey! Little Jamie, right? What's happening?”

Beth's father cleared his throat. “This is Elizabeth,” he said. “Or Beth. Beth Klein.”

Beth felt herself flush, but Sass's smile didn't waver. “Right—Beth! OK. We're having everyone check in at the dining hall, 'K? Remember where it's at?”

“Yeah. I remember,” Beth said. Sass—her real name was Stephanie, Beth knew—straightened up to wave at a red station wagon pulling into the lot. Beth climbed out of the car.

The main buildings of the camp were set on top of a hill. Down one side of the hill were the boys' cabins; down the other were the girls.' In the center of the field was a faded red barn. It had bleachers in front that reached up to the door on the second floor, where the hay bales were tossed out when it was still a real farm. Scattered around the barn were the infirmary, the dining hall, the cracked green tennis courts, and the chapel-shaped counselors' hut with the little bell tower on the roof.

The dining hall was a long clapboard building that once was a stable. The old-food smell inside was just the same as Beth remembered, tinged with bleach from the dishwashing station at the back. At one of the round tables, a young man with a goatee was signing campers in on a clipboard.

“Beth Klein, Klein, OK, here, you're in the Shaq with Evie. Know where that is?” He looked up from the clipboard. Beth nodded. “Cool. I could tell you're an old-timer, 'cause you don't need to look around.” He smiled at her, a flash of white teeth.

She looked at him and then quickly away. She was pretty sure he was Nick, who had been a counselor-in-training last summer.

“I’m Nick,” he said, so close to her thought that it startled her. “You’re lucky you get to be with Evie. She’s really cool.”

Through the screen door Beth could see her father with her trunk, waving.

“Nice meeting you,” she said and slipped through the door.

“Hey!” Nick called after her. She looked back through the screen. “Tell Evie I say hey. When you see her.”

“OK,” she said. She stepped aside to let another camper, a boy younger than she, pass into the dining hall.

“Well, Miz Klein, is this goodbye?” her father asked her as she picked up the handle of her trunk outside. He shook his head at her, smiling. “Seems so different from when I dropped you off here the first time. Do you remember? You were kind of scared for me to leave.”

Beth nodded. She remembered, though it felt like a very long time ago. She remembered feeling very small as her father’s car bumped away along the road. The memory embarrassed her. Had she really been that frightened little girl?

“I’ll miss you, but you’ll have a great time, kiddo.” He put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed once, twice, and then let go.

“Yeah,” she said. “Goodbye. I’ll write you a letter with the stuff.” Beth’s dad had given her sixteen stamped and hand-addressed envelopes, eight to him and eight to her mother, for each of the eight weeks she’d be away from home.

She shouldered her backpack and turned away, heading across the field to the path to the girls' cabins. The wheels of the trunk thumped gently over the grass.

She had packed fourteen of everything, socks, underwear, t-shirts; they only did laundry every two weeks. Four pairs of pants, six pairs of shorts, a couple of warm sweaters and a bathing suit. Bug spray and sun block. "Bring nail polish," her sister had reminded her. "Everyone trades it." So Beth had packed five different colors, even though her own nails were usually bitten too short to paint.

Beth's new cabin had six bunk beds. The walls were pale unfinished wood, with shelves built in for the girls' clothes. In the rafters were scrawled Magic Marker declarations like DA SHAQ RULES and I LOVE RIDER STRONG in loopy cursive. A small blonde girl watched Beth maneuver her trunk up the steps.

"I'm Mandy," the girl said. "You can sleep up there." She pointed to the bunk above hers. Girls trickled in and unpacked their stuff, shy at first, but when Evie came to lead them up the hill for the welcoming meeting they went together as a group and whispered to each other during the camp director's speech.

Camp was like that, Beth remembered, friendships happening fast and reckless.

*

Time became the bell. It called them to meals, began and ended activities, and woke them up in the mornings. Each day a different cabin would be on bell-

ringing duty; the counselor would set a wristwatch alarm for a few minutes before seven and the campers would spring out of bed, eager to shatter the early morning stillness. Sometimes the bell ringers would be so zealous that the bell would still be tolling its dull *blong, blong* as the campers made their way up the hill to the flagpole for the day's announcements, their breath puffing in the cold morning air that already tasted like autumn.

Beth usually did pottery in the morning and went swimming after lunch in the lake. In the afternoons, the counselors presented different activity options and campers picked which they wanted to do. Most of the boys went to play soccer or tetherball. Beth and the rest of the girls from her cabin usually picked Evie's activity, which was almost always jewelry-making under the leafy dome of the willow tree behind the director's house.

All the girls loved Evie and were proud of her, because she was so cool and pretty. She never raised her voice, and she let the girls try on her dangly earrings and taught them to sing "Circle Game" for the talent show. Of the campers, Mandy was Evie's special favorite—probably because Mandy was just like she had been when she was younger, Beth supposed. Often, after Evie had finished showing the girls how to roll beads out of Fimo clay or knot intricate friendship bracelets, she would finger-comb Mandy's hair and weave it into two smooth French braids, the two of them like sisters, their blonde hair feathered with light from between the willow branches. Watching them, Beth wished she was still as little as she'd been last summer. She felt acutely tall and knobby

when she saw how well Mandy fit in Evie's lap. But Beth had never really been like Mandy. Not last summer, not ever.

School seemed very far away. Everything that was so important during the rest of the year was indistinct, hazy. Beth wrote letters home, and got mail every week from her parents, her sister, and her best friend Leah, but as the summer went on she read the letters with less and less urgency, skimming the pages for important information and pulling off the glittery stickers from Leah's letters to stick on the wall over her bed. When Beth wrote back she told them about passing her swim test and learning how to throw a bowl on the potter's wheel, how the food sucked and a rainstorm knocked a tree down onto the dock.

The words seemed hollow when she read them back to herself. It was impossible to explain how it really was. How a current of electricity ran through all these activities, charging the everyday with a force that glowed and hummed. It was like being around movie stars: getting to live with the counselors, to watch them interact, listen to their frank and frequent profanities, and speculate wildly on their secret liaisons. Everything happened so fast here.

Pepper and Snoop broke up and got back together and broke up again in the space of one Friday Dance Night. Bowie had a necklace made of hemp with a glass bead that he gave to Amelia when they first hooked up, and then after she gave it back to him he gave it to Kat; one cabin started calling it the Chick-A-Day Necklace and then everyone did. Kat also gave Bowie a blowjob behind the boathouse and the strange, thrilling words that concluded that particular story,

afterwards there was sperm all over her skirt, got passed around among the campers like currency.

Near the beginning of camp, Nick and Sass had left breakfast holding hands and by that evening they were boyfriend and girlfriend. And then later the whole camp knew about the fight they had after Nick played “Evangeline” at the Sunday campfire. Sass stormed off away from the circle of light into the woods, and Nick didn't follow her. Behind cupped hands, theories and rumors were breathed warmly into waiting ears.

“Evangeline is Evie's real name, you know,” said Sarah J. as they were getting ready for bed that night.

“Oh my god, isn't that so romantic?” said Sarah W. “Nick is so hot.”

“Doesn't Evie have a boyfriend at home?” Beth asked. She hadn't thought the song was so romantic; as far as she could tell it was about somebody dying in a boating accident.

“Yeah, she does,” Mandy said with authority, “and he's way hotter than Nick. She showed me a picture.” Then Evie came into the cabin and the girls hushed. That was the end of the discussion anyway. Evie didn't mess around, they knew; she was above all that, like a queen.

Mandy leaned out from her bunk and gave Beth a meaningful look, and Beth nodded, yes: tonight. The rest of the girls all climbed into bed; Evie pulled her guitar from under the bed and began to sing softly: *So goodnight you moonlight ladies...*

*

On the dark path up the hill Beth followed the glint of Mandy's hair. She was thinking about Connor, whom she'd never considered before. The possibility of kissing him, of being kissed. Connor wasn't cute like Joel, but he was nice enough, and this night had to lead to something, somehow. There had to be a reason why Beth felt as if she was covered in brand new skin, as if the trees around them were bending close to listen to their steps.

By the time Beth and Mandy got to the sauna building, Joel and Connor were already inside, running their flashlights over the spider webs on the stained cedar walls.

"Oh shit!" said Joel. "Look at that huge fucking spider!"

"Oh god, Joel, that's gross," said Mandy, smiling at him.

"Hey," said Connor. "Hey Beth."

"Hey," said Beth. There was a silence.

"This place is cool, huh," said Connor. He put his hand over his flashlight so that his fingers glowed electric pink. The shadows from the cedar benches climbed the walls, looming over them.

"Kind of. But kind of creepy," Beth said. She cupped her elbows in her hands.

Mandy frowned at her. "I think it's cool. Have you guys ever been in here before? I thought it was supposed to be all locked up."

"Nothing's ever locked here," said Connor. "We—"

Joel cut him off. "We've broken in everywhere! We sneak out every fucking night, practically!"

Mandy crinkled her nose at him. "Has Gary ever busted you?"

"Nah, we're careful. Anyway, Ape Man doesn't care," said Connor.

"Ape-nuts! Ape-nuts!" said Joel and jumped up onto a cedar bench, pounding his fists on his chest. The boys had code words for everything, a whole separate language as incomprehensible to Beth as hieroglyphics.

"Why do you call him that?" Beth wanted to know.

Connor looked at Joel and then quickly away, fiddling with his flashlight so the shadows danced around them.

"Ape Man because he's hairy," Joel said, grinning. "And Ape Nuts because when Amelia gave him a hand job, one time she grabbed his balls too hard and he was limping around all day. She cracked his nuts!"

Connor and Mandy were laughing, Mandy with her hand over her mouth, her eyes bright with shock and delight. Beth laughed too, but her cheeks were burning.

"He *told* you that?" she asked.

"He tells us everything," Connor said. "Well, a lot of stuff."

"Do Gary and Amelia *do it*?" Mandy asked, her voice dropping to a whisper on the last words.

"Yeah," Joel said.

"Probably," Connor said.

"Definitely. They definitely do it! I've seen the evidence," Joel said.

“What? What evidence?” Mandy asked, eager.

“Top secret,” said Joel. “Maybe I’ll tell you another time. Or show you, if you’re lucky.”

“Whatever,” Mandy said, pushing out her bottom lip. “I bet there isn’t really anything.”

Beth thinks that Mandy is probably right, but she’s still so grateful that Evie is their counselor instead of Amelia. After last Sunday’s campfire, all the girls in Beth’s cabin agreed to sign a purity pledge, in different colored markers up on a rafter near the ceiling. Sarah R., who had the nicest handwriting, wrote *A Promise to be Pure* at the top in curly cursive letters. Each girl climbed up and printed her name underneath. Beth had been one of the last, and as she sat up there with her legs dangling, looking at the neat list of names along the rafter, she was overcome by a rush of pride and fierce love for these fifteen girls. It seemed impossible that she’d met them all just six weeks before, that there was a time she hadn’t known them, when time didn’t mean a clanging bell and sleep didn’t come with the husky-sweet sound of Evie singing. Up in the rafters, where the air was perceptively warmer than in the cabin below, she felt sure that she would remember this, this moment in this summer, every day of the rest of her life.

She blinked these thoughts away as Connor swept his flashlight over her face.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked. “You looked sad.”

Beth shrugged. She didn't know how to explain it in way that didn't sound embarrassing.

Joel pulled a gauzy piece of spider web from the wall and dangled it over Mandy's head.

"Eew! Oh my god, quit it!" She slapped at him and his flashlight went skittering across the floor. He and Mandy chased after it and scuffled in the dark, giggling.

Connor clicked his flashlight on and off. The sauna building was left over from a long time ago, when Abnaki had been a serious sports camp called Golden Arrow. The building smelled like rotting wood. It had no windows. The complete darkness in the wake of Connor's flashlight made Beth feel spooked. It felt as though the spidery walls were moving in around her.

"Could you leave that on, please?" Beth asked.

"Oh. Sure, yeah." They both looked at the corner where Joel and Mandy were whispering together, and then looked away. The back of Connor's hand brushed against Beth's.

"Can I french you?" Connor asked.

Beth nodded, and then in case he couldn't see her in the dark said, "OK."

He stepped closer to her. She could smell the sour bug spray on his clothes, and then his face was against hers. She closed her eyes and thought, OK. She thought of Evie's boyfriend, how she'd pictured him, with dark hair and green eyes. His tongue was in her mouth, between her teeth, warm and wet, and Beth shivered with wonder and revulsion. She could feel the muscles in his face

working, the way his tongue hinged inside his mouth. His hand touched the back of her arm just above the elbow. He took a small step closer and she stepped the same distance back away from him. Then it was over. Beth heard Mandy giggling and opened her eyes. Her face flushed hot.

“Yeah, well. I gotta go,” mumbled Beth. She couldn’t look at him, at anyone. She walked quickly to the door.

“Wait, Beth! I’m coming too.” Mandy caught up with her outside on the path. They looked back and saw the boys’ flashlight moving around inside through the crack of the door.

“Connor has a big crush on you,” said Mandy.

“No he doesn’t,” said Beth, remembering the slipperiness of his tongue, the alien, crowding feeling of it. So, then: nothing special about kissing after all. She walked quickly. What they would do was get back to the cabin and get back into bed. And it would be as though they’d never left; everything would be exactly as they’d left it. In the morning this would seem as hazy as a dream, as harmless. A twig from a low hanging branch traced a jagged line on Beth’s cheek. She pushed it away roughly.

Then there was a rustling in the woods, and two dark shapes in the clearing beside the path. Beth gasped, a sharp intake of breath.

“Run!” yelled Mandy and ran into the darkness as quick and graceful as a deer. Beth stayed where she was. For a moment she thought she could be invisible that way.

*

In the clearing Nick and Evie had frozen too, listening.

“Ah shit,” said Nick. He grabbed his shirt up from the ground, ducked under a branch and was gone.

Evie pushed the heels of her palms into her eye hollows, hard, and waited to cry; nothing came.

When she lowered her hands, there was Beth, standing there. The moon was silver on her hair and shoulders. Her mouth was a perfect oval of surprise.

“What are you doing here?” Beth asked.

“Beth, hey,” Evie said, relieved. It could have been so much worse. She felt for the pockets of her skirt to make sure it was on right, front to back.

“What are you *doing* here?” Beth sounded confused and very young. “This isn’t—this isn’t right.”

Evie felt her shame uncoil and writhe inside her like a legless, living thing. “I know,” she said. She was thinking of Sass, her friend. Sass had cried in the car on the way to town this morning, saying *I don't even think Nick finds me attractive*. Evie had held her hand and told her everything would be OK. Why had she done that? Why had she done *this*? She sat next to them both at the campfire with a fleece blanket thrown carelessly over her legs and theirs. Nick had reached underneath the blanket and wrapped his warm hand around her bare foot. Just held it like that for long minutes, as she kept her eyes fixed on the fire. Then he'd dragged his thumbnail down her sole, so slowly, and the skin

there seemed to start a shiver that rippled out into every part of her. As everyone was leaving, and Sass was turned away, brushing bits of leaves off of her long skirt, Nick had looked at Evie and mouthed one word to her: *tonight*. And she had nodded. While she was waiting for him, awake in her narrow bed back in the cabin, she'd made up her mind not to go. When he came for her, she'd remind him of all the reasons why this was a terrible idea. But then he'd rasped his fingers over the screen above her bed, and she had felt the same echoing shiver, and she'd gone out into the woods with him, taking his hand and leading him into the darkness between the trees.

Now she couldn't understand why it had happened. What it was that she had wanted so badly. He had pulled out of her and come on the ground, all of it happening so fast she hardly realized it was over. They had turned away from each other to collect their clothes and dress when they heard the girls on the path. And now Beth, standing in front of her with her chin trembling—Beth, out of all the people it could have been, who looked so much like Evie had when she was eleven or twelve. A girl grown tall too quickly, with dark hair instead of light, but the same sad eyes, eyes that looked older than they should. Those eyes drilled into Evie now.

"You're supposed to be there," said Beth, her voice rising. "You're supposed to be there to watch out for us."

"How do you know I wasn't out here looking for *you*?" Evie tried.

Beth shook her head. No.

“What were you doing with Nick?” Beth asked, but she knew. They looked at each other in the half light.

Evie's underwear was gone. She was sweeping her bare foot over the ground, trying to find it and failing. She gave up. “We should go,” she said. “We should go back to the cabin.”

“You don’t get to tell me what to do,” Beth said, but her voice was shaky.

“Please. I’m asking you to. Please, let’s go back, OK?”

Beth turned her back to her and started up the path. They walked back without speaking. After Beth had settled back down into the cool sheets of her bed she heard Mandy creep into the cabin, tiptoeing with absurd caution.

*

The next day Beth told Mandy she had run too, in the other direction; she told herself she wouldn’t tell anyone what she saw, as long as it never happened again. But then the next night, impossibly, Evie slipped out again. Beth lay awake and waited, full of righteous fury. She would ruin Evie for everyone. *Tell them*, she pictured herself saying. *Tell them what you were doing in the woods with Nick, your best friend’s boyfriend*. She yearned for some kind of disaster. She imagined the cabin on fire, the girls fleeing soot-streaked and coughing. Where was Evie? Their grown-up, their protector? And the terrible, holy light of understanding that would cross every girl’s face: what a disappointment she’d turned out to be.

What happened instead that night was that Sarah J. had an asthma attack. She woke up wheezing and when someone turned on the lights, there was the cold hollow of Evie's bed.

Mandy took charge. "Where's her inhaler? Beth! Beth, get it! It's in her trunk."

Beth knelt before the trunk. Under a towel, in a jumble of toiletries, was the black zippered pouch where Sarah J. kept the inhaler and her medication. Beth looked up; the girls were huddled around Sarah J. whose face was turning red with effort. Mandy sat beside her, rubbing her back.

Beth closed her hand around the case. And then quickly, without thinking, she pushed it down deep into the trunk under the clothes, pushed it down until she felt it hit the bottom.

"I can't find it! It's not in here!" Beth said. She was amazed to hear real panic in her own voice.

The girls had to get Celia, the counselor from the cabin next door, and then the nurse came and when Evie finally returned both cabins were awake and blazing with light.

The nurse was the camp director's sister. She was precise and impatient. The next day, the girls returned from swimming and Evie and her stuff were gone.

For the rest of the camp session the owner's wife Felicia slept in the cabin, and turned the lights off promptly at nine thirty. Nick and Sass got back together. Sass glided around camp wearing his hooded sweatshirt and a satisfied smile.

Beth became aware of time again, and began counting down to the last day. She hugged her cabin mates when they would burst into sudden tears and promise to write over the school year, but she did not need to cry. The oak trees around the barn started turning yellow in splotches.

On the last night, the whole camp walked down to the lake holding glowing candles, silent and solemn as monks. They put some in biodegradable cardboard boats and launched them into the water, where they flickered like a constellation under the first stars of the night.

*

The following year, the summer between middle and high school, Beth got a job in an ice cream shop, and went white water rafting with her mom and her mom's new boyfriend. She showed them how strong and muscled her right arm had gotten from scooping as she paddled in the river. "Look!" she said, sleeve rolled up and water streaming off the paddle blade in silver ribbons.

Letter To My Father

Matthew James Mellon, deceased. Gone almost seven years now. The short story would be the car accident, the long story the beer, the hard liquor, and more beer. This is your son, Andrew Matthew Cole, addressing you at the behest of my therapist Dr. Polley. Dr. Polley calls it *facing down the dragon*, because he speaks in heroic Beowulfian metaphors that are supposed to make men feel better about expressing their feelings. Dr. *One Head of the Hydra at a Time* Polley, who Kim wanted me to see. Who she insisted that I see, actually, to work out what she calls my *daddy issues*, which is a joke between us but also isn't. And because I love her, and because I want to be better for her and the baby, due in less than four months: well, then.

I don't know how much of this you would need to be reminded of. First of all, there was the dog. The one and only dog I had as a boy was the one you brought me: the Blue Heeler, a herding dog, with a speckled coat and black mitten-shaped patches over her eyes. She lived for hunting squirrels. She would lie in wait for them for hours, crouched down low in the tall monkey grass behind the house, with only her eyes and forward-cocked ears visible.

"Look, kiddo," you would say, tapping bottle to kitchen window, "Jagger's on the hunt."

I would look and see the dark points of her ears in the pale green grass, and beyond the little gray squirrel she was stalking. The squirrel would be sitting there, furling and unfurling its tail or else darting around, unaware of the danger

in the grass but still perpetually moving, nervous in the way of all small animals. I would hold my breath, waiting for it to begin. Time would slow. And then Jagger would burst forward, legs flashing, the banner of her long tongue flopping out. Then the mad dash across the yard, to the nearest tree or the chain link fence. Jagger, whining, would stretch her whole stubby body—torso, legs, snout—straining, willing herself just a little bit taller, tall enough to reach that damn squirrel, now chittering its taunts from a safe height above.

These chase scenes always made you laugh, but I would watch with my heart just behind my teeth. What would she do if she caught one?

*

You were there the first time, when she finally did. It was in October. I was nine years old. We were in the kitchen fixing plates of the leftovers Mom had put out to defrost before she left for work. The dog was low in the yellowing grass, the squirrel oblivious, everything as usual. But when Jagger sprang out to give chase, the squirrel made a fatal error: it fled toward the garage. The garage, covered in slick aluminum siding. The squirrel made it three feet up the wall through sheer force of will before falling backward to the ground, its claws clutching at air. Then Jagger had her jaws around it, lifting it into the air and down in a quick snap. Even through the window I could hear it, the high-pitched keening of the back-broken squirrel. I cried out.

“Goddamn,” you said softly. “Andy, come with me.” You finished your beer in one long pull and banged out of the back door, not looking to see if I would follow you. I did follow. I watched as you took hold of Jagger’s collar and pulled her away from the thing she was savaging in the grass, the thing that was still alive, still shrieking its one long terrible note.

I took the dog by the collar and held her. I watched as you brought out the cinder block from the garage and raised it up level to your shoulder and brought it down. I closed my eyes; the noise stopped. Afterwards I didn’t look at what remained in the grass. I turned away. I didn’t want you to see my face, my babyish trembling chin. I pulled Jagger inside the house. Her breath was rasping from the strain of pulling against her collar.

I didn’t see what you did with the squirrel’s body. Scooped it up with a shovel and pitched it over the fence into the neighbor’s bushes, probably.

*

That night I crept out of bed and listened at the bedroom door as you and Mom fought in hushed, rapid whispers. I was straining to hear, but I could only pick out fragments, things like *expectations* and *try harder* and *goddamn it I know what that means* and my own name. *For Andy’s sake*, you said clearly. For my sake—what? There was a silence and then the door swung open and there you were. We looked at each other for a moment. I flinched, anticipating anger. You

crouched down and put your hands on my shoulders. Your eyes searched my face.

“Andy,” you said, “were you listening to all that?” I didn’t know what I had heard, but I nodded. I could smell the warm beer on your breath. “Well, that’s that, then. You’re old enough to know.”

Mom was sitting on the edge of the bed in her fuzzy pink bathrobe. Her face was red; she’d been crying. “Matthew—” she began but you cut her off.

“He is, Sharon. He’s a smart kid. You weren’t going to lie to him forever, were you? Andy. Listen, this doesn’t mean I feel any different about you or your mother. I love you very much. Both of you.”

I nodded again. I felt a vertiginous sickness, like I did on long car rides. You kept talking, saying things that didn’t make sense. I think it was a relief to tell your secrets to anyone, even me, even as behind you Mom started crying softly into her cupped hands.

You took off again the next day. After that night, things started clicking into place for me. I understood what was different about us: Mom and I were your other family, the less important one, the secret. You had a wife, a house an hour south across the border into Massachusetts. And a son, almost the same age as me. It was true that you were a doctor in the Army Reserves, the reason Mom always gave for your long absences, but when you left it wasn’t because of that. It was because of your other family, your real family.

I knew that you would go, but I thought that you would always come back, just as you’d been going and coming back for as long as I could remember,

bearing gifts directly proportional to the time you'd spent away. A Sony Discman, a digital watch. A sapphire pendant for Mom. A Blue Heeler pup.

*

Again, I don't know how much of this you would have bothered to remember; I know that what seemed important to me was less so to you. You had another boy. Maybe you bought him a dog too. Maybe you bought him everything you bought me, plus everything else he wanted.

I used to fantasize that he and I were identical twins, somehow, even though we were born of different mothers. Same brown hair, brown eyes, same big ears and big knuckley hands. In the fantasy, I would somehow follow you to your other house an hour south, or maybe I'd stow away hidden in the back of your car. I'd lie in wait until everyone had gone to sleep, and then I would creep inside your house and up the stairs to his bedroom. There would be things in his room I would recognize, things I'd dreamt of. A tank full of tropical fish. Model F-14s and Harrier jets suspended on strings from the ceiling. A candy-red electric guitar in the corner. Him, my brother, asleep. I would tiptoe up to the bed and then I would reach down and wrap my hands around his throat and squeeze and squeeze until he'd stopped breathing. And then with him gone I could have the life I was meant to, the life that he'd been living. As your son, your real son.

*

I met Kim at a party in college. She came up to me and said that she could tell I grew up on a farm.

“Why would you say that?” I asked.

“You drink your beer sideways,” she said, leaning in so her breath warmed the side of my face. “Out of the corner of your mouth. It’s how you would drink out of a ladle. So I know you had a well. Am I right?”

She was so pretty and so sure of herself, I would have told her anything. I told her yes, a farm. I made us gentleman farmers, you and I. I told her I had to help birth calves and geld steers, each in their season. Kim was raised in Manhattan; I figured she’d never know enough to catch me in the lie. I said we went hunting in the hills together, that we shot and ate deer, pheasants, wild turkeys. I never mentioned squirrels to her at all. And I didn’t tell her that it was you who grew up drinking well water. You were the boy who spent his childhood milking cows and riding horses and went away to school to become a doctor, the pride of his whole family. That could’ve been me; hey, here I was, studying to be a doctor too.

I drank my beer the same way I’d watched you do it countless times. The truth was, I studied you like scripture during the brief periods you were with us. I absorbed your movements and mannerisms. I did it because I wanted to but also because I couldn’t help it.

But by that time, when Kim said that about me drinking sideways, the beer went sour in my mouth. I quit drinking not long after that. Not even a glass of

wine with dinner or a toast at a wedding. I quit because I knew I was like you and I didn't want to be. I didn't sleep around for the same reason. One woman at a time. One house, one bed.

You had shown me how easy it was to slip between lives, to try to love too many different people at once. I could do it too, I think. I have the capacity. I confessed this to Kim once, when I finally told her the truth about you. She'd started asking questions, questions about my childhood, probing. Questions about you. She was pregnant, though I didn't know it then. She needed this information. Her need made her relentless and thorough.

She found a VHS you had shot of me toddling around the front yard, the one where I'm shirtless and squinting in the sun. I fall backwards onto the grass and reach up to the camera, to you, my face bewildered but not sad or scared. The little Cape Cod style house in the background with the one-car garage and the chain link fence around it. A perfectly adequate house, but no idyllic farm, no horses, none of the storybook details I'd offered to Kim before. She could forgive me for lying, she said, but not for cowardice.

And so: *facing down the dragon*, as brave as that can be when the dragon's already dead.

*

My mother kept working at that same Citizens Bank in Nashua until the cancer made her too sick. When Kim asked, I told her that's why I wanted to be a doctor.

For my mother, not for you. My mother, who set out the good china when you were coming to stay. She walked around the house humming before you would come. After you left she would go to church every day for a while. She embarrassed me, the nakedness of her grief and her happiness. She thought she was doing this great thing, protecting you, your other family and your job. Your place in the community. Who would go to an OB-GYN who fucks his patients? She was your patient first, and then the mother of your bastard son.

I hated her complacency. She didn't ask for enough from you. You were generous with your money, yes—the trust you set up got me all the way through college and most of medical school, and scholarships did the rest. I assume you paid for the treatments that her insurance wouldn't cover. She spent her last days in a hospice that cost as much as a four-star hotel and died in style, thanks to you, but you weren't there.

I was there. I was nineteen and hadn't seen or heard from you in almost four years. You'd written us out of your story. I went to that town where you lived after she died. I thought I would ring the doorbell and you would be there, grayer around the temples but still tall, still handsome. But when I did a woman answered the door, a young woman who was not your wife, a stranger. She knew you and your family, though. She's the one told me about the car accident. One-two, like punches: both my parents gone within eight months of each other. And everything I had to tell you left moldering instead me.

*

You were gone when it happened again, with Jagger and another squirrel. I was eleven. I didn't see the chase, but I heard that same noise and I knew. Jagger had it in the grass. She was holding it under her paws. I dragged the cinder block out from the garage and kicked her away from the body. There was red on her muzzle and on the white belly of the squirrel, red speckling the matted grass.

The squirrel was holding its claws curled up by its face, as though it was warding off an attack. Its eyes were open and looking at me, black eyes, shiny as patent leather. Its sound went on and on. *A mercy*, I thought, church words, and I brought the block down.

*

When I was fifteen, Jagger was hit by a cable truck and died. She had become almost blind, something the vet called progressive retinal atrophy. Of all the stuff you gave me, she was the last thing to go. I'd smashed the watch and the Discman long before that. I swore you off over and over again. I never stopped hoping you'd come back.

Of course I can't tell you any of this now. I'm grown and you're gone for good, and I can't tell you anything. I can't ask for what I need from you. Explanations? Apologies? A new personal mythology? Some days you're the cinder block and I'm the squirrel; some days I'm Jagger and you're the block, the

end of things I should never have started. Some days it seems all my memories
are you, all you, you and the trail of heart's blood you left behind.

Eight Burgers

The first bite of the first burger is delicious. A Charlie Burger with the works: bacon, American cheese, tomato, pickles, chopped red onion, ketchup, and spicy brown mustard. Fritz McNally has eaten nothing but lettuce and water all day, preparing, and all day his stomach has muttered and growled like a caged beast. He feels hollowed out, purified. Hungry. Ready. His senses are heightened. His nerves twang. As he bites and chews, he savors the tang of the mustard, the juicy, arterial spurt of the meat: it focuses him, reduces him, as though he is just a mouth and a pair of hands feeding it. A chewing and swallowing machine.

On either side of Fritz, each behind a tray stacked high with steaming burgers, are his competitors, noisily masticating their own burgers: a kid of about eighteen or nineteen, with soft, fleshy cheeks and a crew cut; a older, thick-necked bodybuilder-type; a younger bearded man, potbelly encased in a jean jacket; and a thin, dark man with brilliant white teeth, in his mid-thirties, like Fritz. The last is the man to beat: Ernie Singh, who has won the Charlie Burger Big Cheese Chow Down for two years now.

Singh's record is fourteen Charlie Burgers in ten minutes. Fritz is capable of fourteen. He's done it, in practice, sitting in his backyard with a stopwatch and a bulging sack of take-out burgers. (McDonald's Big Macs, comparable in size but not in taste. Fritz doesn't want to get tired of the Charlie Burger preemptively.) But Fritz's problem is not getting the burgers down. It's keeping them.

This is the reason for Fritz's focus. His focus on the burger and nothing else. He looks intently at the bun. The little polished sesame seeds on top. The spongy pale interior, stained maroon at the bottom with juices from the tomato and the meat. He has practiced affirmations, and now repeats them on a loop, like a digital stock ticker running through his head: He is not a man with a stomach, intestines, bowels. He is a machine, a gate, a portal through which the burgers will pass and disappear—wink out of existence as though they were never there at all. This is all. This is between him and the burger at hand. Everything else is trivial.

The watching crowd is small but enthusiastic, and they cheer as he finishes the first burger and reaches for another.

*

Fritz McNally trained for the big day by eating cabbage morning, noon, and night, about eight pounds daily. He would chop the heads into four equal parts and then boil them in salted water, and when they'd softened he'd drain off the liquid, crush the leaves up with a big spoon and get to work.

At the end of the very first day of training, after cleaning his plate, he sat stolidly at the table for about thirty seconds and then vomited into the sink, the freshly chewed cabbage-bits mixed with more fully digested mush from earlier in the day, all of it a uniform hospital green in color. Minda, his wife, was understandably disgusted.

“I don't understand why you're doing this to yourself,” she said. “It's so unattractive.”

Fritz did not reply; he swished water around in his mouth to clear away the taste. *Attractive* was beside the point, he thought, wasn't it. They had stopped having sex months ago.

Dr. Boch, their marriage counselor, told Fritz and Minda that they should each explore a personal interest, something that wasn't work, that wasn't necessarily productive. Something just for themselves. Dr. Boch did not tell them what comes next, after this exploration; the McNallys only agreed to go to the one session.

Fritz went online that evening and found the Chow Down contest, just six weeks away and registration not yet closed—a sign, he thought. He could do it. It felt doable, if he committed himself to training and trained as hard as he could. He spent the rest of the night at the computer, studying the regimes of professional eaters like Kobayashi and Jaws Chestnut and Sonia “The Black Widow” Thomas and taking notes, feeling excitement growing and growing inside him.

Competition of any kind thrilled Fritz, and he'd always suspected that he had something special, something that could make him a real contender. He'd never quite tested this theory. Maybe he'd been afraid. But Boch had given him something—something as simple as permission.

At breakfast, second week of training, he toasted a whole loaf of bread and practiced Kobayashi's Solomon Method, tearing each piece of toast in half and dunking it in a glass of water to soften before eating.

Minda watched him over her laptop. "You know," she said, "most competitive eaters—the ones that win those contests—they're genetic freaks. They have fewer ribs than normal people. Or like, more of a stomach."

"The human body is capable of great feats," said Fritz after chewing and swallowing a sodden bread wad. "There's a lot of stretch in the average stomach—lots of elasticity. Think about what happens during pregnancy. You just have to train it to stretch out."

"Yeah, well. No matter how much you train, you'll never be stretchy enough to go head to head with a grizzly bear," she said. That was what Kobayashi did, in a televised hotdog-eating contest.

"I don't have to beat a *bear*," muttered Fritz. But Minda was not really paying attention; she'd turned back to her grapefruit and her laptop. Minda was working on one of her freelance projects, designing a website. Lately she was always on her computer. She brought it to bed with her. Fritz had grown used to her face, rapt, bathed in the blue-white glow of the screen—the last thing he would see before falling asleep.

Her personal interest, she told Dr. Boch, blushing prettily, is group sex. She wanted to organize an Adults Only party for like-minded couples. It was her most cherished fantasy, she said at the consultation. Before she said it, Fritz had had a wild irrational hope, for one moment, that what came out of her mouth

would be the same as *his* unspoken desire, that they would be revealed to be perfect for each other, all along.

But they'd never really shared many interests. They met when Minda, recently divorced, came into his pharmacy to fill a prescription for a low-dose of Ativan. She mentioned that she needed it for a trip she was about to take; she was afraid to fly. He told her that he was afraid to fly too. He was struck by how softly curved and pretty she was, and in such a different way from Catlin, his last ex, who'd been so tall and angular.

The next time she came into the pharmacy he asked her out for coffee. Soon she was timing her visits for when he was about to go on his afternoon break, and they'd stroll around the corner to Starbucks together.

After a couple months of this, she asked him if he'd like to take her to dinner. "I don't really like coffee," she admitted.

"I'm not really afraid to fly," he said. And they had laughed, united in their conspiracy against one another.

*

The first two years of their marriage were good, really good. They were figuring out everything there was to know about each other, all that hidden history. Great conversations, great sex. Minda liked to experiment: light bondage, role-playing, things Fritz wouldn't have dreamt of suggesting to Catlin. Once, when they were stuck in traffic on the highway in the middle of the day, Minda had given him a

hand job, both of them staring straight ahead through the windshield. It was astonishing.

But seemed like a long time ago. Fritz didn't know what happened. There had been little fights, plenty of them, but nothing major. Many of their squabbles had to do with Ralphie. Ralphie, the dog that was *their* dog when they had picked him out at the pound together—they'd both agreed that they didn't want children. Ralphie had been an adorable butter-colored puppy, but once he grew up and started snoring and smelling bad and pooping great steaming mounds in the backyard, Minda started calling him *Your Dog* or *Your Fucking Dog* and now she refused to walk him or clean up after him. Fritz is certain that Ralphie can tell how Minda feels about him.

Even worse than the fights was the creeping silence that grew like ivy over everything. Worse, because there was no single moment when it happened, no incident to point to. It was just there, all around them, as they went about their separate days. Talking had been so easy, before, and now Fritz had to remind himself to ask questions: questions lead to conversation, conversation leads to intimacy, intimacy to happiness in the relationship, to paraphrase Dr. Boch. And you can't ask or answer questions without interest, real interest, Boch had reminded them. Fritz tried.

*

A week before the Chow Down. Minda settled at the kitchen table with her laptop as Fritz made himself a few pounds of spaghetti for dinner.

“What are you working on?” he asked.

“An ad,” she said. She doesn’t look up. “For CraigsList.”

“What for?”

“For the party. To advertise.”

“Uh-huh,” said Fritz. He poured the dry pasta into the salted water. A few pieces fell and skittered across the floor. “Crap damn,” he said.

“Fritz, if you want to read the ad, read the ad,” said Minda.

“Well, sure. OK,” he said. He leaned over her shoulder and read:

Swinger Party!

Playmates Wanted: Discreet, attractive adults are invited to attend an exclusive gathering on the evening of Saturday the 21st. Must be D/D free; no single gentlemen, please. Please respond with a photo and we will forward you the location.

Hush Hush,

HottMonster

Fritz felt relief wash over him like warm water. No one was going to respond to this, he thought. It was just too absurd. He looked around the room at the familiar walls and furniture, safe now from the touch of fornicating strangers.

Minda was watching him closely; she expected a response.

“What’s with the name? Hot Monster?” he said.

“It’s Hot-T. Hottie Monster. It’s an alias. Everyone uses them.”

“Can I call you Hottie Monster?” He grinned at her, stirring his spaghetti.

“Fritz, we need to talk about what’s going to happen.”

“What’s going to happen when?”

“At the party. When we have the party. We need to talk about us having sex with other people,” she said.

“Ah. OK,” he said. He looked down into the roiling pasta water. “What do you think?”

“I think we shouldn’t put too many restrictions on the experience,” she said. “Too many could really dampen the enjoyment.”

“*Your* enjoyment.”

“Yes,” she said levelly. “My enjoyment. But yours too, potentially. I want this to be something we can both enjoy.”

Fritz felt ashamed. He knew the idea should excite him, getting to try out a different woman or two for the night. But the truth was he just wanted Minda, the old Minda, the way she was before.

He knew what he said next would be important, and he felt a great magnanimity in knowing what he was about to say; there was no risk in it, since that he was certain no one was actually going to show up. He’d play along, and once it was over and the two of them were alone, together, like it was supposed to be, he could comfort her. “I want you to do whatever will make you happy, whatever you want to do. As long as it’s what you want, yeah.” He smiled at her.

“Is that really how you feel?” she said. “You won’t feel too jealous, or like, emasculated?”

“If it’s important to you, it’s worth it to me,” he said, and she rose from her seat and hugged him, a brief hug but a hug nonetheless, and he felt the soft crush of her breasts against his chest and thought, *Progress*.

*

In retrospect, he should have read the CraigsList ad more carefully. He should have seen that she had scheduled her party on the same day as the Charlie Burger contest. By the time he’d realized—*this* weekend?—it was too late. He found her in the bathroom, brushing her teeth.

“Well, the ad’s been posted for weeks,” she said, punctuating her sentence with a neat *p’tooey* of spit into the basin. “It’s done.”

“Did you know? I mean, you didn’t plan it this way on purpose, did you? So I wouldn’t be able to come to the party and you wouldn’t be able to come watch me eat?”

She raised her eyebrows at him in the mirror. “Of course not. It just worked out this way. I wish it hadn’t, but it’s too late now to do anything about it. Anyway, your thing is during the day, isn’t it? Mine’s at night. They don’t necessarily overlap.” Her tone was blandly innocent, and Fritz felt foolish. He’d had his suspicions that maybe this was Minda’s plan all along—something she’d

cooked up, perhaps with Dr. Boch as her co-conspirator, a devious bait-and-switch.

But it wasn't all Minda's doing. Fritz knew that he is capable of great focus, to the exclusion of everything around him—it's what makes him such a good pharmacist, and what had given him hope for his career as a competitive gurgitator. What else had he missed? They had gone to see the counselor to bring them closer together. Had they become too wrapped up in their own research and planning, too arrested by what they found down the internet's many labyrinthine rabbit holes? Fritz was captivated by the matter-of-fact advice he'd found on competitive eating sites, telling him that the gases in boiled cabbage expand the stomach without adding much to one's calorie count, that he should practice breathing rhythmically through the nose and master the "Kobayashi Shake," a sinuous wiggle that forced food down the esophagus to settle more compactly in the stomach.

Minda had researched too. There were new books on the nightstand: *The Ethical Slut* and *The Ice Storm*. An empty DVD case on the arm of the couch: *Galveston Gang Bang*, starring Dusty Boots. The woman on the cover looked a little bit like Minda, if she had been drawn by a horny cartoonist. Fritz's mind stuttered a bit on the word *gangbang*; he had to sit there for a moment, reminding himself: this was research. Just as he wasn't planning to compete against a grizzly bear.

*

At dinner, the day before the Chow Down, as he was preparing the very last pile of cabbage—he'd never eat another bite of cabbage as long as he lived, he vowed—she told him that if she could get everything set up in advance, she would come watch him in the burger contest; she'd do it, even though the thought alone made her feel queasy.

Then, early in the day, something happened. Fritz was getting dressed; he was wearing a T-shirt and Jockey shorts and appraising his belly in the full-length mirror. Not the rippling abs of Kobayashi, certainly. Even as a teenager, he never had rippling abs. His belly bulged over the top of his underwear, a pale moon. But as he turned to the side, appraising it, he felt no shame. It had a purpose: today, it would serve him.

Then he heard Minda cry out. He heard her footsteps in the hall and then she was standing in the doorway, her mouth a thin pink line.

“Do you know what this is?” She held up an oblong piece of purple plastic. Behind her legs Fritz could see Ralphie lurking, shamefaced.

“No, what?” said Fritz.

“It is—*was*, was my vibrator, before Your Fucking Dog destroyed it.” She threw the vibrator down on the bed. It boinged off the mattress and landed on the floor, and Ralphie darted over, snatched it up and raced away down the hall.

“Goddamnit!” Minda shrieked. “Bad dog!”

And that was that for her coming to the contest. It didn't need to be said.

*

The Charlie Burger Big Cheese Chow Down was held every year at the Charlie Burger in the Target plaza off 95. Fritz signed in on the clipboard of a harried-looking teenage boy in a paper hat. A Channel 6 crew was there taking footage of the crowd. The reporter, a young woman in a sexy tight skirt and blazer, was standing off to the side, looking bored as she sucked on the straw of a large iced coffee.

A camera flash went off and Fritz blinked away the red-black spots lingering in his vision. He took his seat at the table. The Master of Ceremonies, a silver-haired man in a red blazer with a Charlie Burger t-shirt underneath, tapped his microphone and began.

“Welcome, my friends, to the sixth annual Charlie Burger Big Cheese Chow Down.” The emcee made elaborate gestures with the hand not holding the microphone. He reminded Fritz of a birthday party magician. A pair of Charlie Burger employees set down the steaming platters of burgers on the table.

The emcee outlined the rules for the contest, rules Fritz knew by heart.

“Gentlemen, you'll have ten minutes to eat as many of these outstanding burgers as you can. We're doing this competition picnic-style, which means we give respect and maintain the integrity and dignity of the Charlie Burger. So that means no dunking, no mashing. No excessive debris on the table, please, let's keep it clean, everyone. Any reversals means immediate disqualification—reversals being when you lose your lunch, if you'll pardon the expression, folks.

“Chipmunking *is* permitted, provided that you finish the burger in your mouth within thirty seconds of the final countdown—chipmunking, folks, for those of you who don’t know, is when you stuff your cheeks full of food, just like a little chipmunk.” The crowd chuckles appreciatively. “Our winner today will enjoy a fifty dollar Charlie Burger gift certificate, one hundred dollars cash, and the opportunity to qualify for *Eats of Strength*, the show put on by the fine folks over at Major League Eating.”

A smattering of applause. Fritz cracked his knuckles one by one. The emcee beamed. “Now then. Give it up for our brave gurgitators, everyone! Gentlemen! Are you ready to CHOW DOWN?”

The crowd and the contestants cheered their assent; Fritz too.

And that’s when it began.

*

The lights of the Channel 6 camera are blinding. Fritz is sweating. There’s a hush among the spectators; even the emcee speaks into the mic in a whisper every time another burger disappears. “That’s seven, folks—seven for Mr. Ernie Singh.”

Fritz is trailing, with only five burgers eaten. One of the contestants has dropped out entirely. The bodybuilder on Fritz’s left is in trouble; he’s suffering the guttural, body-wracking hiccups that lead inevitably to vomit, as Fritz knows all too well. Fritz eats steadily, methodically. Chewing, chewing, chewing, swallowing. His mouth barely registers taste, only texture: if it’s too hard to

swallow, he keeps chewing. He drinks very little water; he remembers that it could fill him up prematurely, and they aren't allowed bathroom breaks. He looks at the pile of burgers on the platter; it's daunting. *Look at the burger in your hand, not the other burgers*, he tells himself. *The burger in your hand.*

Four minutes of the original ten remain; a digital clock counts each second down.

“Six for Mr. McNally, ladies and gentlemen.” Fritz barely hears. Another contestant taps out; he pushes his chair away from the table and lets out a bone-rattling belch. The bodybuilder throws his head between his legs and pukes under the table. The smell blooms up in the air immediately, a sour cloud. “A reversal, folks—that’s a disqualification. Very sorry, sir. Fantastic job,” says the emcee, and two Charlie Burger employees help the ashen-faced man up from the table.

It's just Fritz and Ernie Singh, now. The clock reads two minutes, thirty-eight seconds. After what feels like a lifetime of chewing Fritz forces down another burger. Seven. *You're a machine, a gate, a portal.*

Singh still has the lead, with nine eaten, but his calm is breaking; Fritz sees him shudder as he swallows.

Two minutes. The mass of bread and meat in Fritz's mouth will not soften. He gulps a quick sip from his water glass. One and a half minutes. Singh puts away number ten. Fritz picks up his eighth, and looks up squinting into the bright camera lights. He's still hoping, looking for Minda. The crowd blurs together, but he can see one woman, a pregnant, flush-faced blonde; she's holding a sign that

says I LOVE YOU ERNIE. Fritz feels his heart twist. He crams the burger into his mouth; it fills the hollows of his cheeks, puffs them out. One minute. Singh has started breathing loudly, like a sprinter. Fritz chokes down the rest of his mouthful. Forty-five seconds remain. The restaurant seems to spin around him. He raises a hand to his face, covers his eyes. The crowd is chanting the countdown: *nineteen, eighteen, seventeen*. He picks up another burger and sees the emcee watching him with a look of profound sadness. *Ten, nine, eight*. Fritz puts the burger down, unbitten. *Three-two-one*—the crowd erupts, clapping, cheering.

Singh has finished eleven and a half burgers, Fritz only eight. He's lost. His jaws ache. He sits in a daze, watching the emcee hand the oversized check to Singh, watching the Channel 6 lady reporter hold a microphone up to his face. Singh sways a little as he talks. He's holding onto the back of his chair for support.

The emcee comes up behind Fritz and puts a hand on his shoulder. "Nice work, there, son. I thought you had it there, for a minute."

"I never had it," says Fritz. His voice sounds strange to him. He stands. It's dark outside, almost time for Minda's party. He wants suddenly to be at home, with her.

*

Back at the house, Fritz lets himself in quietly through the front door. He stands for a moment in the living room, looking around at Minda's preparations. Tissue boxes, lots of tissue boxes. Cheap cotton slipcovers for the couches. Scented candles glowing along the mantel. The smell of vanilla in the living room is almost overpowering. Fritz wipes a hand over his brow. He's still sweating. He's so full. He feels like a barrel, top heavy, barely standing upright. His stomach is rolling; he tries not to picture the stew of meat and cheese and bread trapped inside him. He can hear the murmur of voices from deeper inside the house and he moves down the hall, feeling like he's walking in a dream. In the darkened den a couple of people are going at it, right there on the loveseat. Fritz stares at them through the open door and then looks away and then stares again. It's not Minda. It's a pair of complete strangers, on his loveseat, in his den, just jack-hammering away at each other. A door opens and in front of him a man who can only be Dr. Boch hurries down the hall from the kitchen to the guest bathroom, clad only in tight purple undershorts, the deep folds in the flesh of his back like a dozen frowning faces.

Fritz finds Minda in the other bathroom, brushing her hair. She's wearing red lipstick and a black silk robe that Fritz has never seen before.

"Minda," Fritz whispers urgently, grasping her elbow. "Why is Dr. Boch here?"

"Why do you think?" she says. "Why shouldn't he be here?"

"Don't you think that it's—inappropriate?"

"Why?"

“Because of the doctor-patient relationship. Because, the Hippocratic Oath!”

“Well, we're not his patients now, are we? It was just a one-time thing. I think it's fine. I think it's wonderful, actually.”

Fritz reels at this. “Are you attracted to him?”

“I wouldn't say I'm *attracted* attracted, no. But he is the one that made this all happen. He made me realize it was possible, you know, to do something I really wanted. Something just for me. So I suppose I feel grateful to him, maybe attracted to his *mind*, on a certain level.”

“Are you going to have sex with him?”

“Oh Fritz,” she says, straightening the lapels of her robe in the mirror. “That's not really how it works. If it happens, it happens. It's not something I can predict.”

Fritz wishes, suddenly and with great force, that they had done this together, the planning, the research; there's so much he doesn't understand.

“Are you all right?” Minda is looking at him with her brow furrowed. “You're really pale. And you're sweating.”

“Yeah, no, it's the burgers. All the burgers I ate. I think I might be a little sick.” Fritz sits down on the edge of the tub.

“Oh, the burgers. Did you—how did you do?”

“I didn't win,” he says. “I came in second. Eight burgers.”

“Well, that's—that's still pretty good, eight. Isn't it?” She looks down at him.

“Yeah, pretty good.” He closes his eyes and leans his forehead against

the cool tile of the wall. “Oof. Maybe I might have to lie down for a few minutes.”

“Maybe you should stay in here, close to the toilet for a while. To be safe,” she says.

“Maybe, yeah,” he says. She's inching towards the door. *Don't go*, he thinks, and says, “Where are you going?”

“Just to check on everything. See who's arrived.”

“Um, how *many* people are here?”

“I don't know, twelve?”

Twelve! Fritz feels his face flush hot and then his body goes cold, all in a wave. “Minda, is this really happening? Who are these people?”

“They're just—normal people, like me or you. They're just here to have fun. To have an adventure.”

“I don't know. I don't know about this.”

“Fritz. Look at me.”

He looks. She's standing above him, looking regal and beautiful and very annoyed.

She says, “You could've stopped this, if you'd wanted to. It's been in the works for a while. But you were too busy, too wrapped up in your own thing. In your eating contest, like eating is some kind of *skill*.”

“Hey,” Fritz says, wounded. “I had mine and you have yours. That was the deal.”

“Yes! Yes! Exactly! I tolerated it, all of it, your training, the house smelling like cabbage for weeks—I did it for you, so you could do your own thing. Follow

your dream. Like Dr. Boch told us to. Except, Fritz, the difference is, *your* dream didn't include me at all."

"But I did—I wanted you to come. I really did."

"Yeah, to watch. To be a spectator. But it was always your thing, yours alone. What I wanted... It could've been more. It could've been something we did together, something amazing. Didn't you see that? Why didn't you see?"

Fritz doesn't know what to say. How could he have missed that, all of it?

Minda folds her arms. "Look," she says, "I think this is still a good thing. It's helping me sort some stuff out. It'll help us see things in a different light. Reassess."

Fritz opens his mouth to protest—he doesn't want a different light, a new light, he wants things to be the way they once were—and his gullet heaves. He twists around to lean over the toilet, his arms flexed against the seat, elbows out like he's halfway through a push up. But then the feeling passes. When he looks up Minda is gone.

He stands and waits for the dizziness to lift. He runs cold water over his hands and splashes some onto his face. His reflection in the mirror is, as Minda said, pale and sweaty. His hair is plastered to his forehead. He feels a surpassing desire to take a bath, a nice cool bath, to let himself half-float for hours until this all is over and the house empties and becomes his own again. But instead he steels himself. *Eight burgers*, he thinks. Less than a champion, OK, but more than an ordinary man. He rubs his face vigorously with a towel and goes out into the party.

Fritz hears the sound of a woman laughing from inside the guest room and looks inside. Dr. Boch is stretched out facedown on the bed. A bony red-haired woman is sitting on the doctor's back, facing away from the doorway. She's wearing just a pair of Fritz's boxer shorts, the green ones with little chili peppers all over them, and she's massaging Boch's lower back and buttocks. Boch lifts himself up onto his elbows and peers out at Fritz. He nods, and Fritz nods back. They are oddly formal nods, considering the situation.

"Scuse me," says a man's voice and Fritz looks up, startled. A stranger with a long graying mustache moves past him in the hallway. The man is barefoot and bare-chested, wearing jeans and carrying two empty wine glasses. He looks very much at home, and Fritz feels that dreamlike sensation again, a sort of vertigo. As the man disappears into the kitchen, Fritz stoops down and takes off his shoes.

There's a sign on the door to the laundry room that says *Please Keep Closed*. Fritz finds Ralphie shut up inside. "Aw, buddy," he says. He crouches down and scratches the dog's neck and ears. "Listen, Ralphie, hey—I think I know what to do, now." The dog whines and licks at his wrist. There's a tennis ball on the floor and Fritz kicks it; the dog chases after it back into the laundry room and Fritz closes the door tight behind him.

The stereo speakers in the living room are playing some kind of world music, something with lots of drumming and flutes. Underneath, the unmistakable sound of sex.

The only light comes from the vanilla candles on the mantel. Fritz waits for his eyes to adjust and unbuttons his shirt, slides down his trousers. He pads into the room in his socks and underwear, ready, finally. There's a tangle of people, half on the carpet, half on the couch. As Fritz wades in he sees Minda lift her head; she sees him. He pauses a moment. But what's on her face isn't horror, or disgust, it's love, love, like it was on the day they were married, and for one perfect moment, before the eight burgers rise and force themselves out of him like a curse, he feels that old joy.

Fortune

Mona moved into Kristie and Roman's apartment a few days into the new year. A light snow sugar-dusted everything, making the grimy pavement and parked cars look as fresh and full of possibilities as crisp blank paper. The neighborhood, a small far-flung corner of Brooklyn called Cannon Yard, was still just barely affordable, thanks to its inaccessibility to public transit; the nearest subway stop was a twenty-minute walk. Mona didn't mind. She didn't have a job, and so her time was infinite, expendable. She loved to walk, taking a different way each time, in snaky routes through the streets of her new neighborhood. Sometimes, stepping inside a bookstore or a bodega, she would take off her woolen gloves and press her warm hands against her cold cheeks, feeling so happy and alive it brought tears to her eyes. She'd arrived. She was here, finally, as she'd dreamed she would be someday, when she was growing up and then going to school in the same small town in western Massachusetts. She could shrug off the disappointments in her past like old clothes. She felt she was becoming a real person, instead of just the idea of a person or a potential person.

The train she would take to go into Manhattan traveled over the East River, and when she pressed close to the glass of the subway car's doors, the elegant spires and turrets of the skyscrapers along the river launched toward her in a rush that squeezed at her heart. They had been waiting a long time for her. *I'm here*, she whispered soundlessly to them. *Here I am.*

Her new roommates Kristie and Roman had lived together in New York for two years, ever since they'd graduated from college. They had gone to Lancing, the same college as Mona, though they had not known her then. They had been dating for almost four years. Originally, they'd treated the second bedroom as a guestroom and studio where Roman could work on music. But they could use the extra money, Kristie had explained in her email to Mona, as they arranged a time to meet. Mona had written her after seeing a post by a mutual Facebook friend from Lancing about a vacant bedroom in the city.

"It's small," Kristie wrote in her email. "You'd be sharing a bathroom with two people, and we're both pretty messy. Also we have a cat."

"It sounds perfect," Mona wrote back.

*

Mona took the train down on the Friday after Christmas. Kristie met her outside the building so that she'd be sure to find it.

"Come in, come in! Brrr, it's cold as a bitch out here. Hello! Follow me!"

Mona followed her up the four flights of stairs to the apartment. The hallway was dim and narrow. Each stair she climbed made a squeak of complaint. Ahead, Kristie's red-gold hair shone like a beacon.

"Here she is!" Kristie called into the door at the top of the stairs.

The apartment was bright and warm and smelled of garlic and butter. Roman was in the kitchen cooking pasta. He had pale gray eyes and shaggy,

dark hair that curled around his ears. He was wearing a zebra-print apron with pink piping over his clothes.

“Mona, Mona,” he said, taking her hand in his. He didn’t shake her hand; he just held it for a moment. “M-O-N-A?”

“Yes,” she said. He was the most beautiful person she had ever seen.

“Your name fits inside my name,” he said. “Roman-ra-mona. Hm. I’ll have to think up a nickname for you so Kristie doesn’t get confused.”

“Ha ha. Shut up,” Kristie said. “This is the only problem with the apartment, you’ll see—it has him in it. Come on, let me show you the room.”

Mona smiled and smiled as Kristie gave her the tour: the little bedroom and its view of the Williamsburg bridge in the distance, the bigger bedroom that Roman and Kristie shared with Roman’s guitars hung up on the walls and Kristie’s lacy bra flung carelessly on the unmade bed. The rusty fire escape outside the living room windows, the bathroom with bright orange iron stains around the faucets and the tiny clawfoot tub. After, the three of them stood together in the living room. Kristie’s cat, Minty, regarded them coolly from his perch on the windowsill.

Roman cleared his throat. “Mona Boates, we would like to offer you the opportunity to share our cramped, smelly, overpriced apartment with us. Do you accept?”

“I do,” she said.

Kristie had clapped her hands and said, “Wait, wait! We have to seal it with a toast!” And they went to the Mexican restaurant around the corner and

drank so many bottles of Sol and shots of cheap tequila that Mona had to sleep on the couch. She woke up the next morning dry-mouthed and ferociously happy. *My place*, she thought, looking everywhere, at everything: up at the smooth white tundra of the ceiling and the bright clutter of band posters and prints on the walls, down at the carpet with its fine sheen of white cat hair. All of it. *Mine*.

*

Kristie and Roman were the kind of people she'd been too shy to speak to in school, tall and loud and always laughing. They expected to be welcomed and well-treated wherever they went, with the perfect, thoughtless entitlement of the young and beautiful. For Mona, being around them, so close to them, was dazzling and terrifying. It was like being close to wild animals or demigods. She couldn't quite believe they would allow her, so small and colorless, to share their home. But they did. Kristie dressed Mona in her gorgeous, cast-off clothes, sweaters as soft as kittens, the wool still smelling faintly of Coco Mademoiselle. And Roman. Roman. Sometimes he would call her into the bedroom where he was mixing a song at the computer, and he would fit the warm, bulky headphones gently over her ears and then watch as she listened, his gray eyes scanning her face.

"It's beautiful," she always said, gratefully, about the songs and the sweaters, everything. And Kristie and Roman accepted Mona's gratitude with

grace and enfolded her into their daily routines, as though she belonged, as though she had always been there with them.

Kristie wanted to be an actress. She would sit Mona and Roman down on the living room couch and then practice for an audition, acting all the different parts in the scene, changing voices for the different characters. She was good, Mona could tell—almost frighteningly so. Kristie’s eyes would well up with real tears as she begged herself not to go, *please, don’t leave me, not like this*—and Mona would feel a corresponding lump in her own throat. It gave Mona a thrilling little shock, every time, when the performance was over: the moment that Kristie’s face slipped back into her own smile, when she became Kristie again. Then they would cheer her loudly, Mona clapping like mad, Roman putting two fingers in his mouth to make a piercing whistle, and Kristie would curtsy, laughing with amazement at what she’d done.

Kristie never considered the possibility that she would fail. She would say, “When I’m famous—” And it sounded possible. In the meantime, she worked as a hostess in a Basque restaurant in Williamsburg, a small, bewilderingly expensive place with no sign on the outside at all.

Roman was in a psych rock band called Knives. By day, he worked as a tour guide for the Tenement Museum on the Lower East Side. Sometimes, Mona would get up early and they would buy to-go coffees and ride the train together while Kristie slept. Then Mona would ride the train alone back to Brooklyn, or uptown to the library to wander in the quiet, echoing canyons of the stacks,

thinking all the while about his hands, his skin, the way the wool of his sweaters stretched over his shoulders.

*

One night, a few weeks after she'd moved in, Roman asked her to cut his hair. He sat bare-chested on a stool in the kitchen with a towel draped around his shoulders while she stood behind him. She worked slowly, savoring the feeling of his hair between her fingers, the solidity of his skull under its thin layer of skin. Each time, after she made a cut, she would run her hand through his hair so that it stood up in little tufts like wet feathers. Maybe he leaned into her hand, just a little bit. In the warm, honey-colored kitchen with the snow falling outside, it seemed possible.

Kristie came home when the haircut was almost done and she gasped in horror at the sight of him.

"What are you doing? Oh my god, what have you *done*?" She was laughing, but her eyes were not.

Roman grabbed the hand mirror. "What? What? Is it not even in the back? Is it horrible? Mona! You claimed to be a professional!"

"Oh, Mona, whhhhhhy?" Kristie picked up a handful of hair from the floor and shook it wildly at them, the tragicomic actress.

Mona had just smiled and shrugged, her cheeks burning. She thought she'd done a pretty good job. She recalled the look on Kristie's face when she'd

first walked in and seen them, the narrowed, appraising eyes. It made her feel shame—it was nothing! harmless!—and underneath that, a proud defiance. It wasn't nothing. Not really. She'd held his head in her hands, for what had felt like hours. The cuffs of her sweater were riddled with little bits of his hair. Of him.

Roman disappeared into the bathroom to shower, then returned to them, damp and shorn, to tune in the Rangers game. He and Mona cheered as they clobbered the Blackhawks. Kristie, not a hockey fan, heaved long sighs from her end of the couch and fidgeted through the whole last period. Though Mona wished fervently for overtime, the game ended as a shut out.

“Come over here, Caveman,” Kristie said.

Roman leaned over and she whispered something in his ear. He smiled.

“G'night, Moony,” Roman said, and the two of them went into their bedroom and shut the door. And just like that, the spell was broken. They could always go into their room and shut the door.

*

At night, Mona dreamed of Roman. In one dream, he was with her in her old childhood bedroom. He didn't speak. He kissed her shoulder, her elbow, the inside of her wrists, everywhere but where she wanted to be kissed. Outside, she could hear her parents calling for her. It was her birthday and she was late for the party; everyone was already there. In the bedroom, he lifted her hair to his lips. He whispered something she couldn't hear. He kissed the ends of her hair.

*

Mona searched half-heartedly for internships and jobs on the Internet: childcare, publishing, personal assistance. She had saved money from her summer job as a file clerk. It could last her another two or three months, if she was careful enough. She didn't really want another job. A job was something she'd done back home, a symptom of the person that she used to be. Her new self recoiled at the thought of the necessary dullness, the monotony. What she wanted was to stay as she was: a student of the city, on a schedule of her own making, beholden to no one.

Now she could stay up all night and sleep until the gray afternoon, as she did when Roman had a weeknight show. Sometimes his band wouldn't come on until three in the morning. In the hot, dim basement of one Astoria bar, she stood next to Kristie and watched him, the light on his face, the way he bent his head down towards his guitar as though it was whispering confidences to him. Sometimes he would look up and squint into the crowd. If Mona stood just a half step forward from Kristie, she could pretend that Kristie wasn't there at all. And when Roman smiled at her, her alone, it lifted her up up up onto her toes.

Kristie tugged at her sleeve. "What do you think?"

Mona could see the words from her mouth better than she could hear them. She smiled and nodded.

Kristie tugged again, her face serious. “They’re good, right? Aren’t they good?”

It startled Mona to realize that Kristie didn’t actually know. They were very good. The music wasn’t like anything Mona had heard before, but it made sense to her. The more she listened, the more sure she became: it was telling her a story, wordless and true. It was telling her that she was right where she was supposed to be. The very strangeness of it, that was the music’s message to her. It was telling her, *This is nothing like what you know, all the things you’ve left behind you. This is everything else. Everything you haven’t even considered until this moment in this place. This is what your future sounds like.*

“They’re amazing,” Mona mouthed to her, and Kristie smiled, relieved.

After the show was over, and Roman was packing the van with his bandmates, Mona and Kristie sat on the edge of the stage to wait. All the lights were on and the room seemed much smaller without the darkness and the crowd. Mona was surprised to see that the walls were covered in pine paneling, as though they were in someone’s rec room.

Kristie checked her phone and sighed. She leaned her head on Mona’s shoulder. A wisp of her hair tickled the corner of Mona’s mouth.

“I’m glad you came with me,” she said.

Mona could smell the citrusy perfume of Kristie’s shampoo. “When are they playing next?”

“Oh god, tomorrow and the next day and the next, probably. At six in the morning. In the Bronx.”

Mona smiled her scorn into Kristie's hair. Kristie couldn't hear what she heard in those songs. Songs that Roman had written, that he brought into the world from inside of him, songs that he played with his hands.

"I'll go with you the next time too," Mona said. "I really did like it."

"I wish you could go *instead* of me," Kristie said. She picked up Mona's hand and squeezed it. "Thank you for being a sweetheart. He should be done soon, I promise."

Mona squeezed her hand back. She felt the pulsing, dried-eyed exhaustion that comes at four AM, the kind that pretends to be a second wind. She was weary and serene, holding up Kristie's head with her shoulder.

*

Kristie was not careful with her secrets. Her face betrayed her. It was too sensitive, too elastic. Her eyes, her mobile, laughing mouth, her finely shaped brows that drew together or arched, skeptical—all these parts Kristie had trained with acting classes and hours at the mirror, they were all a language of signs that revealed her mood and thoughts like ripples spreading in a pond. If you knew how to look, you could see everything.

One night, while Roman was at practice, Mona sat with Kristie watching movies in the big bedroom. Onscreen, Mollie Ringwald watched slack-jawed as a boy lip-synch-serenaded her to "Try a Little Tenderness." Kristie muted the movie. She was telling Mona about a friend of hers from improv class, a girl

named Annabelle, who'd allowed a rich man she met on the train to set her up in an apartment on the Upper East Side, rent and utilities and a well-stocked refrigerator included.

"And she's not even embarrassed about it," Kristie said. "She talks about it as if it's this great gig that she's landed. You know, with her *talent*."

Mona sat on the floor with Kristie's many bottles of nail polish. She'd put them in a neat row in front of her, arranged by color from an iridescent pearl-white on one end to an inky black on the other.

"This one," Kristie said, leaning down from the bed and tapping a long fingernail on a bottle of wine-red polish. "It won't chip so bad." She rolled up her pajama pants to her knee. "Anna claims it's not even about sex. She says he just wants to take care of her. Like a creepy daddy." Kristie shuddered theatrically.

"Do you believe that, though?" Mona asked. "That it's not about sex?"

"I don't know. Maybe. It sounds too good to be true, doesn't it? I think she's just trying to make it sound amazing, to make me jealous. Like it could've been me, but oh well, she got on the right train."

Mona thought that Kristie did sound jealous. "So, but—how does it work? Does he just show up at the apartment with checks and groceries?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask for all the dirty details. I didn't want to give her the satisfaction, really. She just kept going on and on about how much time she has now that she doesn't have to work some menial day job. Now she can focus on her *craft* full-time, she says."

Mona painted the thumbs of both her hands with the red polish. “Is she any good?”

Kristie sighed. “She’s very pretty, but no, not really. The problem is, she doesn’t want to work at it. Now that she’s quit her job, she keeps bugging me to come shopping with her. Or to come along with her to some fucking Zumba class. She doesn’t know what to do with herself. That’s what really makes me crazy about this whole thing. I mean, if I had that much free time, I’d *use* it, you know? Take more classes. Practice my ass off.”

“But you’re a good actress already,” Mona said.

“Thank you, Little. It’s just—it’s not fair. I know I’d be a much better kept woman than she is. I just wouldn’t actually *do* it. How could I explain that to my parents, anyway?”

“And Roman too.”

“Right, well, of course,” said Kristie. “Roman too. He’d have some issues with the whole thing, obviously.” Their eyes met and Kristie looked away first. She wiggled her bare feet at Mona. “Do my toes.”

There was an idea in Mona, a secret truth that had started to take root the night of Roman’s show. *She doesn’t love him anymore*, Mona thought with wonder.

Kristie went on, “I bet that guy has a key to the apartment so he can sneak in and watch Anna sleep. Or steal her dirty panties. He doesn’t have to touch her to make it gross. There are all kinds of ways to get off.”

Mona wanted to hear more about Roman. There had to be something she could use. "Why do you call Roman Caveman?"

Kristie flopped onto her back and giggled. "Sometimes when Roman comes, he makes this sound like *herrrunnnggh*. Like a caveman. I don't know. It's stupid. The name just stuck."

Mona forced herself to paint each one of Kristie's toenails with extravagant care. She felt as though someone had thrown scalding water across her face. Roman naked on top of Kristie, their bodies shining with sweat. She brushed the polish on in straight, even lines. Kristie had big feet and long, monkeyish toes. For a moment, Mona lets herself imagine the way Kristie's feet would look with the toenails ripped off. Would there be wine-red patches where the nails used to be?

Kristie propped herself up on her elbows carefully, to watch. "You're good at that, Moon. When I'm famous I'll hire you to be my manicurist."

What if you never become famous? What if you're wrong about everything? Mona thought, and said, "And I also cut hair."

*

Mona found herself thinking in loops. Inventing scenarios. If she had met Roman at Lancing instead of Kristie. If Kristie got offered a job in Los Angeles and had to fly off, away, leaving Roman and Mona behind, together. If Kristie fell in love with someone from the restaurant, one of the movie stars or big-shot financiers she

was always bragging about meeting. If Roman wasn't so blinded by Kristie's gloss and sparkle, her paper-thin charms. If Mona could tell him the truth, just once; if she could hold out her heart for his inspection. He would see how huge it was, how true. No one had ever seen her true heart. She could feel it inside of her, large and growing larger every day.

*

One night, Mona dreamed that the moon was calling to her. She woke up to long, silvery fingers of light across her bed. The moon was full in a cloudless sky outside her window. The streets were hushed. She couldn't hear the usual hum of traffic from the expressway. It was as though the world had frozen for a moment, waiting. Waiting for her. She pressed her forehead to the frigid glass of the window. *Send me something*, she thought. *Help me*. She fell asleep with an echo of the cold still pulsing on her forehead. She didn't realize she'd spoken aloud.

*

The next day, Mona woke to an empty apartment: Roman gone to work at the museum, Kristie out on some errand. She pulled on her coat and boots and went for a walk. The day was cold but clear, and she walked as she usually did when she had no destination or need to hurry, making left and right turns at random.

She found the market this way, by chance: a dozen weatherworn tents on an empty lot, clustered behind a chain link fence. A painted sign hung over the entrance, secured by plastic zip ties: WELCOME FLEA MARKET. She wandered inside, in a maze of furniture and knickknacks, stacked in piles so high they dimpled the tent's ceiling. Here and there were vendors, haggling with a smattering of customers. All of the customers looked vaguely lost. The vendors seemed to all be short and beetle-browed, seated behind card tables spread with crockery, cloudy antique bottles, glass-topped boxes of costume jewelry and pocket knives. Between two of the tents, Mona bought a lemon crepe from an unsmiling little man. With beautifully practiced flicks of his wrist, he poured the batter onto the griddle and then twirled it into a cone of waxed paper. The whole place reminded Mona of going to the carnival when she was young: the smell of hot oil and sugar, and the giddy, nauseating feeling of too much to look at all at once.

The fortuneteller was inside one of the innermost tents. Her table was nearly bare, a little plateau between the teetering stacks of stuff. The woman wore a scarf tied around her head and a faded Duke University sweatshirt. She smiled at Mona cherubically. Next to her elbow, a tented white card read MAKE YOUR FORTUNE WITH LA SIGNORE DEL GIOCO in neatly printed letters.

“Hello, girl,” she said.

Mona smiled and kept walking.

“Make your fortune?” the woman asked as she passed.

“Oh, I—I don’t have any money, sorry. I spent it all already,” Mona said. She held up the crumbled wax paper as evidence.

“First fortune is free,” the woman said, still smiling. There was something about her face. She looked both old and young at once. “No obligation whatsoever. If you want another, then you pay for the next one.”

“Why would I need my fortune told more than once?” Mona asked, smiling back at the woman. It was impossible not to.

“Some do, some don’t. It depends on the soul. But for you, I do something special. A fortune made, not told. Your soul is in the right mood today, to make a fortune. Can’t you feel it?”

Mona shrugged. “What would I have to do?”

“Sit,” the woman said, and pushed a wooden three-legged stool out from under the table with her foot. “Listen.”

Mona sat. Why not? This was the sort of person she was now, a person who made time for amusing charlatans. She watched as the woman produced a deck of worn-looking cards from the kangaroo pocket of her sweatshirt and dealt four cards out on the table, facedown. On the back of each card was a picture of a heart, an anatomical drawing with the different sections and valves and ventricles labeled.

The woman cleared her throat. “Before we begin, you need to put your hands in top of the cards—flat, like this—and fix a desire in your mind. Something that you want to have, or become.”

Roman. Roman's. Mona pressed her palms down on top of the cards and nodded. "OK."

The woman looked closely at her. "Do you have it? It makes all the difference to the cards. Whether they will help you or not. They are your fate. Choose them with care."

"But you've already dealt them."

"That's true," the woman said. "But the cards don't know what they are going to be yet."

"OK," Mona said, smiling again. "I have it. I do." The woman's words sounded like patter, the kinds of things that a professional magician says between tricks. So she would be tricked—Mona didn't care. It would give her a story to take home to Roman and Kristie, at least.

"Very good." The woman placed her hands on top of Mona's and closed her eyes. Her fingers were cool and dry. Mona held very still and waited. There was a taxidermied lynx peering over from the booth behind the woman, atop a crate of old newspapers. The lynx was posed against a log as though it was stalking the little stuffed squirrel perched on top. The lynx had a puzzled, cross-eyed expression. The squirrel looked dead.

The woman let out a long sigh of air. She gently pushed Mona's hands off the tabletop and then flipped over the first of the four cards, her manner suddenly brisk and businesslike. "OK. First we have the Five of Wands. This represents the situation now, for you. A situation that is not satisfactory. See the five young men? They're fighting, but it's just a game. It has no outcome. For now. So, you

are not happy, but you are at least in a place where you are ready, ready to fight for what is yours. OK?”

Mona nodded. She kept her face neutral, but she was disappointed; she had hoped, absurdly, the cards would really be about her. Not just describing anyone with any random desire, anyone who paused long enough to sit on La Signore’s stool.

“Pay attention,” the woman said sharply. “Next is the Queen of Wands reversed. This Queen is the matriarch. Her element is fire. She represents the obstacle. The source of your pain. She is the light half to your dark, is that right?”

Mona looked down at the card. The woman in the illustration had a heavy, mannish face, but her hair was the same red-gold as Kristie’s. Mona wanted to believe, suddenly. “Yes,” she said. “I mean, go on. What are the rest?”

“The third is the Seven of Cups. This is the way through the obstacle. How the Queen will fall. There are many choices here. Different ways to go. The treasure in that cup, there—that is the temptation of wealth. A very strong temptation for some. The castle is the temptation of power, the laurel means glory or success. The snake is animal passion, lust.”

Mona leaned over the table, examining the illustration. Up close, the symbols were crude drawings. The snake looked cross-eyed. “But which one is the right one?”

“It depends on the Queen. But you know, I think. You already know.”

Mona twisted a length of her hair and chewed at the end of it, glaring at the card. “But I don’t. I don’t understand.”

The woman ignored her. “The fourth card: ah. The Moon. Very potent. The dream and the nightmare both. The secret inside of the secret.” She looked up from the table. “Have you ever identified with the moon?”

“Yes,” Mona said. “I mean, it’s my nickname. What my friends call me sometimes.”

“Yes. It is the thing that lives deep inside of you. This is the real you, the part that is more primal than your most basic animal aspect. The part that only *wants*. Some people think that there are two beasts that live inside of all of us, a good beast and an evil beast, and they battle for our soul. But the truth is, there is really just one. It isn’t good or evil. It just wants what it wants. And the more you feed it, the stronger it becomes. That is the engine that powers everything. That is what will get you your heart’s desire.”

Mona sighed. “Can you be more specific?”

“No. Not with this deck. It’s murky. But it’s the right deck for matters of the heart, you see?” She swept her hand across the table and gathered up the cards. “The heart is just a symbol, but symbols can be powerful. If they are used correctly. And if they are attached to belief, of course. Belief is everything. Do you believe?”

“I don’t know,” Mona said.

“You had better try. You are halfway there. In your heart, you already believe that he *should* belong to you. Now try to believe that he *can* be yours.”

Anyone who sits on La Signora’s stool, Mona thought again. She said, “I’ll try. I promise.”

“Good. And don’t eat your own hair. That’s bad luck,” the woman said.

“Like wishing on the moon.”

Mona looked back at her, startled, but the woman just returned her gaze, her smooth round face as placid as a baby’s. She had no hair of any kind, Mona realized—no eyelashes, no eyebrows. That was what gave her that otherworldly look of someone both young and old.

“Thank you for the fortune,” Mona said as she stood.

“You’re the one who made it,” the woman said. “Come and see me again, if you like.”

Back at the market’s entrance, Mona paused for a moment, disoriented and blinking, waiting for her eyes to adjust. Outside the sun was shining brilliantly, broken into a million shards of light by the snow on the ground. A sudden flurry, while she’d been in the tent: the sky had not even been cloudy before she’d gone inside.

*

She did not tell Roman or Kristie about the flea market or the fortuneteller. She was embarrassed by her hope, even momentary, that the reading was real. Real magic. She was afraid they would see it written on her face. *So what did you ask her about, Moon?* She didn’t want to lie to Roman. She didn’t want Kristie to watch her lie. She went to bed early and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep, with

the curtains flung wide and the moonlight painting a blue-silver mask across her face.

The next morning, Mona caught the train into Manhattan with Roman on his way to work. He was quieter than usual, unsmiling; strangest of all, he didn't joke with the girl who always made their coffee at the corner shop. He just counted out the exact change and thumbed each coin across the counter to her. Mona watched him carefully, feeling panic and hope battle inside of her.

"What's the matter?" she asked him as they stood swaying on the train.

He shook his head. "I really don't want to talk about it."

He was holding onto the pole in the middle of the car. His sleeve was pushed back. She looked at the expanse of wrist between his palm and his sleeve. The bluish veins under his skin, carrying blood in and out of his heart.

You belong to me, she thought, and she reached out and wrapped her hand around his wrist, so tightly she could feel the pulse that beat there. They stood that way for a minute as she marveled at her own bravery. When she finally dared to look up into his face, she saw that he was crying. Her heart hammered wildly inside of her. "Roman?"

"Shh—shh, don't, please. I can't talk about it now. I'm sorry." The train ground to a stop. He pulled his arm away from her gently. "I'll see you later at home, OK?"

She nodded and watched his back recede through the glass doors. It was happening. She reached up and held onto the pole, where the metal was still

warm from his hand. She rode the train north for a while, and then got off and rode another back home.

*

When she got back to the apartment, she found Kristie curled on the couch with Minty trapped in her arms. Kristie was wrapped in a knitted afghan, watching a talk show with the volume turned up very loud. Her eyes were red-rimmed, but she smiled at Mona.

“Come sit by me for a little while? I need some company.”

Mona sat down. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I mean, everything. But it’s going to be all right.”

“Did something happen with you and Roman?”

“I’m just an idiot,” Kristie said. “Can you do me a really big favor? Can we just sit here and watch this stupid show for a while? I’ll tell you everything later. I promise. I just need to sit here and not think about it.”

Tell me now, Mona thought, but then Kristie leaned snugly against her and rested her head down on her shoulder. Mona sat very straight, afraid Kristie might feel the insistent beating of her heart. They watched the show. A man found out the result of a paternity test: he wasn’t the father. He leapt from his chair and did an impromptu dance of joy. Kristie laughed and swiped at her eyes with the heel of her hand.

They were interrupted by a pounding at the door, the sound of a fist striking metal. Kristie bolted upright. “Oh shit,” she whispered.

They sat very still. The pounding came again. “Who is that?” Mona asked.

“It’s Juergen—it’s my boss. Can you tell him I’m not here? Tell him I’ve gone out. Please.”

When Mona opened the door, there was a man in his late thirties clutching a fistful of expensive-looking red flowers. He was handsome in the way that older soap opera actors are sometimes handsome. The stubble on his face was silvery.

He glanced at Mona dismissively and then called past her into the living room. “Kristie? I need to talk to you, goddamn it. Kristie!”

Mona looked over her shoulder. The couch was empty, the afghan puddled on the floor. The door to Kristie and Roman’s bedroom was closed.

“I know she’s here,” the man said. Mona could see the muscles of his jaw working. He was furious.

“Who are you, exactly?” Mona asked, keeping her voice neutral.

“Who the fuck are *you*? She knows who I am. *Kristie!*”

“Come in,” Mona said softly. “Hold on a minute.” She left him standing in the foyer and knocked gently on the bedroom door. Her heart was pumping. She would not let Kristie hide from this. She couldn’t.

“Kristie? It’s Mona,” she said. “Can you come out?”

Kristie opened the door and saw Juergen there inside the apartment. Her mouth opened and closed without sound. Her eyes, hurt, flickered to Mona’s.

“He already knew you were here,” Mona said.

“Kristie. We need to talk.” Juergen had come up behind her. Before the two of them, Kristie seemed to shrink.

“OK,” Kristie said. “Not here—outside.”

They stepped out onto the landing and shut the door. Mona sat on the couch to wait. She thought about how the downstairs door to their building had a keypad; Juergen had known the code. Mona smiled at the implication. The depth of Kristie’s crimes.

Ten minutes later, when Kristie returned, Mona got up from the couch and blocked her path to the bedroom.

“Who was that? What’s going on? Are you all right?” Mona fought to keep her voice from shaking, to make her questions sound like concern.

“I’m all right,” Kristie said. She was rubbing her arms as though she was very cold. “I just need to lie down for a while. We can talk later.”

“No,” Mona said. “Tell me now.”

“What? What do you want to know? That was my boss. My former boss. He owns the restaurant.”

“And?”

“And? Roman found out. And he’s never going to forgive me.” Kristie’s eyes welled up. “Please let me lie down.”

Actress, Mona thought, and asked, “How long has this been going on?” What Mona wanted to ask was this: *Did I make this happen?* But Kristie wouldn’t know what she meant.

“Mona, stop. Just stop. OK? I’ve been through enough already. I’m not going to keep apologizing. And also, sorry, but why would I apologize to you? I didn’t do anything to you.”

“What is Roman going to do?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know.”

Mona stepped closer to her. “You can’t love him anymore. Why would you do this to him, if you loved him?” She wanted to know: *What made you do it? Was it because Juergen was rich, or because you thought he could help you become a real actress, or was it the snake, the animal part inside of you?*

Kristie just shook her head. She pushed past Mona into the bedroom and shut the door firmly behind her.

Mona returned to the couch and watched television for hours, each show blurring into the next. She was washed in dread, and hope, and a tremendous, buzzing excitement. It could all be a coincidence. But if it wasn’t? If *she* had done this?

What if: There was Kristie, finishing up at the restaurant, about to go home. Everyone else had already left for the night. Juergen, in his office, opening a bottle and offering her a glass. Kristie lingering in the doorway. A fragile moment, a moment easily forgotten—if Kristie had refused.

But she hadn’t. She agreed, almost in spite of herself, and sat down with him and accepted another glass and then another. How many altogether did she drink? *Seven cups*, Mona thinks, and covers her smile with her hand. The wine spreading its recklessness inside Kristie like a dark flower. Making her careless.

Every other time, she'd been so meticulous, so calculating; she would never have let herself be caught. But this time, something was working inside her, something that was in her but wasn't of her. She let Juergen lift her up onto the desk, her hair wound tightly around his fist. The sickly raisin-sweetness of the wine in her mouth. And then later, when she stole back into the apartment, as silently as she could—what was it that gave her away? What did Roman hear, or smell, or see? Maybe it was all right there, written across Kristie's face, as clear as the reddish stains on the corners of her mouth.

Mona was startled from these thoughts by the sound of Roman's keys in the door.

"Where is she? Is she here?" And before Mona could open her mouth to say his name, he had crossed the living room and gone into their bedroom, and the door closed behind him, and she was alone again.

*

Mona could not sleep. Outside her window, the moon was visible through patchy clouds, a wobbly less-than circle. She could hear their muffled voices rising and falling through the wall that separated the bedrooms. Around two, she heard the unmistakable sounds of sex: the bed frame thudding against the wall, Kristie's wordless, high-pitched pleasure. At the end, she listened for and heard Roman's sound. *That's why we call him Caveman*, she thought, staring unblinking at the moon.

*

In the morning Mona heard the front door close behind Roman on his way to work. When she got out of bed, Kristie was in the kitchen making breakfast. Humming.

“Good morning,” she said. “Want some cinnamon toast?” She was flushed, radiant. She looked more beautiful than ever.

Mona felt a blackness descend on her.

“What happened? Did he—he forgave you?”

“We talked. I told him everything. I’m not going to work there anymore.”

Kristie smiled down at her toast, spreading a thick layer of butter on top of it. “He really does love me. I’m a very lucky girl.”

“How could he *forgive* you?”

“Yeah, I know, I get it. I did a really shitty thing. I betrayed Roman. He’s not perfect, but he didn’t deserve that. But believe me, I’ve suffered for it.” Her blue eyes were wide and sincere. “I’ll never forgive myself. And I’ll do whatever I need to, to earn back his trust. But right now what we need to do is just deal with it and move on.”

“Move on?” Mona can hear herself repeating the words like a parrot.

“Oh, little Moon,” Kristie said. Her tone was kind. “You don’t understand us. It’s hard to explain something like this. And, look, I know you have a crush on

Roman. I'm not an idiot. And he loves you too. He does. But me and him, we understand each other. That's what real love is."

No it isn't, Mona wanted to scream. She was burning with humiliation. Was it possible that her own face had betrayed her? That her lips and eyes had telegraphed clumsy things to Kristie, things to *Roman*, all her secrets? Had they laughed about her, the two of them, nested together in that big bed?

"Here, have some," Kristie said, and she pressed a piece of the toast into Mona's numb hand.

*

If only she could make what was *inside* Kristie visible to the world. If only Kristie could be reversed, somehow, so that the corrosion and rot colored the air around her.

Mona remembered the Seven of Cups, the treasures it offered. Money, power, fame. It wasn't going to be enough, she knew. She needed a new card, a different fortune. She couldn't solve the problem this way, by offering Kristie something that she wanted in place of what she already had. Kristie would keep all of it. Everything. There was no limit to her greed.

*

Mona returned to the flea market. As she ducked under the same dirty canvas flap in the fortuneteller's tent, she was sure that the card table and the little sign and the woman would be gone. There would be a man selling wristwatches in the booth instead, or it would be unused, full of dusty stacks of folding chairs. But La Signora was there, sitting with her arms folded on the tabletop. A small pink plastic radio played tinnily beside her.

“Make your fortune?” The woman's smile was different. Her eyes were hard.

Mona unfolded the three twenties from her wallet. “This is all I can afford,” she said.

“That's not enough,” the woman said. “It has to be more.”

Mona swallowed. “How much more?”

“How much is it worth?”

At the bodega around the corner, the ATM printed out the balance left in Mona's bank account. She looked at the numbers on the slip of paper. She had less than two hundred dollars. The money in her hand was all she had to pay her share of that month's utilities. She looked at her reflection in the little rounded mirror next to the screen. She looked small and frightened.

Mona crumpled up the slip of paper. She shook her head *no*. No to the gnawing worry inside her. It would not be the thing that would stop her. Such a drab and practical concern—it felt like something from her old life, her old self, reaching out and trying to pull her back. She would not allow it. She was too

close. She would worry about the money later, when everything was settled. She and Roman would figure it out together.

When she returned, the air in the tent was too warm. It smelled of stale cloth and something worse underneath, the heat rising off of unwashed bodies. Mona felt light-headed. She took out the three crumpled twenties and the crisp new bills from the ATM.

The woman folded the money and slipped it into her pocket. “Do you believe now?”

Mona nodded.

“Good,” the woman said. She reached under the table and pulled out a black orb. She placed it on the table in front of Mona. A Magic Eight Ball, like Mona had played with when she was very young.

Mona stared at it. “Is that a joke?”

The woman looked at her. “Is it *funny* to you? It’s just another way to make your fortune. Another way to look. That’s all. Pick it up. Tell it what you want. See what happens.”

Mona took the ball in her hand and turned it upside down. Behind the little plastic window in the bottom, she could see the floating piece with the fortunes printed on its sides in raised letters, illegible in the colored water. She closed her eyes. She thought of Kristie in the kitchen, her breath sweet with cinnamon and sugar, her triumphant laughter. She didn’t just want Kristie gone. She wanted her to be sorry. *Take something away from her. Something she loves. Something that humbles her.*

When she opened her eyes, there were words in the Eight Ball's window: You Choose. Or did it say You Chose? The bluish water was dark, and the words had spun out of view.

The woman leaned over the table and plucked the ball deftly from Mona's hands.

Mona felt a cold draining sensation in her stomach. "What did I just pay you for?"

"For permission," the woman said, and smiled. Her teeth were very small and very even, circlets of pearl.

"Permission—to do what? What do you mean?" She wanted to grab the woman by the shoulders and shake her and shake her.

"Go home and get it done. You'll see." The woman reached into her pocket and produced a plastic lighter and long black cigarette. She lit up and blew the smoke toward the ceiling of the tent.

"What about my money? What about the cards? Don't I get another card?" She could feel tears stinging her eyes.

"No more cards. And it's my money now. You spent it, didn't you? You'll get what you paid for. If you don't, come back and say so. Say you're unsatisfied. I'll give it all back to you."

"Really?" Mona swallowed hard.

"Yes, really. But if you *do* get it—if you do and you still are not satisfied, you'll have to bring me something else."

"Something—like what?"

“Something that means more than money. Much more. But until then, we’re done.”

Mona opened and closed her mouth.

“Go away. We’re done here.”

Mona walked home in a daze, the sour smell of the cigarette still tingling in her nostrils.

Back at the apartment, she went into the bathroom and closed the door. She turned the shower on, very hot, until the room filled up with steam. Kristie’s hairbrush was lying on the edge of the sink. Mona worked a snarl of hair free from the bristles. The hair was a dull, tepid orange once it was not attached to Kristie. It tasted liked nothing at all. It tickled her throat on the way down. The mirror over the sink was fogged over. Mona pressed her thumb on it once, twice. Her two eyes stared back at her, reflected clearly in the middle of the gray blur.

*

What happened next was that Kristie’s hair began to fall out. By the time the moon had waned to a half circle, the hair was everywhere—making a wet, rust-colored nest around the shower drain, tangled in the weave of the carpet. Little tumbleweeds of hair in the corners that Minty would bat around, playing.

Kristie’s parents sent her to the doctor, who pronounced it a result of stress and gave her a prescription for Xanax. The pills made a rash break out on her arms and legs. Kristie scratched the rash until it turned a deep angry maroon.

She was irritable and jumpy, and complained constantly that she was too warm. She kept opening the living room windows so that icy breezes knifed through the apartment.

In the night, Mona woke to the sound of breaking glass and found Kristie crouched on the floor of the bathroom. She'd dropped the hand mirror and was trying to pick up the scattered pieces. She was crying, in harsh, breathy gulps. Looking down at her, Mona could see her scalp. It was shockingly white through the sparse red hair at the crown of her head.

Kristie looked up at Mona. Her hands were full of broken glass. One of her palms was bleeding. "Why is this happening?" she sobbed, her words choked. "I don't understand why this is happening to me."

Roman pushed past Mona and knelt down beside Kristie. "Baby, hey, shh, stop, don't." She hid her face against him. He pulled her closer.

*

It wasn't working. He was even more under her spell, now that she needed him so badly.

"Make it worse," Mona said. "Make it uglier."

"Anything else?" The woman tapped her fingernails on the tabletop to the rhythm of the song on her plastic radio. Tap *tap*, tap *tap*.

"No," Mona said. "That's everything." By her feet, Minty mewed and fidgeted, unused to the cat carrier she'd bought to bring him there. Back at the

apartment, Kristie had gone to another doctor's appointment and left the living room windows open. The cat could've jumped out onto the fire escape after a pigeon or something. Who could say he didn't?

The woman leaned down low over Mona's hand. Her breath was hot. She traced one line on Mona's palm with a sharp fingernail. "There." And another. "And there."

"Is it done?"

*

In the final days, Kristie kept the curtains closed and the lights off in the bedroom. Mona stood uncertain in the doorway and called into the darkness. "Do you need anything? Want me to bring you some water? Or tea?"

Kristie rolled to face the wall. "Come in here," she whispered. "Come sit by me."

Mona sat on the edge of the bed. The bedroom didn't smell like Kristie and Roman anymore. It smelled like something rotting. Mona listened to the slow, fractured sound of Kristie's breathing. She reached over and parted the curtains to look at the fingernail sliver of moon hanging in the sky.

"Are you awake?" Mona spoke softly. "Kristie?"

The thing that was Kristie didn't answer.

In the living room, Roman lay on his back on the couch. His face was lit blue by the TV screen. Mona watched him for a moment, and then crossed the

room and stretched out on top of him, her hips against his hips, her face in the warm curve of his neck and shoulder. He let out a deep shuddering breath and put his arms around her. He kissed the top of her head, her forehead, each of her eyelids. He ground his hips against her. He parted her lips with his. Mona could taste his breath. It tasted like the sour air inside the bedroom where Kristie slept.

Not like this, protested the old part of Mona, the small part getting smaller every minute. *Yes*, said the other. *Finally. Yes.*

They did not speak. At the end, Roman pressed his face hard against her shoulder. The sound that came out of him was muffled, secret. He made it only for her.

After he had fallen asleep, Mona disentangled herself gently, balled up her clothes in her hand, and crept back toward her bedroom.

The door to Kristie's bedroom was ajar. Just far enough. Mona stood there for a moment, looking in. Her bare skin felt electric. Inside, nothing moved.

*

In the morning, Kristie's parent came to take her home with them. They had arranged for Kristie to see a specialist at Mass General. Mona let them into the apartment. Kristie's father was tall and as red-golden as his daughter used to be, but her mother was petite, barely taller than Mona. As the father took her luggage out to the car and Kristie packed up her things in the bathroom, the mother took Mona's hand and thanked her.

“She’s really leaned on you, Mona,” she said.

Mona searched her face. For one terrible moment, she wanted to confess everything. She wanted the judgment of this small woman, with her sweetly anxious, tired face and sensible mom-clothes. But she couldn’t think how to begin. What could she say? She hadn’t *done* anything, she thought. Not really. Not anything real. She’d only turned her heart inside out. She’d only wished for the impossible and gotten it.

“I wish I could come with you,” Mona blurted out, and Kristie’s mother frowned at her, puzzled.

“She’s going to be all right, sweetheart,” she said. “Kristie, hon, come say goodbye to Mona.”

Kristie put her arms around Mona. Mona could feel the tines of her ribs under her sweatshirt.

“Be good, little Moon,” Kristie said, and brushed her dry lips across Mona’s cheek.

From the living room window, Mona watched as they helped Kristie into the car. Kristie wore a bulky coat and a scarf wrapped around her head. She moved like an old, old woman.

Mona went into the big bedroom and opened Kristie’s half-emptied closet. She ran her hands over the beautiful clothes. She rubbed her face against the collar of a silk robe and the sleeve of a suede jacket. She found the dark red polish and repainted her nails. She dabbed Coco Mademoiselle on the inside of

her wrists, behind her ears and knees, and on the nape of her neck. She brushed out her hair in front of Kristie's mirror until it shone.

Later that evening, Roman returned from work and crawled into bed with Mona. But when she slid her hands up under his shirt to feel the smooth, working muscles in his back, he began to cry and would not stop, until her neck and shoulder and pillow were slimed with his tears.

"What are we going to do now?" he asked, looking at her with the wet, pleading eyes of a child.

Mona looked at him and shook her head. She looked away, out the window. Snow was falling steadily. It had covered up the tracks of the car that had taken Kristie away. Everything was still and white, waiting for her answer.

*

"Why are you here? Didn't it turn out the way you wanted?" The woman's eyes were bright, flat and shiny as new dimes.

Bait

When he was younger, Oliver would wish sometimes that his parents would die so he could go and live with his god-family, the Hahns. The Hahns had a sprawling green and white farm in Vermont, near the mountains. Oliver and his parents would drive up every summer and visit them there for a few days during August.

The Hahn boys were loud and blonde. They could ski and ride horses. The youngest, Bo, was born exactly one week before Oliver. There was a Polaroid of Bo and Oliver up on the refrigerator. In it they were six years old, sharing one cowboy costume: the gun belt around Bo's waist and a bandanna around his neck, and the felt hat on Oliver, throwing a curved shadow over his smile. Oliver thought he could remember posing for that photo, but he'd seen it so many times it was possible he just placed himself inside it, looking out. What he mostly remembered of these visits with the Hahns was a happy blur of sun and grass, shouted profanities and rough games. He didn't have any brothers.

In preparations for their visit, the Hahns would always have a huge pile of brush collected in the far pasture and they would make a bonfire. The boys would run around hooting and waving silver sparklers in the air. Oliver remembered the sparklers especially, the peculiar weight of responsibility for this thing that burned and sputtered out hot little bursts of stars.

Then there was the summer when Oliver was eleven and his parents separated. Oliver's father moved into a large apartment above a dentist's office,

where the old furniture he'd taken from the house looked startled, like kidnapping victims, sitting in those big empty rooms.

It wasn't clear who would get the Hahns in the divorce. Oliver's father and Mike Hahn had been college roommates, but it was Oliver's mother who always made the arrangements for their visits and talked for hours with Joanna Hahn on the phone. Oliver anxiously watched August approaching and waited for someone to mention Vermont, but no one did.

So none of them went that year, and then the following summer his mother arranged for Oliver to go up alone.

*

When he got off the bus in Montpelier he didn't know if he was early or late; the big clock on the wall of the depot was stopped at permanent four-thirty. He didn't see anyone he knew inside the station. He sat on the edge of the bench outside and felt his unease rising in his stomach. Maybe they'd forgotten.

On the bus ride up he'd gotten too jittery with excitement to play GameBoy and spent the last leg looking out at the sweep of pasture and the sudden huddles of woods alongside the highway, everything slightly purple from the bus's tinted windows. He would have two weeks with the Hahns, their dogs and red barn and easy way of including him in everything.

But they'd forgotten about him. He toed at a still-smoking cigarette butt on the pavement. And then there were two short blasts of a car's horn, and he saw

Joanna waving frantically over the wheel of the Hahns' big Volvo station wagon and Bo slumped down shirtless in the passenger seat.

Oliver felt a fist of shyness in his throat. He walked over to the Volvo and climbed into the back seat.

"Hello, Oliver!" Joanna trilled, patting his knee forcefully between the seats.

"Hey, fucktard," said Bo, without turning.

Joanna apologized for their lateness and explained with a long story, one that lasted until they bumped up the dirt road to the garage, about one of the horses escaping from the barn and eating most of the young apples off the trees in the orchard before they realized it was out. She laughed often during the story and Oliver watched her blonde ponytail bob and her eyes flash at him in the mirror. He smiled back obediently whenever she laughed.

Joanna was fat but pretty. She wore fleece jackets in dusty pinks and green with a turtleneck underneath, and her soft neck and cheeks billowed out at the top. She'd grown up there, in the Hahns' house. The last time he'd come, Oliver had spent some time studying the picture of her on a side table in the living room, the one where she was a slim sixteen or seventeen, sitting on top of an immense black horse. She had a huge smile and the number twelve pinned to the front of her tight shirt. Behind the table was a bulletin board hanging on the wall, bristling with blue and red ribbons that had faded patchily in the sun.

*

At the house she made Oliver a plate of scrapple and syrup. Bo sat next to him at the kitchen table while he ate, flicking slowly through the TV channels. Joanna called out from the mud room, "Why don't you boys go down to the pond?"

"You wanna fish?" Bo asked, pulling on a gray shirt that hung off the back of his chair. The shirt had holes from washing and said ADOPT A RAT in black block letters across the chest. Oliver watched Bo roll the sleeves up over the top of his skinny shoulders. It made him look tougher; Oliver made a mental note of this for when he went home.

"Yeah, OK."

In the breezeway, Bo grabbed his tackle box and two fishing poles out of a barrel jammed with lacrosse sticks and tennis racquets. The dogs came bounding out of the barn after the boys, a jowly brown lab and a yipping terrier.

"Where's the other little one?" asked Oliver. Last time there had been two of the small, potato-shaped dogs.

"Cricket. She died," Bo said. "Dad backed the truck over her in the driveway." He frowned at Oliver. "I thought that happened while you were here."

"No," said Oliver. "I would've remembered."

Bo shrugged. "C'mon, I need to get something." He dropped his box and pole on the grass and ducked into the sagging playhouse on the corner of the lawn. Oliver followed. He remembered one summer where it had stormed for four days and they'd played Spit in the playhouse for hours with the rain slanting in sometimes to mist their backs and elbows. Now the chairs were gone and the

table was splintery and moss green at the legs. Bo crouched and pulled a coffee can out from under it. Rattling inside was a maroon tin of Skoal Longcut. Bo pinched out a bit of the loamy smelling tobacco and slipped it into his mouth.

“Do you want some?” he asked, holding out the tin.

“OK, sure.” Oliver stuffed a small wad into the side of his mouth. The fibers tickled the inside of his cheek and tasted of earth and wintergreen.

“Don't swallow it,” said Bo, watching him.

“I know,” said Oliver, but then he did. He coughed and spit, and then his stomach twisted and he retched a hot missile of scrapple and bile onto the playhouse floor.

“Oh shit,” said Bo, “that's fucking disgusting.” He started laughing. Oliver heaved again, holding on to the edge of the table for support, and then the wood snapped off in his hand and he stumbled into Bo, who laughed harder and pushed him out the door.

“Oh man,” Bo said when he caught his breath. “You *painted* that place, dude.” He let out a *whew* of happy exhaustion and handed Oliver a piece of foil-wrapped gum, warm from his pocket.

Oliver spat and blotted his mouth with the back of his arm. He was embarrassed, but he was glad, too; this was it, the thing that would make the two of them familiar to one another again. There had to be something to cut through their initial strangeness, the summer he'd been away.

*

The path to the pond ran between two of the horse pastures and was lined with an electric fence. Oliver remembered getting shocked hard by the fence when he was younger; his teeth still itched when he looked at it. One of the horses rumbled up to the fence as the boys walked past. Bo dug into a cargo pocket and found a couple of crumbly pellets. Oliver took one and held it out gingerly between the wires, on the flat of his palm. The horse huffed two hot jets of air over Oliver's fingers, and then rippled back its black lips delicately for the treat.

“Come *on*,” said Bo over his shoulder.

Oliver followed, wiping his hand on the thigh of his jeans. The path led sharply up along a steep ridge. From the top he could see the pond below, and the meandering stone wall that marked the edge of the Hahns' land. Beyond was a tight mesh of green woods, and then a clearing, and beyond that the blue gray mountains. Oliver stumbled a bit and stopped; there was something in the clearing.

“Hey–Bo!” he called. “There's a guy over there.”

“Where?” Bo looked, but not in the right place.

“Over there. No, right there,” Oliver said, pointing.

Bo squinted. The man was standing with his back to them, head bowed, arms held slightly away from his body as though he was drip-drying his clothes.

“Who is that?” Oliver asked.

Bo was already walking. He spit a long brown spurt from between his teeth. “I dunno. Somebody hiking maybe.”

Oliver looked back over his shoulder. The man was still there, not moving. There was something wrong with him. Oliver felt his scalp tighten. He wanted to look away but didn't quite dare to take his eyes off the man.

"Come on," yelled Bo from the edge of the water. Oliver started back down the path and watched until the trees obscured the man from the ground up. As soon as the man was out of sight, Oliver felt better. A hiker, probably, like Bo said. Bo would know. Even if Bo hadn't seen the man himself, or seen how strangely he stood there, how gangly and still, like a half-living scarecrow.

Bo was turning over rocks. "There, you fucker, you little fuck," he said to the pale struggling earthworm. He slid it onto the hook. Oliver swallowed hard.

"Here, take this one," said Bo, holding out the baited pole. "I don't want you barfing on my feet again."

They cast into the pond. Bo slid his feet out of his battered leather sandals and held the fishing pole between them like a monkey. Oliver rolled his pole between his palms. The afternoon sun was heavy on their shoulders.

Bo spoke lazily. "Last Christmas when we went to Mexico, me and my dad went fishing offshore, and we caught a barracuda as long as my fucking arm."

"Shit," said Oliver.

"No fucking kidding. You've gotta play it out, with a big fish like that. Because it's really strong. It's gotta get tired before you pull it on the boat, 'cause you don't want it thrashing around and biting you. Those things could bite your whole fucking hand off." He spat again towards the pond. Oliver watched it

splash down among some water bugs skating on tented legs near the shore. He imagines catching a plesiosaur, the long snout crowded with jagged fangs.

“Did you eat it?”

“Yeah. They grilled it for us at the resort. It was good.”

“What kind of fish are there in the pond now?”

“Just bass. We can eat those, if we catch any.” Bo stuck the end of his pole into the mushy ground and pulled a red pocketknife out of the tackle box. He picked up a stick and started slicing off the bark in long pale curls. When he'd whittled the end to a point he stood and launched it at a log, where it thumped harmlessly off a turtle's shell that Oliver hadn't even seen. The turtle slid into the water with a plop, and the boys laughed. Then Oliver's rod pinged suddenly and bent forward in an arc.

“Yeah! Yeah! Reel that fucker in!” yelled Bo.

The pole was shivering in Oliver's hands like a living thing. He stumbled forward and felt mud squelch into his flip-flops. He cranked the reel, hard. He could feel the fish pulling back in the strain across his shoulders and in his arms. The line cut a panicky zigzag through the water, and then the fish broke the surface, twisting.

Bo whooped and stabbed his knife into the air. The fish swung at the end of the pole, shivering droplets off its long body. Bo reached over and pulled the pole from Oliver's unresisting hands. The fish flopped once on the grass and lay still. Bo placed one sandaled foot over its head and slit its gill with an expert twist of his knife. Oliver looked away towards the pond. On the other side, framed in

the crook of a low branch was a man's face. His eyes were in shadow, and his mouth was hanging open. He was perfectly still.

"Bo. That—that guy's over there," Oliver said. His voice did not shake. But his heart had leapt up and was hammering against his ribs, frantic.

"The hiker?" Bo was busy with the knife and the fish.

"Yeah, he's right there in the woods, on the other side of the pond—look, he's right there!"

"Fuck!" Bo cried. "*Dickfucking* damn it!"

Oliver looked down and saw a shock of bright blood on Bo's hand.

"I cut my fucking thumb," Bo said. "Shit. That stings." He sucked at the wound and then spat onto the grass.

Oliver remembered to look across the pond, but the man was gone, and the branches framed only dappled green and black shadow.

Then the two Hahn dogs boiled over the top of the ridge and came loping down the path, barking.

"Fuck off, Piper," yelled Bo, shielding the fish from the dancing dogs.

Oliver threw a stick into the water and the dogs splashed in after it. The big dog got it, and trotted off to chew it with silvery water streaming off his coat and the little dog weaving between his legs. Bo wiped his hand on the thigh of his cargo shorts, leaving a crimson smear. He wrapped the fish up in a plastic shopping bag and slid it into the tackle box.

"Do you want to keep fishing or go back or what," said Bo.

Oliver shrugged. His heart was still racing from the man in the woods, the blood, the sudden rush of the dogs. The woods around them seemed darker and more dense than before, the shadows more watchful and still. "I guess go back."

"Let's run," said Bo, and took off with his tackle box clattering. Oliver, grateful, ran after him with the hook swinging dangerously at the end of his pole, each step taking him further and further away from his fear. He ran loose and easy, not bothering to try to beat Bo back to the house. He'd caught a bass, a big one, and they would eat it like olden-day fishermen. The boys flew down the path, sandaled feet drumming the earth and rising up in unison.

*

They did eat the fish; Joanna skinned it and cooked the flaky white meat for them in a frying pan with butter and parsley, exclaiming over the size of the fish. The three of them ate in the kitchen, standing up at the counter; Bo's father was away, traveling for work. After dinner the boys lay on pillows on the living room floor in front of the big TV until bedtime.

They watched a Jean-Claude Van Damme movie about an underground kickboxing club where people fought to the death. Bo held the remote and flipped around during the commercials. A pink-faced weatherman gave the prediction for the week: uniformly hot and sunny. Afterwards the local news came on. A kid was missing. They showed her photo, a little girl with crooked teeth and penny-bright hair, and gave an 800 number to call with information. Bo's brother Carl

came home and stretched out on the couch, groaning and smelling sourly of beer. He wrestled the remote away from Bo to put on MTV over their protests, and they never got to see how the movie ended.

Later, with Bo asleep and whistling softly through his nose on the bunk below, Oliver thought about the man in the woods and the way he'd watched them, so still, like a statue. When he finally fell asleep he dreamed of fishing.

*

In the morning Oliver woke up alone; the lower bunk was a chaos of twisted blankets and sheets. He could hear voices from downstairs. Then Bo came thumping up the stairs and into the bedroom.

“Hey, you're awake,” he said to Oliver. “There's cops downstairs.”

Oliver slid off the bed and followed Bo to the window. Outside Joanna was bending down to talk into the window of a police cruiser.

As the police car pulled away, Joanna squinted up towards the bedroom window, and the boys stepped simultaneously back. Oliver felt his face flush red.

“Did you talk to the cops?” he asked Bo. “Did you tell them about that guy we saw? The hiker?”

Bo shook his head, confused. “They were asking Mom about the well; there's an old well in the side yard that's covered up. They thought maybe this kid that's missing fell in.”

Oliver rubbed his cheeks vigorously; he felt as though something important was on the verge of happening, was happening. “We should tell them about that guy, right?”

Bo just shrugged, his eyes narrowing. Oliver was burning now with a sense of purpose and he walked past him and went down the stairs and told Joanna what they'd seen. She listened with her arms folded and her mouth a straight serious line, and once he'd finished she went into the study and spoke in a low voice to someone over the phone. When she returned she sat down on the couch next to Oliver and took his hand.

“The police are coming back, honey. They want to ask you a few questions about the man you saw,” she said.

Oliver nodded. She squeezed his hand in both of hers and said, “It's nothing to worry about—you're going to do fine. Just tell them what you told me. They're going to be really grateful for your help.”

Bo slouched in the doorway, watching them. His eyes were unfriendly.

Oliver turned to him. “Bo, can you remember the guy? You can tell them how you saw him too.”

Bo snorted. “Saw what? I saw a guy, yeah. Some random guy, just walking around. I don't get why you have to make a big fucking deal out of it.

“Bo,” Joanna said. “Watch the attitude. This is serious, and Oliver is trying to be helpful.”

“Yeah, OK,” Bo said. He looked away, out the window.

“Apologize to Oliver, please,” she said.

“That’s OK,” Oliver said, flushing. “I don’t—”

“Sorry, OK?” Sorry.” Bo turned and went back upstairs. Oliver waited until he heard the bedroom door close, and then followed him up the stairs. He shut himself in the bathroom and brushed his teeth slowly, preparing himself for when the police returned.

*

The cop that came to the house was short and had a reddish brown beard. His name was Officer Frank, and he sat with a notepad at the kitchen table with his legs stretched out in front, crossed neatly at the ankle. Oliver told him about seeing the man in the clearing from the ridge, and stood up from the couch to show them how the man had been standing, with his arms away from his body just so. Joanna nodded and smiled over her coffee mug at him when she caught his eye. Bo sat on the stairs and watched silently.

“After I'd caught the fish, Bo had it on the grass to kill it, and I looked up and saw the guy again, on the other side of the pond. That's when I tried to point him out to Bo, but then the dogs came running over the hill and the guy went back into the woods.”

“Uh-huh,” Officer Frank said. He leaned in towards Oliver. “Can you tell me something, Oliver? Was the man you saw white, like you or me? Or did he look different?”

Oliver shook his head. “No, he was white.”

The cop settled back in his chair and flipped a page of his little notebook. "How tall about, would you say? Taller than me?"

"I don't know," Oliver said, his face burning. He felt as if he was messing this up somehow. "He was pretty tall, I think."

"Anything else?" asked Officer Frank. "No? Well, thank you, Oliver, you've been a big help." He deftly flipped the cover closed on his notepad and slid it into his breast pocket. Joanna unlatched the screen door for him to go. She turned and smiled brightly at the boys.

"Well," she said, "that's that, then."

Bo pulled a box of cereal and a bowl down from the shelf and the glass bottle of milk from the fridge and took it all with him into the living room.

"Oliver? Do you want something to eat?" Joanna asked.

Oliver shook his head and said, "No, no thank you, not right now."

Joanna carried her coffee mug to the sink and dumped it out. Oliver watched her, leaning against the counter, and then he followed Bo into the living room. The two boys sat in silence in front of a game show that Oliver had never seen before; after a few minutes he found it incredibly boring. Bo had the remote balanced on his knee and wasn't flipping around to see what else was on at all, even during the commercial breaks. Oliver was about to ask him to change the channel when Carl came home and stood in front of the TV fanning himself with the front of his stretchy mountain biking shirt.

"Carl, what the hell, move," said Bo.

Carl ignored him. "Did Mom tell you guys about the murder already?" He grinned down at them. "They found the body of that little girl in the Iverson's' pasture this morning. That's our neighbors, right up the road," he said for Oliver's benefit. "She was wrapped up in a garbage bag. People are losing their fucking minds. It's like the first murder of a kid in this town, ever."

"How the fuck do you know all that?" Bo asked.

"It was on the radio, anus. Also they said she was missing body parts, but they didn't say what. Nobody knows where they are. They could basically turn up anywhere."

Bo told him he was full of shit and Carl pushed him so his face was mashed down into the cushions of the couch and held him there. Bo flailed his arms and legs and screamed muffled threats.

If this had been like the times that Oliver had come before, he would have jumped on Carl's back and the three of them would've wrestled around on the carpet until one of them got actually hurt, hitting an arm against the coffee table or getting rug burned on a cheek.

As Carl and Bo pummeled each other on the couch, Oliver stood and walked out to the porch where he stood watching the horses crop the grass. Many years later, when he is grown and had two small daughters of his own, he still remembers his certainty that he had looked right at the face of death and been spared. He'd been certain that it wasn't luck, that he'd been chosen to live. Because he'd been strong and beaten the fish. Maybe also because Bo had a knife, but not just because of that, barely because of that. It was a feeling that

sustained him through the rest of his stay with the Hahn's, through Bo's chilliness and Joanna's worried solicitude. He's grateful that he did not find out until much later that the girl's stepfather was the one who was guilty of her murder, proven unmistakably so by DNA evidence, that the man in the woods could have been anyone at all, good or evil.

As a boy, standing on the porch, Oliver understood that this would be the last summer he would come here. He could feel himself growing, shedding his old self like a snakeskin. He could hear Bo still yelling inside, overmatched. He watched the horses.

The Hook

It's mid July, 1999, the last summer of the century, and tonight will be the last party of the summer. Emma picks up Demon at his house a little before ten. He jogs across the street to her car holding something up in the air like a torch. When he gets close enough she can see it's the arm. A prosthetic arm, grayish pink, with a blunt silver hook at the end. Demon found it at the West Gainesville Goodwill that afternoon. The arm was stuck in a barrel, its hook poking up out of a tangle of crutches and battered sport equipment; Demon pulled it free with a gasp of pleasure and added it to the miscellany in his shopping cart, and Emma had forgotten about it until now.

"Dee, is that really coming to the party?"

"Of course it is," he says, climbing into the car. "It's a conversation piece. It's gonna be a big hit, watch." He's right, Emma thinks: it's just the right kind of prop for a party like this, half goofy, half gory, the kind of thing that focuses the drunk and stoned, and Demon will end up popular by default, even though he doesn't really know anyone who'll be there, even though it's Emma's friend from summer camp, Tess Markham, whose parents are out of town. But that's Demon. Conversation centers around him. He is funny and smart and occasionally a little cruel, and to be his friend means sometimes feeling like the victim of a prolonged practical joke. To be in love with him, as Emma is: well. It's like putting matches out on your tongue.

There was one night, sophomore year, when they stole a bottle of Jim Beam from Demon's older brother and climbed up into a pine tree to drink it, and they'd kissed, sitting there in the fragrant darkness, and he burrowed a hand up under her bra and held it against her rapidly beating heart. Afterward she'd expected something; she kept thinking *everything's changed*, but nothing changed, and they've never talked about it since.

Demon likes boys; Emma knows this to be a fact, intellectually. It doesn't really make a difference. Demon can be gay, that's *fine*, except except except, he needs to love her best of all. Now that it's almost the end of the summer, and they will both be leaving Florida for college—Emma to Rhode Island, Demon to California—it seems both hopeless and terribly important that this still be true.

In the passenger seat Demon cradles the arm in his lap. Close up, Emma can see it's nicked in places and scuffed with grayish marks. The plastic is a darker pink at the top of the arm, where it would have been attached to the body. She shudders and backs the car out of the driveway.

They take 20 East around the lake, driving just below the speed limit; Emma knows that Demon has drugs on him, probably pot, possibly pills.

Sure enough: Demon sticks the prosthetic arm upright between the seat and the door and rolls a joint expertly on the dashboard. He licks his thumb to collect the loose crumbs of weed and taps them back into the baggie.

Along the road, the buildings thin out between clusters of trees and then fade completely into dark forest. Tess lives in Brunswick, the nicest suburb, in a big house with acres of lawn and woods around it. Like Emma, she's an only

child, but Tess has fantasy parents: young, glamorous, always traveling abroad and leaving the house in Tess's dubious custody. Tess's parents throw their own lavish parties and drink complicated cocktails with bitters and twists of bright fruit. Some of this Emma knows, some she imagines. Emma has met Mrs. Markham, Sylvia, only once; she was tall and even more beautiful than Tess. Sylvia spoke to her daughter's friend with such elegant ease that the intended effect was lost on Emma; she had felt out of sorts and answered all of Sylvia's questions with stiff formality.

Demon lights the joint and exhales a pungent cloud. He fiddles with the radio for a minute and then snaps it off. "Here." He hands Emma the joint. She inhales, waits for the familiar muzzy calm. The smoke is a burr in her throat. She coughs and hands the joint back to him.

"Imagine, what if—" He takes a long pull and pauses to recollect his thought. "What if there was a hooker with a hook? A hook for a hand, you know?"

She laughs shortly. "Yeah, what if?" It starts to rain, and she squints through the windshield, trying to read house numbers painted on mailboxes. "Would that turn you on? You want a hand job from a hooker with a hook?"

"I wouldn't say no. Hey, that was the turn, right? Four-oh-two? I thought you'd been over here before."

Emma makes a u-turn, and they pull into a bumpy gravel drive. At the top of the hill, the house is alive with light and music; a long line of cars is parked along the way.

“Dee, can you please be good at this party?” Emma says as she parks at the end of the line.

“Emma-baby, I'll be so good you won't believe it's me.” He smiles, handsome and sleepy-eyed, and Emma feels a tingle of unease.

As they climb the steps up to the front door, he leans over and whispers in her ear. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“What secret?”

“That pot is laced.” His lips graze her ear, tickling.

“What?” She stops and turns to look at him. “With *what?*”

“Surprise!” He pushes the door open and pulls her inside.

Tess's house is an enormous Spanish Colonial with pinkish stucco walls and gnarled wrought iron banisters. In the sunken living room, two tables have been dragged together and boys are playing Beer Pong. Tess is sitting on the staircase with some girls Emma doesn't know.

“Emma!” she yells. “You guys, this is Emma.” The other girls smile but don't get up. Tess gives Emma a tight brief hug. She smells of cigarettes and some flowery perfume.

“Hey Tess,” Emma says. “I'm sorry, I'm really messed up right now. *This* asshole, here, he did it.”

“Oh, hi asshole. I'm Tess,” Tess says, giggling; she's drunk.

Demon smiles. “Hey Tess, it's nice to meet you, finally. I'm Demon.”

“Oh!” she says, and it's all there on her face, everything Emma's told her about him. “It's nice to meet you too. Finally.”

“Dee, did you forget something?” Emma wants this to be over. “In the car? Your hook.”

“Oh yeah. Tess, don't move. I have something very important to show you.” He jogs back down the steps.

“Emma, *wow*,” Tess says.

“Yeah, I have to pee.” Emma turns and walks quickly away. In the bathroom she splashes her face and runs cool water over her hands and wrists. When she checks her reflection in the mirror, she's startled at the sight. Her eyes seem too widely spaced, and there are hectic spots of red in her cheeks. Her hair is stuck to her forehead in dark swirls. She takes deep breaths and dries her face and hands on one of the tasseled guest towels. When she returns to the living room, she sees Demon and Tess standing in a little huddle in front of the television with a few other people. They're watching the news. Demon has the prosthetic tucked under his arm like a rolled-up newspaper.

“What's going on?” Emma asks. Her voice sounds strange, too loud. She can't seem to figure out how to stand, if she should plant one or both feet for balance, where to put her hands. She leans against the back of the sofa and it rocks queasily under her weight.

“It's JFK Junior,” Tess says. She's standing with Joshua, her new boyfriend, his arms around her waist. Her eyes are fixed on the TV screen. “His plane crashed earlier today. He's been killed, they think.”

The TV is muted, playing footage of the rescue mission. The debris from the little plane bobs on the waves, stark white in the dark water.

“What was the last thing that went through JFK Junior's mind before the crash?” Joshua waits for a beat. “The prop.” There is laughter, a few groans.

“The prop is like the steering wheel for the plane,” Joshua says to Emma, who doesn't laugh.

“I know what it is,” she says. *John-John*, her mother always called him, *goodness, what a handsome man*. Emma feels tears prickling her eyes. Suddenly she wants to cry over this, the futility of the boats combing the water, the truth that some people have to die and others have to be in hopeless love, that things never go as they're supposed to. She says dully, “My mom has a crush on him. Had.”

“My mom too,” says Tess. They watch the rescue lights moving over the choppy waves. Off the coast of New England, where Emma will be moving in only a few weeks.

The boys playing Beer Pong shout suddenly, cheers and curses, and Emma flees into the kitchen. It's full of people mixing drinks and rummaging through the fridge and cupboards. Will, Tess's ex-boyfriend, is sitting on the countertop, eating pickles from a jar.

“Hey, Emma,” he says. His mouth is full. A sunburn is fading on his face and arms. “Want a pickle?”

“Okay,” she says. “Thanks.” It's salty and vinegary and reminds her how thirsty she is. “Is there any beer left?”

“Yeah. Fridge.” He watches her open one and drink greedily. “Em, are you okay? You look fucked up.”

“Jesus,” Emma says. “That's nice.”

“I mean—sorry, you don't look bad, you just look—your eyes are all watery.”

“I need to just sit down somewhere quiet for a minute,” she says and looks at the people surrounding her, unsure which direction to go.

“Wait, okay? I'll come with you. You want to go sit on the deck? Let me get a beer.”

She waits for him to balance two cans of Coors in one hand and then slide open the doors out to the deck. Outside it's been drizzling, just a little more than a mist. A small group of people at the far end of the deck are smoking cigarettes, talking in low voices. Emma leans against the damp railing and tilts her face up to the sky.

“Is this good?” Will is watching her, maybe a little anxious.

“Yeah,” she says, and looks at him for a moment. When they were all sophomores, Will and Tess had dated for almost year—she'd lost her virginity to him—and after they'd broken up he'd announced that he was gay. Emma has never really spoken to Will about any of this, but she marvels at him, someone able to shed his identity like a snakeskin, for a newer, truer one. It helps, of course, that the high school he and Tess go to is a different world than Emma and Demon's; the school is tiny and they call their teachers by their first name and everyone takes Latin for all four years. Being gay seems fashionable there. At the school where Demon and Emma go, it can get you beaten up. As well liked as he is, Demon has only told Emma. Their other friends just think he's

weird about girls, too particular, only dating freshmen and sophomores and breaking up with them abruptly and without explanation.

Through the sliding door, Emma watches people moving around in the kitchen. Will hands her the second beer, and she holds it up to her forehead and then against her cheeks.

“Thanks,” she says. “Can we stay here for a minute?” There’s the sound of glass breaking from somewhere inside. She doesn’t want to go back in there. Everything seems softer, more manageable out on the deck. The lawn smells freshly cut. She slides down and sits cross-legged on the deck with the slats of the railing behind her, digging two sturdy lines into her back. She wonders if she’ll feel nostalgic about parties like these when she’s older, if she’ll remember them as being better than they were, less characterized by awkwardness and thwarted expectations. Parties might be that way in college too, she supposes. Everybody bumping into one another, looking over each other’s shoulders, everyone trying so hard to make the night look like what they’d imagined.

She hopes it will be different. Lately she’s had this feeling of something stirring inside her, of being almost ready for the business of real life. Everything will be different, surely, when she’s at school a thousand miles north, away from the stupefying Floridian humidity, in a climate of sharp and clarifying cold. Back in the fall, she had applied to the University of Florida, practically in her backyard—a sure thing, with both her parents professors at the University, her father in Literature and her mother in Health and Human Performance. She had thought of it as appeasement, that it was what her parents wanted. But when she got

accepted to Brown, her reach school, her parents were supportive, even enthusiastic. So enthusiastic, in fact, that Emma suspects they may be looking forward to having the house all to themselves again, as it was in the first decade of their marriage, the gentle cadence of their earlier selves. *Three weeks*, she thinks.

She stirs and looks up at Will. He's going to Emory. "Are you leaving soon? When are you leaving?"

"August tenth. I need to start packing my shit."

Then there's a pounding on the steps up to the deck, and Demon is there next to them.

"Emma! Get up and come with me," Demon says. "I need to talk to you about something."

She feels that tightening in her chest: her dumb leaping hope. "What? What is it?"

"Okay, you know that ghost story about the guy with the hook?"

And like that, the feeling passes. "No, I don't," she says, flat.

"Yes you do. The guy's escaped from prison or a mental institution or something and this couple is fucking in a car in the woods nearby—come on, everyone's heard this."

"Yeah," Will chimes in. "Yeah, so the couple is in the car, and they keep hearing this tapping noise, and the girl gets kind of freaked out, but the guy doesn't want to stop messing around, so he keeps telling her it's a tree branch or whatever, and they finish up and drive away—no, before that they hear on the

radio about the guy escaping, and then everything else happens, and they drive away and when they get home they find the guy's bloody hook dangling from the door handle.”

“Gross,” says Emma.

“You've really never heard this before?” Demon looks aghast.

“No,” she says. “I had a nice childhood.”

“Well, everyone else in the English-speaking world knows it. Right—what's your name?”

“Will.”

“Right, Will?”

“Yeah,” Will says. “It's pretty classic.”

“Well, so,” Demon says, “the idea is, there's a car parked down the driveway and two people are making out—actually, by now they're probably going at it, and we need to go down there with the hook and scare the shit out of them.”

It is this quality of Demon's, his rejection of the mundane, the safe, the business-as-usual, that is what's always driving him to hatch some plan like this, to disrupt and amaze. It's what made Emma fall in love with him in the first place. And she's been his accomplice many times, on schemes far stupider than this one. But not tonight. Not this party, when they're both leaving so soon. She wants to shake him, to say, *Can't this be enough, for once? Can't you just be normal, for me, can't you just be here, be content, drink beers, get drunk enough and kiss me again and again?* She shakes her head, feeling her anger throbbing

inside her like a second heart. “Dee, you don’t even *know* them,” she says.

“There’s no way. No.”

“Seriously?” He looks dumbfounded.

“Yeah, it’s a stupid idea. Do it if you want to, but I’m not helping you.”

“I’ll go,” says Will. Emma looks at him, amazed, but he’s turned away from her; he’s looking at Demon. And Demon’s looking at him. “I think it’s pretty funny, actually.”

“Yes! Yes! Thank you, *Will*. Okay, first of all,” Demon says, “we need to find the hook.”

“You lost your hook?” Emma feels a brief spurt of hope. There must be a way to stop this—this plan, this thing that’s bringing Demon and Will together.

“No, I didn’t lose the hook, I just gave it to Tess to show someone. It’s inside—let’s go.” She can’t think fast enough to stop them and that’s it: they’re gone, disappeared back into the party. A couple of guys Emma doesn’t know come out onto the deck with a bottle of gin, and Emma ducks back into the kitchen as if she has somewhere urgent to go.

There’s nowhere to go. Everywhere there’s people, people who know each other and talk in code, their shared history of secrets and jokes. People with uncomplicated best friends, with actual boyfriends. But there next to the refrigerator is a door: a small door that even she would have to stoop to pass through. Emma looks around. A girl bends over at the kitchen sink, drinking from the faucet, two boys talk animatedly by the door to the living room. No one pays any attention to her. She pulls the little door open. Behind there is a narrow

hallway, carpeted steps leading down to another door, dimly lit by a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. Her head feels clearer, suddenly, more focused. She closes the little door behind her and moves down the hall. When she touches the knob on the second door, a bluish spark of static electricity buzzes her fingers.

Beyond the second door is a large dim room. A man sits at a plywood table with his back to Emma; there's a desk lamp shining on him, casting a shadow out behind him like a long black cape. Emma stands there blinking until she realizes she's in the garage. There are tools hanging on the walls, a riding lawnmower half covered with a canvas tarp. The man turns around in his chair and they look at each other.

"Hi," Emma says. She's still holding onto the edge of the door; it feels reassuring.

"Who's that? Tess?"

"No, it's—I'm Emma. Hi."

The man—Tess's father, he must be—stands and holds a hand out stiffly in front of him, and Emma stares at it dumbly before she realizes he's waiting to shake her hand. She walks over. His grip is warm and a little damp. He's maybe fifty years old, with a ruddy, rumpled face.

"I'm Luke," he says, and makes a sweeping gesture to a chair on the other side of the table. "Won't you sit down?" His manner is courtly. She looks into his eyes and realizes he is almost too drunk to see.

"I should maybe—I was looking for a friend of mine, actually."

"Sit down," he says, returning to his chair, "and have a little drink." He's

pleading. He pulls a six-pack out of a plastic bag on the floor and cracks open two bottles of beer with a silver opener, placing one carefully in front of him and one in front of the empty chair. Emma sits and takes a sip of her beer, an expensive brand she's never had before; it tastes bitter and a little savory, like soup.

Tess's father drinks his beer in one long pull, his Adam's apple bobbing like a rubber ball. Emma sees another six-pack, empty, on the floor just outside the circle of light, and what looks like a broken wine bottle resting in pieces in a puddle of dark liquid. On the table next to his elbow is a half-eaten roast beef sandwich in wax paper.

"So," the man says when his beer is gone. "How's the party, Emily?"

"Um. The party is—good, it's really good. Thank you for letting us have the party—for having us."

"Well, you know. It's Tess's party. I promised her—" He swings down toward the ground and Emma starts up out of her chair, thinking he's falling, but he straightens up with two new beers in his hand. When he sees that she's only about a third of the way through her bottle, he looks crestfallen.

Emma thinks of Tess and flushes with humiliation. Seeing Tess's father like this, with every thought naked on his face, she feels an urge to protect him. She's only seen people her own age as drunk as this. It makes him seem younger than he is. Emma's parents don't really drink—a glass of wine with dinner, sometimes. Emma remembers her eighteenth birthday, back in April, helping her mother grill burgers out on their deck. Her father had opened a split

of champagne and poured each of them one starry glassful. They raised their drinks and her father quoted Emerson—*the beauty and happiness of children makes the heart too big for the body*—and they clinked the glasses together, solemn, as though it was a ritual done many times before. Later that night she had gone out with Demon and some other friends from school and gotten wasted on the beach, creeping in later through the sliding door while her parents slept.

He takes another long pull at his beer and goes on. “I promised her. Tess. She could have a little party for her friends, here, while we went to Guadalajara.”

Emma remembers Tess saying something about this. “Were you in Guadalajara, um, recently?”

“No, my friend, I was not. In Guadalajara. *Sylvia* is in Guadalajara, as we speak, at this very moment.” He looks at his chunky silver watch and frowns. “She’s there right now.”

Emma considers several responses to this. “Ah,” she says. “Nice.”

“Yes it is. She’s there, and I’m here, and Tess’s got her party, like I promised her. And Sylvia can stay down there in Mexico for as long as she wants to.” He leans forward across the table, his elbow planted dangerously close to the sandwich. “You know what? She can stay there for the rest of her goddamn life.” He leans back, looking pleased.

“Oh,” says Emma. She takes a gulp of her beer.

“Here’s the thing: Sylvia can have all of it, everything below the border. She can have Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Panama, all of it. Guatemala.”

“Costa Rica,” says Emma, helpful.

“Costa Rica too. But I get the house. That’s fair. I bought this house; it’s my house. Did you see the back patio?”

Emma nods, though she hadn’t noticed it, really.

“That back patio was twenty thousand dollars. I just had it done. April. Twenty thousand dollars.” He taps his beer bottle on the table for emphasis.

“Wow,” Emma says. She’s beginning to realize that her responses are not particularly important.

“That’s how much I paid. Because *Sylvia* wanted it. I didn’t give a goddamn. And then *this*, this happens three months later. Sure, of course.”

“I’m sorry,” Emma says. She is sorry for him. She can hear the thumping bass of the stereo playing in the house, muffled voices and laughter. It all sounds very far away.

“This house,” he says. “*My* house. She picked it out. She said she picked it for me, so I could golf as much golf as I want. But that course is *infested* with those goddamn gators. In the pond, there. Everywhere. They just lay around on the grass all over the place. It’s not safe.” As he’s saying this his head is swaying lower and lower, until his chin brushes the table top. He looks down, surprised, and then touches the table tentatively with his palm as though testing its temperature.

“Are you okay, Mr. Markham? Luke?”

He looks up at her. “Thank you, but I’m not okay, no. I’m in danger, and so are you, so is everybody, and I’m the only one that sees it. And I don’t know what to do. Christ, I don’t know—I don’t need much. That’s the thing, though, listen to

me: you'll never get enough of what—of whatever you need. Or you will but it'll be *taken* from you, somehow, sooner or later. And the people who love you, they say they love you—they'll say it but it doesn't mean what you think. Loving people is like owing money, money with interest, and the interest just keeps piling up. Everybody takes a bite out of you and another and another and you give them everything and they take it and want even more. And you get tired and run down. And then they end up hating me. Even though I did everything I promised I would do. No one warned me about *that*, though. It's a secret. A dirty fucking secret, and that's it. That's the truth."

Emma feels heat rising in her forehead and cheeks, a bright red blush as if she's embarrassed. But she's not embarrassed. She's angry, suddenly. She doesn't want this, any of this information. Which is not information at all, really, just rambling bullshit that has absolutely nothing to do with her or Demon or anybody else who isn't old and ruined. *Danger?* They're only eighteen. They're at the very beginning of everything. The only danger is that they'll forget each other.

"You shouldn't be telling me this—I'm eighteen," she says. It sounds stupid out loud.

He crosses his arms slowly and deliberately and lays his forehead down on top of them. "This is good, thanks. I think you should—you should go. Go and enjoy Sylvia's party, now." His voice is muffled against his arms.

Emma wants to say more, to argue. She stands up too fast and the room tilts crazily and little red spots crowd the edges of her vision. "Fuck fuck," she

says and squeezes her eyes closed. When she opens them it's all still there, the man and the table and his sandwich. But she can't think of anything to say.

On the way out she pauses at the door and looks back; he's motionless, face buried in his arms.

As she moves down the little hall, Emma can feel all of it receding behind her, and it's a relief, palpable, like shrugging out of a hot, heavy coat. She wants to put even more distance between herself and the garage. She wants a drink, several drinks. She wants to find Demon. She wants to share a cigarette with him, the two of them drawing the same smoke into their lungs. That's what this night was supposed to be about: the two of them, together, before they go off to separate corners of the country. None of the rest matters. Not Luke, sleeping alone like a secret in his own house. The possibility of that kind of unhappiness does not exist for Emma and the people she cares about. They're all going in different directions, but that direction is up, always up.

She takes the steps two at a time, thinking of Demon, if he's wondering where she is, if he and Will and the hook even made it outside. When she comes out of the hallway into the brightness and happy noise of the kitchen, it's as if she's coming up from underwater, and there's Will, hurrying through the kitchen. He's carrying Demon's prosthetic arm. When he sees Emma, he grabs her by the elbow.

"Em, come with me, there's a gator on the driveway! It's fucking enormous, come see!" His eyes are wild. He tugs her into the hallway and out

onto the front porch, and she follows, feeling the strangeness of the evening all over her skin.

*

After that night, she will replay that walk often, following Will through the house to see the alligator. She has no way of knowing for sure, but she believes that she could have changed everything, if she'd gone to the back porch instead of the front. That they could have all been spared the confusion and horror that the night would unravel into. She replays the walk from the kitchen to the front door, and sometimes, in her mind, she does not keep walking. She turns. She tells Will she'll be along in a minute, but first she needs to find Demon: Demon, her heart.

Nobody saw what happened. There is no one to say that it didn't happen the way Emma imagines, what she pieces together from what she knows and what she hopes.

She sees him there, alone on the deck behind the house. He swings his legs up and over the wooden railing. Earlier, he and Will had shared the contents of a small brown bottle of ketamine on the walk back from the car; he can feel it spreading inside of him, the sweetest feeling, of being lighter and stronger than ever. He perches there on the railing, looking out at the lunar expanse of the golf course. Sand traps like craters. In the distance, the glossy black lagoon. The breeze lifts his hair. He can smell the ocean. His vision pulses, fading in and out. He looks back over his shoulder at the house. The light from the kitchen is

spilling golden onto the deck. He can't see her—can't see anyone inside—but he knows Emma is in there, waiting for him. He has so much to tell her. The car parked in the shadows of the woods, the plan suddenly forgotten, Will's hands on him, his searching mouth. How Demon feels, right now: as though he can be a better person now, free of cynicism and regret. He rises to his feet and turns, balancing on the railing, strong and agile as a gymnast. But then something happens that he doesn't expect—his knees buckle, and he's falling backwards, and the lights of the house disappear and the moon that was over him is in front of him, and it's curious, he feels no fear and makes no sound except a long exhalation of breath, and his body hits the grass below with soft *whump* and a split second later his head cracks against the edge of the new flagstone patio and he's gone.

*

As Will tugs Emma through the door and out onto the front porch, she scans the small clusters of partygoers, looking for Demon. Will stands next to her, breathing in quick, shallow huffs. She looks down at the curved shape in the driveway, a darker black than the asphalt. It looks close to six feet long. The alligator's tail is pointed at the house, its head half-turned toward the woods.

“Throw a bottle at it,” someone says, and there's nervous laughter, but no one moves. Emma can hear Tess talking quietly to someone who wants to leave but can't get to his car.

“It’ll move on its own,” Tess is saying.

Then Will is walking down the steps, away from them, towards the alligator. He’s holding the prosthetic arm out in front of him. Like he’s going to shake somebody’s hand with it, Emma thinks, and she wants to laugh or cry out and does both at once, a strangled, useless sound.

“Will, what the fuck, man?” Joshua is leaning over the railing. “What are you doing?”

Will turns for a moment. Emma can’t see his eyes, but his teeth flash white in the darkness.

*

Emma imagines the alligator can feel the people watching from above: wavering columns of heat, making strange abrupt noises. He is resting here for a moment, on the smooth driveway that still holds a lingering warmth from the sun. The night air is cool and he is sluggish. But then, his brain pulses with alarm as one of the person-shapes suddenly breaks away from the group on the porch and comes down the drive towards him, moving quickly and with purpose.

The alligator hisses and recoils, curling his muscular tail around himself. Will steps forward and jabs the alligator with something cold, just where his jaw hinges to his head. The alligator snaps his jaws and catches hold of the thing in Will’s hands, jerking it to him. Will stumbles, almost loses his hold. Emma and the other spectators on the porch are silent, transfixed. They will remember this

moment, the electrifying strangeness of it, for the rest of their lives. It is the last fragile moment of safety. Of their own invincibility. Everything that happens after feels like a dream: Will's wounded hand, the wailing ambulance that comes for him, the police that will come for Luke after Demon is found, when the flashlight of a paramedic bounces off a reflector on his sneaker. But invincibility is the real dream. They are not safe in this world. It will take them, like it did Demon, lying undiscovered in the grass, still warm but cooling, cooling; even if they didn't love him as Emma did, even if they don't know him at all, the facts of his youth and his death will come to mean this to them as time goes by and they lose more and more of themselves against the jagged edges of the world.

From the porch, in their waking dream, they're watching this struggle, and for a moment it seems like an even match. The alligator and the boy, advancing and retreating: for this one long moment it looks like a dance.