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THE AGE OF SAIL: STORIES AND A NOVELLA

by

Elizabeth Cameron

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

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## Abstract

Cameron, Elizabeth. MFA. The University of Memphis. August, 2013. *The Age of Sail*. Major Professor: John Bensko, Ph.D.

The five works of fiction in this collection aim to examine the role of family as a unit of order, and the ways in which this order defines identity, determines and subverts behavior, tempers or inflates expectations, and substitutes domestic politics for socio-cultural realities. These stories feature characters bewildered by the fluid boundaries between the personal and the social, by how the sacrifices and mistakes made in the family alter their experience in the public sphere, and by how the sacrifices and mistakes made in the public sphere upend or destroy the family. The range of ages depicted highlights the juxtaposition of characters unready for the responsibility family confers on them with characters denied the authority they believe they have earned, while the diverse eras and passages of time presented explore the larger evolution of family dynamics against the essential stasis of individual family hierarchies. Above all, these stories aim to consider the strange balance of the intimate and the taboo in family structures, the clash between the high standards we hold our family members to, and the necessity of forgiving their trespasses and failures.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Lifeguarding	1
The Burning of the Houses	20
A Visitation	46
Tiny Rooftops, Tiny Homes	61
The Age of Sail	75

## LIFEGUARDING

SIX MONTHS IN, the house was still a red skeleton plunked on the dirt, and Lisa began to realize they might never finish. She could tell Turner didn't know this yet from the way he scowled, unloading the single-paned windows that had arrived nine hours late. He looked like he was going to install each one tonight, though it was Sunday and the clouds drooped low. He didn't know it was hopeless. He motioned her over.

“Are you going to help me with these or what?”

Lisa skirted their two sons, who were playing with a Tonka truck in the sand, and met him at the truck bed. “Let's just lean them against the wall and get home.”

“Are you kidding? I waited all day for these.” He slid a pane off the bed and nudged its boxed end at her. “Take this.”

Together they stumbled over the furrowed sand and propped the window against the east wall. Turner started for the truck but Lisa remained, breathing wet air and the raw bite of sawdust. “It's almost dark and Owen's hungry,” she said to his back. “Let's call it a night.”

He waved a hand. “Just go.”

She brushed the boys off and herded them through the woods to the house they were renting next door. The sun was reddening the clouds over the ocean. The placard she'd put up—*Welcome to the Clunes!*—greeted them at the door. In the kitchen she lit the gas stove and put on a pot of last night's stew. Turner would be grumpy when he came in; he always was on Sunday nights, when they hadn't gotten enough done over the weekend. He worked in construction four or five days a week, and she was lifeguarding for now at the local pool, so the weekends were long, grimy hauls at the site.

On weekday afternoons, if the light was good and the boys had a snack, they postponed dinner and worked late on the house. Owen didn't worry them; only four, he'd just sit in the sand and eat fistfuls of grass or goldfish crackers or whatever his brother put in his hand, but Benny, a first grader now, was always climbing stacks of lumber or splatting his toes in wet concrete or gouging holes in the plywood with loose nails. Sometimes she thought she and Turner yelled at him too much, but it was hard to keep that in mind when he was racing around putting himself in danger. Turner's parents watched Owen on weekdays and sometimes both boys during the weekend; that helped. But she didn't like to feel indebted to them on their turf, far away from her own family. The year before, they'd sold their house in her hometown of Boise to move to Turner's hometown on the Oregon coast, where the land was cheap and clogged with rain. With the help of Turner's parents, they'd purchased a dune-grassed little plot of land close to the beach. They'd be able to see the waves from the second floor. It would be like heaven, she was told—a gray, cold heaven. Living by an unswimmable ocean.

Turner's friends joked that they were crazy to build a house on their own, with the two boys still practically babies. But it was easier than everyone thought, really, and cheaper, to buy your own parcel of land and slap a house up, painfully but on your own terms and with no middleman to pay. In the long run they'd be better off than all those guys, Turner said many nights, hauling the covers off the bed. This was good but she preferred the way his friends thought of it: crazy but an exciting crazy, like in a romance film. But there were times when she wondered what the hell they were doing, aloud. And times when she thought Turner was too overworked or too inexperienced, or both, to do this well or, really, at all. Not aloud.

She put the boys in a bath and waited for the front door to slam. She sculpted soap beards on their pointy chins and laughed when they bared their teeth in smiles.

It had been fun in the summer when they were bulldozing the Scotch broom and leveling the sand. They laid the foundation slab and bought deck chairs and drank beer in the late evening when the sun was still out at nine o'clock. Benny and Owen made tunnels in the tall grass or played at their feet. They twisted the caps right off in the sand and pointed at the features they could still imagine then: a garden fenced in from the rabbits and deer right here, French doors opening onto a cedar porch right there. Those days had gone with the warm weather.

Nearly every week, and very quietly, they nixed a feature that had previously seemed attainable. The attic space, because roofing with the prefabricated trusses was cheaper. The picture windows on both sides of the living room, because storm glass was expensive. The outdoor shower, because dammit, they already had two bathrooms. Tiny steps back in the hopes of completing this one big dream. A bare house. Turner had never designed such a customized house before, though neither of them broadcast that. The blueprints had been approved, and that was certification enough.

Turner came in after dark and scrubbed his hands in the bathroom as she towed the boys off. He kissed her cheek on his way to the kitchen. After dinner she stepped into the shower with him even though she was exhausted. They were careful not to rattle the glass door. They had discovered that the soreness after a long day of work could become a kind of pleasure, could feel good under the hot water and soapy hands. And it still erased the irritability that came, too, with a long day.

Reaching for his towel, he said, “It was already too dark to get the windows put in.”

“We’ll do them all tomorrow,” she promised. She’d heard of husbands and wives killing each other over the building of a house. It was important not to sweat the little things.

SHE DROVE HOME for her lunch break the next day, to get some time alone. In the mailbox she found another envelope addressed to Dr. Emmett Carson, the man who usually rented this house for the holidays. It was a vacation rental, and the owner, Miriam, had been reluctant to let them lease it for an indefinite period of time. She was able to charge a hefty amount to those who wanted it for a season or a weekend. And then there was the matter of this regular Christmas tenant—a psychiatrist from Portland, she said. He’d holidayed there for eight years, and always reserved his slot in September. But Miriam was a friend of Turner’s mother, and when she couldn’t get ahold of the psychiatrist in June, she gave in to Turner and Lisa. Still, she let them know she wasn’t keen on the disruption—especially since they had young boys. “I’ve just had new carpet put in,” she reminded Lisa at least twice when they moved in. It was a run-down ranch house with squirrels in the outdoor fireplace, Lisa refrained from mentioning—surely it could withstand them.

The envelope was long and thin, addressed in loopy red pen. She bent it a little, pocketed their other mail, and slipped her pinky beneath the flap. At first she’d kept his mail, three envelopes in all, on the kitchen table, meaning to ask Miriam for his permanent address. But she’d burned with curiosity. Were they from grateful patients?

Estranged family? The angry and uncured, wishing him ill? Last week, she'd reasoned that Miriam wouldn't want to dig up that information, even if she had it, and gave in. One envelope contained an offer from a local restaurant, promising a free dessert with the purchase of a regular entrée. Another suggested a subscription renewal for the *Signal*. The third contained a card printed with a garland of holly berries, wishing him happy holidays from Jim and Carrie Anderson. She'd kindled them in the fireplace, just in case.

This one turned out to be a Walmart family portrait, printed on photo paper with a Merry Christmas affixed to the side. *Wishing you joy and peace in the New Year, from Vicki, Chase & Brooke*. That was all; no personal note to the good doctor. She wondered, so often, what he was like, and why he had been unreachable in June, and how he would spend Christmas this year. Maybe he'd finally met someone, and it wouldn't have to be alone. She dropped the card on the kitchen table with her keys and went back out for a walk.

The beach was crowded with gray waves, stacked and forceful, each coming in farther than she expected, making a play for her shoes. She knew people swam here in the summer; she couldn't imagine it. No one else was out walking, but ahead she saw an SUV approaching—a Lincoln, a silly waxy thing to be driving in the salt spray—and hunkered into her coat. She didn't have that unconscious ease in her Adidas and windbreaker that the locals seemed to possess. When you were alone like this, away from a husband to look at you appreciatively, it was easy to forget that you had aesthetic worth. She remembered a time, at age fifteen, when a friend told her that the friend's mother had said, Lisa's going to be pretty when she grows up. The first time anyone had looked at her objectively and found potential, as far as she knew. She found now it was

easy to go back to mousiness, without the self-importance given by children hanging onto your waist.

She glanced up as the car passed close—driven too near her by the high tide—in case the driver waved, but he too was hunched, eyes slitted furiously at the ground ahead of the car’s bumper. That shocked her; how full of loathing he looked. He was *deliberately* not looking at her! Angry at her very presence! She strode on, quickly, pretending not to look at the driftwood she passed, until the noise of his engine faded away. She wished the boys were here. Funny how she looked forward to time alone and then found herself at a loss, needing them to remind her what to do, how to keep from feeling adrift.

Then a hand clapped onto her shoulder, squeezed. She shrieked and spun around, choking on her inhale.

“Oh my God,” she said, the breath limp in her lungs, “where did you come from? I didn’t even hear you.”

Turner slid his arm around her shoulders and wheeled to walk back with her. “I thought I’d surprise you. I didn’t know you’d have a heart attack.”

“Well, I thought you were—that man—this guy that drove past me a minute ago.”

“Why? Did he say something?”

She shook her head. “I just got bad vibes. He looked angry. Probably a local thinking I’m a tourist beachcomber or something.”

“You’re something, all right.”

She hugged his arm for a moment. “I was just being silly. Too much time alone. Why are you off?”

He pointed to the sky. “Bad forecast. Supposed to be high winds, so we didn’t want to start laying shingle.”

“Do we need to put anything away at the house?”

“I stopped by and laid the windows down. Nothing else we can do.”

It seemed like they were always running over to secure something at the last minute or to check on a possible emergency. Last week, after they’d laid the concrete for the garage, Benny woke at three in the morning because he’d imagined he heard elk knocking through the woods, and they rushed over to make sure the cloven-hooved, half-ton beasts weren’t trampling the wet foundation. The herds had the run of the land, here, and it was common for them to blunder through a build site. She carried a sleeping Owen and let Benny come with them, half-humming and half-whistling the weird call that someone at school had taught him meant danger in Elk. He was good at it—not as good as Turner, who stopped when they saw that the elk had bypassed their property and showed Benny how to purse his lips so the sound came out evenly. It surprised her that Turner wasn’t angry at being dragged out of bed for nothing—she felt grumpy herself, having been up late with a coughing Owen. But it was like that sometimes, an adventure they were all taking.

She led Turner home and changed her wet shoes while he rinsed off. When he came out of the shower, legs steamed red, she gestured to the refrigerator, where she’d magneted the picture from the envelope.

“Look,” she said. “Merry Christmas.”

Turner tightened his towel and peered at the picture. “Who the hell is this?”

“Come on, don’t you recognize them? Old Vick and the kids?”

“Are they from your side?”

“Actually, they’re not for us. This came for that guy,” she said, voice dropping, “the psychiatrist who usually takes this place for Christmas?”

“You opened his mail?” He hefted a gallon of milk from the fridge. “That’s low, Lise. That’s a felony. I married a felon.”

“But he’s been getting all this stuff! I couldn’t take it! You heard Miriam, he probably moved away. These people need someone to appreciate their card.”

Now that it was slapped on the fridge she rather liked it. Vicki, grown flabby through the years, lurked in a small frame to the side of the main portrait. Chase and Brooke, only a little older than Benny, hugged each other and bared uneven teeth on a corduroy couch. They all looked haggard and cheerful.

Since they’d just moved in and saw Turner’s parents regularly, they hadn’t received any Christmas cards of their own (“Why, you never send out any cards!” Turner’s mother admonished. “How do you expect anyone to get your address?”). They hadn’t done any decorating aside from putting up a tree. Building the house sucked the festivity from them. She centered the picture before she went back to the pool, so that she’d see it first thing every morning. She’d send Vicki a Christmas card in her head while she fixed the boys breakfast. Dr. Carson probably didn’t even remember how he knew her.

IN THE MORNING, Owen waved to her from his grandmother’s stoop as she pulled out of the driveway, stifling the familiar pang. With Benny they’d promised never to do

preschool or babysitting—it was just too young and fragile an age, they thought—but now it seemed like the only feasible option to get the house done.

In the locker room at the pool, she changed unhurriedly. Most of the lifeguards wore their suits beneath their clothes to save time, but she liked the quiet of the cavernous room before the morning sessions started. The way the concrete floors echoed an errant drip from the showers; the rare dryness of the wooden benches. No shouts or alarming shrieks from the pool.

The other lifeguard, Marjorie, came in and dropped her purse. “Hiya. Did you get anything done with all that wind last night?”

“Nope, sand everywhere,” Lisa said. When she’d gotten home from work Turner had been back in a sour mood, worried about all the grit they’d have to clean out of the window stripping before they could be installed. “We took the night off. Did you go out at all?”

Marjorie shook her head. She was a recent high school grad with a toddling boy of her own and didn’t have the time or inclination for going out. Neither did she have the inclination, as she told Lisa, to go to college, despite the trust fund her grandmother offered. The grandmother or the mother watched the boy every day, as far as Lisa could tell, and Marjorie, still dumpy around the hips from pregnancy and an eager smoker during breaks between open swims, seemed to be the most satisfied person Lisa had ever met. What would that be like, she wondered. They only got the chance to chat off-duty, like this, or in rare moments when the pool was strangely empty—and that was fun, talking loudly across the water like the kids who used the pool—but Lisa liked glancing

at Marjorie's cheery face for reassurance when the kids started playing rough. The aqua light, rippling over her face, beatified her.

"You know," Marjorie said, "I was reading this article in the *Signal* about how they need to move the high school because it's right on the estuary, and it reminded me how in the seventh grade our science teacher told us this place has a big tsunami every two to three hundred years. And guess how many it's been since the last one?"

"A hundred," Lisa said. "Four hundred."

"Two hundred. It's exactly time. That's how my mom convinced me to take swimming lessons. When I found out about that."

"That's morbid."

Marjorie laughed, showing white canine teeth. "She can be pretty funny. But I was pretty serious about it for a while. This whole town would be underwater. When I got good enough I started lifeguarding here because my little brother's such a crappy swimmer." She fluffed her hair in the mirror. "Do you ever think about that? If something like that did happen here, like in Japan, and you might have to try to save people, like a bunch of them?"

Lisa snapped the straps of her suit on her shoulders and sat back down on the warm bench. "I have thought about it," she said. The roads were marked with arrows pointing to high ground in case of a tsunami. There had been a warning the previous summer, and they tested the sirens weekly, which made for ominous Wednesdays. Right about the time she picked Owen up from Turner's parents. "I don't think anyone can fight those currents. But I guess I would try. You probably wouldn't even think about it first."

Marjorie nodded. “I think that’s what’s special about lifeguards. They don’t think, they just go.”

She and Turner had been moving from Idaho to his parents’ here at the time of the tsunami. They’d kept the radio off, worried it would disturb Benny. In the soothing chaos of driving the U-Haul and changing Owen’s diapers and finding a combination of fast food they would all grudgingly eat, it had been easy to forget about the panic halfway across the world. She’d heard the death toll, but never thought about what it would be like to be in that water. It gave her an uncomfortable chill.

Leaving the locker room, she resolved to take advantage of the free lessons the pool would offer her for the boys. That day she was extra-vigilant above the water, marking each potential flail of an arm, ready to *go* at the hint of an emergency. But none came.

HER MOTHER CALLED that night for their weekly family chat. After getting her hellos, a and dutiful “yes, Grandma, love you too, Grandma” from Benny, and a shy mumble from Owen, balanced on Lisa’s hip, her mother asked how the house was shaping up. Phone propped between ear and shoulder, Lisa nuzzled Owen’s hair, thinking. He touched the photo on the fridge. His sticky finger blurred the freckles on Brooke’s sunny face.

Turner roared, “Lise, what happened to the remote?” and she cast a mournful glance at Vicki’s face and new Christmas sweater, setting Owen down.

“Well?” her mother prompted. “Anything new?”

“Not much, nothing really.”

“No big storms yet? Run out of money yet?”

“Very funny.”

Benny dashed into the kitchen, knocking Owen into the dining table. The box that held their important documents toppled off, fanning papers across the linoleum.

“Dad says to tell him where the remote is,” Benny announced. “He said he’s going to tie it to the TV so you can’t lose it anymore.”

Owen, slumped against the table leg, split his mouth, as if for a yawn, and started to cry.

She sat on the floor and rocked him, reaching with her free hand to gather the papers. They had been alphabetized, but that was hopeless now; she couldn’t even recognize half of them. Was that the dentist’s bill for Benny’s cavity? Or the insurance claim for the car Turner had dented backing out of the lumberyard? Or the receipt for the extra bags of concrete they’d bought after she ruined a whole batch by tipping it onto a heap of pine needles? It was a pain in the ass, was what it was, all the shit they’d accumulated. She missed, fiercely but not suddenly, the sweet little house in Boise, where they had a towering file cabinet in the study-den-guest bedroom in which she kept their few records neatly ordered in preparation for this romantic adventure. The house with the fenced yard and the friendly neighbor yellow Lab, the benevolent hills lining the horizon out the kitchen window, her friends, her high school, the college where she met Turner practically down the street, her parents and the comforting smile of her mother—who knew exactly how all this would go—only a car ride away.

“Everything’s fine,” she said to her mother, stuffing the box into the hall closet.

“We’re ahead of schedule. The boys love it.”

Her mother sighed. “We miss you. Don’t let Turner’s mother take my place as favorite Grandma.”

“I won’t,” she said. She pressed the phone hard against her ear. “I miss you, too.”

THE WEATHER CLEARED and turned cold, revealing the bright network of stars above the pines. There wouldn’t be snow for Christmas, not like the drifts of Idaho.

They installed most of the downstairs windows in an afternoon. It was painstaking work, and their gloves couldn’t keep the damp out of the bones. Turner pulled her hands out and blew on them when she began to fumble the tools. They sat for a moment on a stack of plywood, listening to the boys play in the shell of the bathroom. The house was a maze of two-by-four cages. The upstairs flooring wasn’t finished yet and the roof above was cavernous, dripping. Through the new window she watched a Lincoln cruise past the driveway. Builders talked about a midterm lag, the point where the house looked like one but wasn’t ready to be lived in. That was the time when people’s spirits died, when they walked away from the whole idea. They weren’t even there yet.

“Will we be okay for Christmas?” she asked. They’d taken out a construction loan in the spring, and would refinance when the house was finished, but their paychecks went quickly to the rent and the many surprises in their construction budget.

Turner shook his head. “We’ll make it work. They’re kids, they won’t be able to tell.”

“I hope you’re right.” When he stopped rubbing her hands she took his and added, “What if we cut that Jacuzzi you owe me?”

He snorted.

“I’ll still get you a special present,” she said.

“How about a house?”

SHE’D JUST REALIZED Turner was late coming home the following day when the phone rang. It was him. “I was just taking the boys to the beach,” she said. “Why aren’t you home yet?”

“I need you to find the number of the roofer who quoted us. I want to get it done now before it starts raining for three months straight.”

“I thought we decided not to contract that.”

“I changed my mind, Lise, you have no idea what the winters here are like.”

She pulled the box from the linen closet in the hallway. Inside was a mess: wayward sheaves of paper in every direction, pronged from bites Owen had apparently taken when she’d stuffed them back in.

“Oh God. I forgot we just threw everything in here. I don’t know if I can find it.”

His voice crackled with frustration. “You said you were going to put it in order. I thought you were going to keep track of this stuff.”

“I have a lot to keep track of, Turner. You were the one who left it out.”

“Are you going to find it or not?”

She rifled half-heartedly through the papers. She had a picture of it in her mind: a mostly blank page with columned figures typed at the top and a phone number scribbled in blocky letters across the middle, diagonally.

“I give up,” she said. “I can’t find it. Wait till you get home and leave a message at his office. It can’t be that important.”

“I called, didn’t I?”

She heard him take the phone from his ear and yell “Just a minute” at someone in the background.

“Anyway,” she said, softening her voice, “it’s almost Christmas, he probably doesn’t want to be bothered.”

He snorted. “Too bad. We need to know how much he’s really going to charge before we get presents for the kids, honey.”

The *honey* almost made her hang up—she hated the way he said it when he was pissed. Instead she looked out the window at the back yard and jumped so badly the phone half-slipped from her hands.

“Turner, there’s someone here,” she whispered.

“Who? Listen, I’ll look for it when I get home, but it’ll be a little while.”

“There’s someone *in the yard*. He’s walking around the back yard, and he has a— a shovel—”

It was a garden spade, she realized when he crouched in the lawn and began to dig. Sharp, purposeful jabs.

“What the hell,” she said. “He’s digging something up in the yard—I’m going to see what he wants. Maybe he’s a gardener and he went to the wrong house?”

The man in the yard looked directly at her, a glance, dismissive, and back to his work.

“What do you mean he’s digging? Lisa, are you listening? I think you should hang up and call the police.”

She flapped her hand to hush him. “No, no, I think it’s ok. He has the wrong house. I’m going to go tell him.”

She told Benny to take Owen to their room and stepped out onto the stoop, shoeless. “Excuse me?” she called. The man didn’t even look up. She set the phone on the windowsill and groped for the boots she kept beside the door. “Excuse me? I think you have the wrong house?”

The man had a paper sack with him; he pulled up something—a pinecone? A potato?—and dropped it into the crinkly bag. He paused and looked back at her.

“This was my house,” he said.

“Oh—gosh—it’s you,” she said. “I saw you on the beach the other day. Didn’t I?” She peered around the corner of the house to the driveway and there it was, the gleaming Lincoln.

“I’ve come here for almost *ten—years—*” he said, duckwalking forward and jabbing the spade in a new spot of earth. She winced.

“Dr. Carson?”

He flushed, from anger or exertion she couldn’t tell. Maybe embarrassment. She’d sure be embarrassed to behave like this in someone’s front yard. He wore glasses on a lanyard around his neck and they kept bumping the ground as he dug. He dropped another tuber—what the hell was that?—into the bag.

“Look,” she said, striding forward, “I don’t mean to be rude, but you didn’t rent it this year and I have to ask you to leave the property. We live here now.”

“I saw!” he said, whacking his glasses out of the way to point to the placard she’d put on the garage. *Welcome to the Clunes’!*

“I’m sorry you’re upset,” she said. “Miriam felt bad, we all felt bad—” a lie, she realized as she said it—“but you weren’t around and—what the hell are you doing to our yard, anyway?”

He pulled another tuber and shook it at her. His face was so wrinkled with fury she thought he might spit. “Did you even *notice* there was a garden here? I’ve been planting these tulips for almost ten years. I have them imported from *Turkey*.”

“Really?” she said, before she could stop herself. She’d thought tulips came from the Netherlands. “That’s what they are? Won’t that hurt them?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, “because they’re not for you. Do you get my mail, too?”

“No,” she said. “Of course not. Because you don’t live here! I need you to leave.”

What if he got violent? What if he looked in the window and saw the Vicki-Chase-Brooke family plastered to their refrigerator—the refrigerator he’d used every winter day for eight years? She saw Benny peeking through the curtain and prayed he would stay inside.

The doctor stood and crumpled the sack in his fist. She could see now that the expression on his face, the one she remembered from the beach, wasn’t angry if you looked long enough. It was the look of someone who couldn’t see very far beyond the car, someone struggling to just go forward.

“This was my home too, you know. She should’ve known I’d still rent the house, I always do. Now she says you’re here indefinitely. Where am I supposed to go? This is the one thing I’ve looked forward to for ten years.”

She opened her mouth, closed it. “I’m really sorry,” she said finally. “But you should go.”

He jerked around and walked toward the car. She saw him hesitate, and then stop.

“Did I get any mail? Do you have any mail for me?” He looked at her sidelong, unwilling to turn around.

Her voice surprised her, speaking before she even thought. “No,” she said, adding a slow headshake. “Haven’t seen any. Sorry.”

When he pulled away she had half a mind to run after him, pound on his window, and tell the truth about his mail. Or at least that she’d thrown it out. He made it sound like the Christmas cards were the highlight of his year. But it was hers now, all of it, to protect.

She locked the door behind her and pulled the photograph off the fridge, stuffing it into the back pocket of her jeans on her way to the boys’ room. “Are we still going to the beach?” Benny asked.

“Not right now.” She sat on the bed and pulled Owen onto her lap. He scrambled back off. “We need to stay home for a while.”

She jumped, hard, when the front door slammed. Owen laughed at her, train in hand, and then Turner appeared in the hallway. She clapped a hand over her mouth. “Oh God—I’m so sorry—I was so flustered—I completely forgot about the phone—”

He put his hands on her shoulders and held her still. “I almost called the police, you idiot. How could you forget?”

“That man,” she said. “It was the man I told you about driving on the beach the other day—well, it was the psychiatrist, the one Miriam usually rents to.” A laugh

burbled out of her throat, surprising her. “He wanted his tulips, or the tulip bulbs he’d planted—you should have seen him, he was so angry, he said he orders his tulips from *Turkey*.”

Turner squeezed her shoulders. “So you’re all right? He didn’t hurt you, or get in the house or anything?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “I hope he doesn’t come back. I don’t think I could face him again.”

He pulled her into a hug. “If he does we’ll just have to call the police, tulips or not. Yeah?”

She nodded her head against the underside of his chin. It was amazing, what could be forgotten when you were in the only embrace you could count on getting—even unhappiness.

“Do we need to finish those windows today?”

“Let’s just relax, light a fire,” he said. “We’ll get it done tomorrow.”

She followed him to the living room, the boys in tow. With the TV on and the fire stuttering upward the room grew cozy, and the evening stretched on ahead of them, delightfully empty. She remembered the photograph in her pocket and crumpled it into the flames. Through the window the reddening sky framed the trees and the bones of the house on their plot next door. “Would you look at that,” Turner said, and she moved to stand beside him. “It’s going to be an incredible sunset.” And then she shut the curtain.

## THE BURNING OF THE HOUSES

RECENTLY, I PICKED my daughter up from summer camp and had to stay for a show that her cabin was putting on. The supervisor had informed all the parents that there would be a sort of ceremony, but I'd forgotten and made plans and now I was eager to get her in the car. I ended up staying, of course, and was glad I did.

We live now in Pendleton, Oregon, where you can track the sun across the plains all day long, and that area has a rich Native American history. So each cabin put on a little play enacting certain Native American myths. My daughter's told an Eskimo story about the origination of the Arctic midnight sun. One summer the moon chased his sister, the sun, up past the North Pole. Once there, she was unable to break past the skyline to return home.

My daughter played the sun, a lonely disc of yellow circling the horizon.

I was reminded of what my stepfather told me the summer I was twelve, the age my daughter was now, about the stories we invent to explain the phenomena we can't understand. We give it a history only to harness our fear; whether we cloak it the name of benevolence or evil, its true power is the fear sparked in our hearts when we can't find its meaning. Driving back from camp, spotting the new freckles on my daughter's face, I would have liked to say I would instruct her against such magical thinking. But I knew I wouldn't.

THE SUMMER I was twelve, we moved up to Gin Ridge from the smoky little house at the back of Gearhart. That was also the summer the strange yellow lights hovered over the

ocean every night for weeks. My brother, Ryan, was only nine, and the lights were spooky enough to keep us from paying attention to our mother.

There were several changes that summer, too many; I think she wanted to get them all over with at the same time. For starters, she finally wrapped up the divorce from our father, which had been stumbling forward, on and off again, for five or more years. And right away she married Ken the Cowhand, as my father, who was a pediatrician, called him, and moved into that spanking remodeled four-bedroom with a claw-foot tub in every bathroom. Ken was a real cowboy, sort of; he'd been a ranch hand back in Redmond and now he worked at the local meat company, Reed & Hertig. Though he was pretty nice, I don't know how my mother could stand the smell when he came home; it made the hair stand up on my arms.

The real name of Gin Ridge was South Ocean Avenue. The locals called it Gin Ridge because most of its houses were second homes for the rich, who only came down for the golf when Oregon weather permitted. They headed our Fourth of July parade in elaborate floats, with drinks that already needed a new umbrella by ten a.m. and Ray-Bans and pointy-nosed schnauzers who got to ride right up in the front of all that papier-mâché. Our own dog, Waller, was a brown Lab, too big for everything but trotting alongside our bikes. That summer my mother let Waller sleep with Ryan every night, even though he wasn't technically allowed in the bedrooms.

The new house had a square face on the ocean side and an upper deck along a row of long narrow windows like the teeth of a grinning whale. When I was little and we'd take bike rides up here I called it the Whale House, and I'm fairly certain that's what got my mother to pay attention to it and, finally, to covet it. I think that for a long time she

didn't know that coveting doesn't have to be done quietly, doesn't have to be of the unattainable.

She purchased the house with money from the divorce settlement. She took her favorite Turner print from where it had always hung in our bathroom and propped it right up on the new mantel.

Our father remained in our old smoky house—the chimney sagged just enough to funnel the wind inside if it blew the wrong way—and Ryan and I rode our bikes with the dog to see him every day for a few weeks. He could have afforded a new house, as my mother reminded him, but he wouldn't move now for the same reason they never had, when they were happy: it was the family home. At first, he put his foot down about us staying with our mother and Ken the Cowhand, but custody was difficult for fathers to get, and Ken was nice and the new house was nice and even our mother was nice now, all smiles and the voice she used for children, and my father was too nice to divide us any further.

The night we moved up she sat us down and explained how our lives wouldn't be that different.

“Your dad's still your dad,” she said. Ryan fidgeted. I put my hand on his knee. “You can see him and stay with him anytime you want, as long as you get permission from both of us so we know where you are.”

“From you and Ken?” Ryan asked. He seemed plenty old at the time, when we were fighting epic battles over the TV or rigging treehouses with our old next-door-neighbor, Lane, but in the pictures from that summer he looks like a kindergartener, a wraith.

“No, honey, from me and your father.” Mom frowned. “Well. From Ken too, of course.”

Ken was in the background, sitting on the arm of the couch. He never made a lot of noise, but you always knew he was there. A way he had of making his presence felt, warm and solid, so as not to spook the horses. I thought that this was responsible for making my mother better; she had the placid calm of a horse around him. She didn’t weep in the afternoon, or take us out of school to shop the little boutiques.

“And you don’t have to call Ken ‘Dad,’” she added. She smoothed her blonde hair back and the bracelets on her wrist whispered. “But you should feel like you can ask him for whatever you need. Understand?”

We nodded. Unsure of how to proceed with this day, we settled for uneasy compliance. We wanted life back the old way, but the new didn’t seem too bad, either, and we thought it wise not to make any enemies.

“The upstairs floors have just been refinished, so no dog or shoes upstairs. And no eating in your bedrooms on the new carpets.” She looked from my face to my brother’s. She put on her dentist’s smile, the one for the little kids who’d had a bad cavity experience under a less kind drill. “But seriously, guys, nothing’s really going to change. I’m still going to work at my office, your dad’s still going to work at his. We’ll still do birthdays together, and Christmas—I guess we’ll—” She looked over her shoulder at Ken, who nodded and gave an encouraging smile. “You can stay with whoever you like for Christmas, or maybe we’ll do presents all together.” She brightened. “But that’s miles away, it’s only summer now! We’ll have to start thinking about getting the fireworks and decorating the bikes.”

I glanced sidelong at Ryan to raise my eyebrows. We'd seen Mom upset a lot, but not flustered; she was a fast talker and had everything planned out. Ryan looked grave. He pushed a brown lock off his forehead. "Can I have some ice cream now?" he asked.

Mom cast her eyes to Ken, lifting her shoulders. He gave her the same smile and stood, spreading his hands. "Come on, kiddo," he said, "let's go get you a bowl." He stopped in the doorway and looked at me. "You want anything, Ellie?"

I shook my head. "Nope, thanks."

"No, thank you," Mom corrected, but I just looked at her and Ken moved off into the kitchen. She lifted her drink from the side table. Gin in a real martini glass, the kind we hadn't had in the old house because Ryan and I broke them all trying to build a glass tower. She sighed and tipped the drink toward me like a toast.

"This isn't so bad, is it?"

I shrugged. It wasn't, but she and I both knew you shouldn't ask questions like that, either.

That night I heard them in the hot tub, a bitty two-person bucket on the deck, splashing and laughing quietly and setting their drinks down and down again so late into the night that I had to crawl into bed with Ryan and Waller just to get some sleep. My father had asked me to tell him if she started drinking too much. But I knew what she would say to that: it wasn't his business anymore, was it? If you'd asked me in the daylight whether twelve was too old to sleep with your little brother, I'd have said yes. But in the long night it was different. All three of us slept with our faces turned toward the window to feel the stars.

GEARHART WAS JUST a two-mile town with two long parallel streets: Marion, running along the beach dunes and from which Gin Ridge sprouted, where we lived now with our mother and her new silver and restrained floors, and Cottage, running along the woods that separated our world from the highway, where we'd lived as a family with our hooked rugs and sad chimney.

Ryan and I were allowed to roam the town all day while our parents—the three we'd been gifted with now—were at work. Sometimes I'd leave Ryan with Waller and see a girlfriend, Lindy or Sara, but mostly we spent the days as we always had, with Lane. Dad had given us new copies of the key to let ourselves in anytime we liked during the day, but we stopped after a while. It was too quiet. He'd gotten a new refrigerator that whirred soundlessly, and he never had enough clothes to fill the dryer or pots to fill the dishwasher. All the chairs were waiting for us to sit in them and it got too tiring, making the rounds. We felt like we had to stroke everything we passed by, to let it know we still cared—that it was still *our* chipped nightstand, *our* backwards faucet handle, *our* mantel studded with tack holes from Christmas stockings. Our sagging chimney, which, an appraiser had informed us, was dangerous and a drag on the house's value, and which my father had been planning on fixing any day now since Ryan was on a tricycle.

It was more exciting to hang out with Lane now that we couldn't just see him through our windows, besides. He had news. He was surprised we hadn't heard about it already, he said, smirking.

“Maybe we have,” I said. “What do you know, Lane.”

“Right. So you've seen the lights.”

“Yes,” Ryan whispered. He had a look on his face like he’d been trying to tell everyone something crazy and he’d found someone who believed him.

I turned to him. “What lights? You know what he’s talking about?”

“My window faces that way,” he said. His bedroom at the new house was in the southwest corner, looking out at Tillamook Head rising from the sea and the cove it created, where the cool locals surfed year-round. He’d woken up to see what, it appeared, several other locals had witnessed: a series of lights hovering over the water, unmoving.

“Everyone who didn’t see says it was just stars,” Lane told us, pleased with himself. “But I’ll tell you what they are. We’re finally having our own UFO sighting right here in Gearhart. They like to come to rural areas, you know. To scope us out without being spotted.”

Ryan’s face showed nothing but he held too still; he’d always had that fear of things like yowling fire trucks and lightning storms and sonic booms: strange, insurmountable powers. I wanted to laugh at the idea, to reassure him, but I was too envious. I’d always wanted to see a UFO.

Lane hadn’t seen them, it turned out, but his mother, coming off the late shift at the golf course inn, had noticed and nearly called the Coast Guard, in case they were flares from a boat in trouble. But the lights had been up too long for that, she realized, and after a few minutes they just disappeared.

“Don’t be too disappointed,” Lane told me. “Sightings often continue for two or three nights in a row. I read that. I bet you a buck it happens again tonight.”

ALL OF GEARHART was up that night, waiting by the windows—we could tell because by midnight every household light winked out and the night held an expectant hush. We had never seen it so dark. Even the streetlamps dimmed in respect. Lately my mother had been staying up most of the night anyway, so she sat with us and watched. She made me uneasy, the way she was so excited. In the morning, I knew, she'd barely be able to open her eyes to get to work. She kept jumping up to peer out each window in turn, telling us stories about aliens she'd heard as a kid.

“Roswell was such a big deal when I was a kid, you have to understand,” she kept saying, tapping her nails against her glass. “Even my dad thought it was the real deal, and boy was he a skeptic.” *Tap tap.*

It was strange, to be awake so late with her. The town had always felt safe at night—we could have wandered barefoot and without fear, since it was hidden from the highway and the nearby tourist towns. The bakery and the grocer and the ice creamery and the antique shop all closed up at five sharp, and the light at the only four-way stop winked steadily through till morning. But now it no longer felt like our town. We could feel a hundred people awake around us, see the expectant breaths against every neighboring windowpane.

It was hard to note the actual moment the lights appeared. We'd given up searching the sky and were gazing listlessly at the seashells and figurines on the windowsills when they emerged, or were emerging, as if someone tightened the focus on a camera we hadn't realized was careless. They were far away and bright, six singular gems. Closer than the stars, though; we could just *tell* that with a perspective that came

intuitively. We expected them to move at any moment; their stillness seemed uncertain, unlike the stars.

Ryan turned to our mother. “What are they?”

I retrieved the binoculars from their case on the coffee table and pressed them against the window—I’d never gotten the hang of keeping my hands steady. Closer up, the lights were beautiful, warm and difficult to focus on. They reminded me of lit windows. Little panels of welcome.

“Wow, honey, I have no idea,” Mom said. She yelled for Ken. “You have to see this, baby! I mean really!”

Ken had been going to bed earlier and earlier as a way, I assumed, of letting my mother know he didn’t approve of her staying up all night, walking the house or whatever she did. They’d argued about it before leaving for work that morning. He appeared at the top of the stairway, mussed and undershirted. He whistled, though, when he saw the lights.

“We should call Dad,” Ryan said. His face, with its pointed forelock, was transfixed—both anxious and excited, the way he looked the moment before I slapped him in a game of Tag.

“Oh, no, I don’t think so, sweetie,” she said. “We don’t want to wake him. He might be mad you all are still up.” She handed the binoculars to Ken, who stood behind us all. Holding them to his face, his forearms were tense and strong in the moonlight.

Sometimes he looked much younger than my father, which I supposed he was. Though all adults seemed middle-aged and unreachable to us, Ken was becoming less old to me as the summer wore on. Sometimes I would imagine that my mother wasn’t there,

that I was older, that Ken noticed I had come seamlessly into womanhood. I couldn't explain it to myself, though I'd try, about to fall asleep at night. Sometimes it was the smell of the meat company on him that made me think that way.

"It reminds me of the painting," she breathed, flapping a hand behind her at the Turner on the mantel. She'd seen it at the Tate, she used to tell us, on her trip abroad before college. It showed a fire in the night sky, a fire that looked like the end of the world. "They're so beautiful." When she took the binoculars back from Ken and pressed them to her eyes I saw that she was about to cry.

BY THE TIME we saw Lane the next day, he had already bicycled the length of Gearhart and heard every story. We met him at the ice cream shop, where we overheard a few vacationers saying they'd come earlier than usual this year, for the lights.

"Practically everyone saw," he huffed, out of breath. We walked alongside his bicycle. "My dad took me up to the park to see last night. I tried to get him to call a news channel but he wouldn't do it."

"So we don't know what it is?"

"Well." He quirked his mouth to one side. "A few people did call the Coast Guard. And the Coast Guard said thanks but they already got a few calls, and it was nothing to worry about, that they're just testing *their* flares."

"Oh." We drew up short at the park and looked out at the waves beyond the dunes. Another calm day, sunny and breezy along the beach grass. We had often come here at sunset when the wind died down to play tag or soccer, a long time ago, with our parents—and now with Mom and Ken. You could stand on the park bench and get a

panoramic view of the sky blazoned with seared clouds. It was hard to imagine seeing anything out there now.

“I guess that could be it,” I offered after a minute.

“You know what my dad says? He says that’s what they *always* say about stuff like that. He says even if they were testing flares they only last a minute or something and they don’t hold still like that.”

“Maybe that’s why they’re testing them,” Ryan said. “A new kind of flare.”

I could see him clinging to this: the safe, the unmagical. For a minute I was mad. I figured I’d told him too many spooky stories in the tree fort at the old house when we were growing up. I’d scared him before he was ready, and now he was a disappointing thumbsucker. But I could count on Lane, at least.

“My dad said they’re in *cahoots* with whoever’s in those UFOS. Or it could even be one big UFO, the mothership, with all those lights,” he said. “But I think they’re just trying to keep people from panicking. I bet they didn’t have any idea this was going to happen, or they would have made the them go farther away where we wouldn’t notice them.” He lowered his voice and looked straight at Ryan. “They have ways of making you forget things. They could be abducting us in our sleep and we wouldn’t even remember. They could do it every night.”

THE NEXT NIGHT, and the night after, they did look like flares. A new kind of flare. They were warm, almost orange in color, and indistinct. And, as far as we could tell, in a different formation every night. Ryan drew a picture of their constellation, one night, and

we tried to match them up on the window the next, but it was difficult to feel certain about where we'd been standing, what we'd seen.

The *Signal* ran a story about the lights. *As the town gears up for its annual Fourth of July parade*, it said, *tourists flock to our coast to witness the nightly appearance of what many believe are UFOs. And locals are reporting some strange happenings.* Extra traffic accidents, from sleepless drivers, but also claims of drained car batteries, unusual skirmishes among children at the daycare, women calling the local radio station to request songs and breaking into weeping as they named the titles.

“That could be Mom,” Ryan said when I cut the article out, and I flicked his shoulder.

Ryan gave up after a few nights and started going to bed at nine, but he left his light burning all night, and Waller guarded the window with a steady thumping tail. I felt guilty staying up without him, but I burned each night to know if the lights would come back.

My mother stayed up night after night as June dwindled, but not with me. I heard her nightgown swishing on the newly stained floors and smelled her smoke coming through the screen door. She'd always been fastidious about her teeth, but every once in a while she would revert to these smoking jags, these wild-eyed long nights followed by exhausted naps during her lunch hour at work or after she picked us up from school. Our father would always be gentle and angry with her, by turns, when she was like this, and I didn't want to tell him now in case he wanted us to leave her. She seemed to need protection.

ONE NIGHT, KEN came up and sat beside me on the couch. He nodded toward the lights out the window.

“I think you might be the only one watching those things anymore.” He had his elbows on his knees and the tips of his fingers templed together. “Do you worry about them, Ellie?”

I shrugged. “Not anymore, I guess,” I said. “I like looking at them.” I leaned over to give him a surreptitious sniff, to see if he smelled like blood or cowhide like I sometimes thought, but he just smelled like skin, like men’s shampoo and light sweat.

“What does your dad say about them?”

“Not to worry.”

“They are beautiful, aren’t they,” he said quietly. “You know, I used to work with this fisherman, a really old geezer, who’d been all over the place. He’d met some of the last Indians who lived traditionally and didn’t have much to do with our society. He’d been ice-fishing in Wisconsin and he said the Fox Indians thought that lights in the sky were omens of war and famine. They thought the lights were angry spirits of old enemies who were trying to rise up and come back for them.”

I pictured these angry, formless spirits setting mansions in the sky alight like signal fires to warn their enemies: they were coming to take revenge. If I squinted, the lights over the water almost danced like flame.

“I guess it scares a lot of people, huh,” I said.

Ken smiled halfway. “Some, yeah. But not everyone. The fisherman had a dozen other stories about what old cultures thought of phenomenons like this, lights in the sky. The Eskimos taught him that the sky was a haven for spirits after death but that to get

there you had to cross a long and dangerous bridge over the water. The spirits already in the sky held torches to guide the feet of the ones who were still crossing. And that's what the lights were."

I looked out at the lights. "When I was little, I got the idea that the stars were people you'd loved who'd died, and that they stayed up there to watch over you and shone a light so you'd know they were there. I picked one to be Grandpa George and I used to pray to him every night and tell him what I did that day and stuff." The dark of the upstairs living room made me brave but as soon as I said it I felt stupid. "I was still a baby though," I muttered.

He patted my knee. The flannel of my pajamas against my skin felt comforting. "That's pretty smart for a baby," he said.

"Did the old guy ever see lights like this?"

"I'm not sure. I think the lights the Indians were talking about were mostly the northern lights. You ever seen those on TV?"

I shook my head. "I know they don't look like this."

"I've never seen 'em in real life. Always wanted to. But I think the northern lights to them are like these lights to us, anyway. Something they weren't able to explain for a long time. You can put any explanation on it you want, but what matters is whether you decide to be scared or just appreciate it. And now we all know what the northern lights are made of when humans used to think it'd be a mystery forever."

He patted my knee once more, then stood and stretched. "Feel better?"

"I feel fine," I said, hurt. So I'd been talking to a father, not a friend.

“You’re a smart kid,” he said as he started down the stairs. Then I heard him stop.  
“Do you notice anything different about your mother?”

I remembered something my father had yelled at her once—that she didn’t even hide it well. Whatever it was he meant, I saw it too. And if Ken couldn’t see it maybe that was better, maybe that was what she needed.

“No,” I said.

I tucked my knees up to my chest and kept my eyes on the lights, not watching him go. The lights beamed back at me. I wanted them to be real, something the Coast Guard couldn’t explain. Maybe they would tell me where to go.

IT SEEMS LIKE all the summer days were mild when I was that age, warm and almost windless, just enough breeze to lift the morning fog from the water by the time we were waking up. Just as it seems there was the barest sprinkling of snow every Christmas, and power outages in the winter that would last a whole week. I know now that town’s a cold and rainy place most of the time, sheltered from heat and snow alike by the mountains, that power outages never last more than a few hours and require neither lanterns nor blanket forts—but I can’t explain the difference between that life and this.

When I imagine that my mother lived in this world, the cold one, while we were in the spell of that town, I think I begin to understand her. The way her heart worked—and how easy, for it to beat its way out of the spell. How easy, for us to pretend she’d make her way back in.

AFTER KEN LEFT that night I was determined to stay up till my mother went to bed, but I fell asleep on the couch to the smell of her smoke curling through the screens.

I couldn't be sure if I dreamt this—I was so scared I stiffened up all over and didn't move. I thought I woke to all the lights on in the living room and someone like my mother whipping around in her white nightgown with her cigarette in her hand, nostrils flared and sniffing. *I can't stand all these lamps off all the time*, she was saying. She stopped and stood over me and pressed her hand to my forehead, hard, with a sweaty palm. I couldn't move, or speak, but she saw that my eyes were open and forced an apologetic smile, and there in all the streaming white glare of the lamps I saw that her nose was bleeding, that her teeth were stained in ridges with thin fresh blood.

*It's ok*, she soothed, *I'm not an alien, you're just having a dream, you're safe.*

ON THE NIGHT before the Fourth of July, the lights were brighter than ever. From my perch on the couch I saw upper-story lights go on and off; through the screen I heard balcony doors open and jacket zippers whirr up. I squinted at the lights, held the binoculars steady against the glass. They looked bigger, closer; they seemed to burn colder. I tightened the binocular hinge until the lights became tiered and blurry, till they looked again like a house in which every window was lit.

My father came over in the morning to help us decorate our bikes with red and white crepe paper. Ken was on the deck with a cup of coffee, but our mother was still in bed. She hadn't left her room yesterday; every few hours I'd crept to her door and pressed my ear against it to her even breathing, the covers shuffling. But I heard nothing.

The floats that year were spectacular. Not because they were giant or carefully painted, but because they were all about the lights: women stood in backseats with drinks in one hand and squirt guns like laser blasters in the other; men with gin-blossom noses drove cars decorated like flying saucers, high beams on. A big green alien rolled by, holding a sign that said *I'm just testing my flares*.

Every kid in town, whether local or vacation, rode their bikes behind the floats, one-handed, dog leashes looped around the handlebars, tossing candy from a basket to the spectators on the sidelines, or catching candy tossed back into the parade. This was the one time of year when Gearhart was filled with people not our own; well-dressed tourists down from Portland for the holiday stood side-by-side with our parents and cheered us along as if they loved us, too. After a few minutes we all just unhooked the dogs and they got in on the excitement too, gobbling candy and galloping alongside the bikes, sniffing jerkily at the cards slapping the wheel spokes. Once we neared the four-way stop they all ended up sitting forlornly on their haunches, anyway, howling at the wailing fire trucks bringing up the rear of the parade. Ryan threw his bike down outside of the ice cream shop and sat right next to Waller, who licked his face between howls. He always covered his ears when the trucks started up. I nudged him and pointed to where I'd finally spotted our dad—across the street, staring out over the tail of the parade, standing next to Ken. They had their arms crossed, not speaking. We waved.

Behind us I saw Julie Parker coming out of the ice cream shop with her sister. I thought Julie, who was my age, was an obnoxious know-it-all, but her mother was a truly nice person, always stopping Ryan and me when she ran into us to tell us how much she loved sending her kids to the dentist now that they'd started going to our mother. Even

Ryan and I liked going there for our cleaning every six months. Mom had pastel stars on the ceiling above the exam chair and an array of cool sunglasses to choose from when she turned the bright light on. She spoke in a soft toothy voice and sent kids home with sparkly toothbrushes and chocolate-flavored toothpaste. Our father often reminded us that it was hard for some kids, being in a small town, and if I'd thought about it I'd say I was grateful that our mom didn't do anything embarrassing like get sued for malpractice or bag groceries at the Safeway or only blow into town once in a while.

We said hi to Julie, but she had a lopsided blue bow in her hair that made her look like a stuffed animal, and I must have given it a look, an up-and-down that girls know the meaning of from the time they start kindergarten. She stopped, blocking the door.

“Guess what?” she said. “My mom says we're not going to your mom anymore because she's crazy. She cancelled my appointment last week and flat out didn't even *show up* for it yesterday.”

Something squeezed inside my hand, an awful, tingling, electric-eel convulsion, and I jerked Waller's leash. He watched us from beside Ryan's fallen bicycle with a benevolent smile.

“Why should I care?” Ryan said, getting up, and brushed past her. Between blasts from the fire truck I heard the bell on the door jingle. I was so proud of him, but I could barely get my own mouth to work. Julie's sister wandered away and Julie started after her. I grabbed her arm.

“She came down with the flu,” I said. “Like that's such a big deal.”

I followed Ryan inside before she could say anything else. I hoped I looked regal but inside I was a scurrying mouse.

I gave him money for his waffle cone but didn't order for myself. I put a hand on his shoulder to try to tell him things you don't even know you feel at that age: that you admire someone fiercely, that you pity them, that the need to protect them is love's most terrible burden.

"Listen, Rhino," I said, "wait here for Lane, okay? I forgot I promised Sara I'd meet her at the hot dog stand."

"Sure." He sucked the top of his cone, cheeks caving inward.

"You can take Waller, okay?"

"Sure."

I left him there before he'd even come fully out the door, pointing a finger at the ground to get Waller to stay. My father and Ken were gone; I searched for their white shirts against the crowd but everyone looked the same. The air buzzed with heat and laughter and the smell of charcoal from the barbecue at the fire station across the street. I pushed past starched polo shirts and crepe papered handlebars until I found a clear path on the sidewalk, past the spectators bringing up the wake of the fire trucks. I stopped at the gate to our yard, when I saw that they were standing outside the front door.

Watching my father from this distance reminded me of how I used to hate visiting his office. It was uncomfortable, somehow, to see my father with other children, balancing chubby babies on his knee or pressing the stethoscope tenderly to the chest of a girl my age. When I saw my mother talking to her kid patients, I could tell that it wasn't her real smile, that she left something reserved for us. But with my father I couldn't. He looked at us all with the same comfort and kindness, as if he couldn't tell any of us apart.

At first I thought they were arguing, the way Ken shook his head. But my father had his hand to his head and he pressed the bridge of his nose with his fingers for a long time, the way very tired people do. Finally he looked up at Ken and smiled, the stretched smile he gave us when we came home with an abysmal spelling test that *didn't matter*, he'd say, *not really, because I still loved you*.

Over Ken's shoulder he saw me, and for a long moment we just stared at each other. Then Ken turned and my father beckoned me over.

"Why aren't you at the barbecue?" he said.

I shrugged and the shell of my Styrofoam helmet, whose straps I still clutched, clattered against my knee.

"What's wrong with Mom?" I asked. "Why is she missing her appointments?"

Ken sat down, on the refinished stoop. My father glared at him, but Ken raised his hands, palm up. "I didn't say anything," he said.

I'd never seen them so close before. I could see why my mother liked Ken; he had a handsome cowboy mustache and his chin was still tough, while my father's face was hidden by the full sandy beard he'd had all my life. But it was my father I went to, who opened his arms and pulled me on his knee though I was at least four times too big for that now.

"She's sick again," he said into my hair. "And we're going to try something different this time. She's going to a place to get better, like a vacation. She needs to be somewhere calm and quit working for a while and this place is going to help her do that." He pulled away a little and lifted my chin. "I don't want you to worry. She'll be back

soon and you and Ryan can come stay at the old house for a while. We'll spend some good time together."

"When?" I remembered the silence in her room the day before. "Did she already go?"

"She left last night," Ken said, not looking at me. "When you guys were asleep."

"We were going to wait till after the parade to let you know," my father added. "I don't want you to worry about this. You should head back to the barbecue with Ryan and we'll pack your stuff later today."

"You didn't tell us all morning? How long will she be gone?"

"Just a month," Ken said, as my father said, "Not long at all." My father stepped toward me. "Let's walk over and get a hot dog with Ryan."

I took a step backward. "We want to stay one more night here," I said. "I don't want her to think we just left."

My father started to shake his head and then looked at Ken, who stood. "I'd be happy to have them if it's all right with you," he said.

My father took a long breath. "If that's what you want," he said finally. "But I wish you would come home. We really need to be together."

I left my father there with Ken, outside the empty house. Let them have it, I thought. Let them have each other. Since they didn't do my mother any good.

THAT NIGHT I stayed in my room until everyone was asleep and then lifted the window sash. Even the house's casements had been replaced, so it glided up without a sound. I heard Waller groan softly in Ryan's room across the hall as I slipped out. At our old

house our bedrooms were upstairs and I never would have dared, but here I stepped right down on the grass and followed the moonlit street to the park. Overhead clouds scooted northward; the wind had been picking up steadily all evening.

Lane was waiting for me. Maybe he didn't know yet, or maybe his own mother had coached him again to pretend like everything was the same, that my mother's office wasn't closed up and our suitcases packed. We sat with our knees touching and plucked at the furled buds of English daisies. He said, "I bet no one even cares about those lights anymore."

"I do," I said. "I came, didn't I? And what about all that UFO stuff at the parade? They all saw how bright they were last night."

But they were later coming out this time. Lane pointed when they began to distinguish themselves from the stars. We were close to shivers by that time. Their lights seemed thinner, almost brittle. The blackberry bushes flanking the park shifted in the wind. Lane slipped closer and hung an arm across my back.

"Have you ever French kissed anyone?" he asked.

"No."

"Do you want to try?"

"I don't know."

"This girl at school, Tracy, let me kiss her, and she said I was pretty good at it."

He nudged his nose at the air the way puppies do when they're waiting for you to call them. I leaned over and let him mash his lips against mine, our noses flattening too. I kept my mouth closed and for a second, with his bony arm around me, I thought of Ken and the way he looked strong and complete when he rose from the hot tub to get my

mother a drink, like he was finished growing, not slipping flabbily past it like my father, or still weedy like Lane, or my brother, or me. When I got the sense that Lane was working up the courage to slip me the tongue—I felt it poking his own cheek—I pulled away.

“I have to get back before Ken checks on us,” I said. I walked away before he’d even stood up. I knew he’d be embarrassed, but my heart was beating too fast to let me care. My breasts tingled with the beat of my blood against my polo shirt. They’d started to appear that summer, though it’d been easy not to notice it. I felt like my mother would notice, now; I felt her watching me. I knew what I had to do.

I walked past Ryan’s window and went right in the front door and up the stairs, which hadn’t been replaced and still creaked the way they must have for the family before us. I watched the lights hovering over the water—they seemed to grow brighter and more hazy, for me. And then I rummaged in the kitchen drawer for a clean dishtowel and wrapped it around the tip of a log from the fireplace we hadn’t even used yet, even though we’d had fires almost every summer night at the old house. I found my mother’s matches slipped into the plastic jacket around her pack of Parliaments on the mantel. I positioned my torch on the windowsill. I wanted her to see it. I wanted to light her way home.

I’d only lit matches a few times before, from the boxed kind for candles or fireworks, and the first few only ripped and smelled of sulfur. When one finally caught I burnt my fingers pressing it to the towel, which charred and curled and finally caught in a tenuous square of flame. I didn’t notice I was crying until Ken came in the room, shirtless, wrapping his arms around me to slap the flame out with his bare hands. He

whipped me around and the torch fell to the floor with a clatter I was sure would wake Ryan. I felt the bruise already on my arm and cried out.

“What the hell, Ellie? Are you crazy? Your dad’s going to kill me. What do you think you’re doing?”

I shrugged, eyes shut and nose running.

“Answer me, Ellie. Were you trying to burn the house down or what?”

“No.”

“You should have stayed with your father,” he said. Then he took his hands from my shoulders and pulled a throw from the couch, cashmere, which we were not allowed to use, wrapping it around my shoulders. He hoisted me up, pressing me to his chest, and walked with me to the deck door, tripping a few times on my dangling legs.

“It’s okay,” he said, opening it. He’d told me once that you have to keep talking to a horse to let it know you’re there, and to never walk directly in front of it or behind it without telling it, slowly and gently, what you’re going to do. “We’re just going to clear the smoke out of this room so your mother doesn’t know we’ve been ruining her new house, all right?”

He set me down in front of the railing and stood beside me, one hand on my head, fixing the blanket back up on my shoulder whenever it slipped. The wind was high by now, and probably cold on his skin.

“Are you going to tell me what you were trying to do?”

I shook my head.

“I’m not going to tell your father.”

“Thank you.”

He sighed. "I wonder if those lights are ever going to leave."

YOU CAN SEE how I'd think it was my fault, even now. That I called it into being.

We'd only been outside a few minutes when Ken saw the orange glow coming from the back of town. At first we thought it was coming from inside our own house, that he hadn't put the torch out. But it was the chimney ablaze on the roof of another house. Ken ran inside to call the police, and then he was out the door, with me tailing him as fast as I could run. Even though we had a fire department right across from the ice cream store he still beat everyone to the source of the fire: our old house. He dislocated his shoulder breaking through the windowpane to pull my father out. He even started to give my father mouth-to-mouth, I saw when I ran up, trailed by those monstrous fire trucks, but the chimney had kept the fire bottled and it turned out my father was only drunk, not smothered. I hoped Lane had gone home and fallen asleep. I didn't particularly want to hear his recounting of this story.

Around me I felt the presence of people, neighbors, drawn into their shawls like I was, eyes fastened on the light. The smear of fire against the blue night was a beacon, darkening our surroundings and making our house look like the only one on the block, exposed and lonely. The ceiling beams cast into relief, the teacups silhouetted on the windowsills. Sparks showered from the chimney, lit in the pine needles, glowed and faded. The needles and the trucks and my father and the other men were two-dimensional figures, etched against the blaze. I wanted to tell my mother that she was wrong, that *this* was what the painting looked like. I recognized what she saw in it. It was beautiful.

The fire chief crouched down before my father when they'd gotten him sitting up and the fire was mostly quenched. "You should've had that chimney replaced a goddamn decade ago," he said, but he closed his mouth when he saw me, still clutching the blanket against the wind. Ken and my father blinked at me, exhausted, sooty-faced, full of love. I let them hug me to show that I was okay, that I wasn't scared, careful not to charcoal my mother's cashmere throw. I decided then that I would forgive my father. For he was the one to build the beacon, to light her way home when I had failed. He could still guide her. He wanted her back, I saw, even more than I did.

## A VISITATION

### **How does a man break a forty-year habit?**

Every morning for forty years, Carl Wright wakes at five, scuffs his feet into the slippers beneath the bed, and pads with the certainty of a blind beagle into the kitchen. He perks and drinks two cups of coffee while dressing one-handed, finishing the second in the chair by the front door, where he listens to the wireless and exchanges his slippers for work shoes. After the shoes comes his smart blue conductor's cap, issued by the Milwaukee Road railroad line in Rapid City, South Dakota. For eighteen or twenty of those years, a period that seems all too brief, he peeked at the sleeping heads of his children before slipping out the front door.

Even after he retires, he keeps to this routine: slippers, coffee, clothes, wireless. This for another fifteen years, while his wife snores on till half-past six. And then, one morning in 1968, he does something different: he turns after his feet find the slippers and looks back at his wife, Minny, in the near-dark. Her open mouth, the occasional whisker thrust from some sub-chin pore the mirror refuses to show her, the brisk business of gray at her temples. *Ah, this is right*, he thinks, *nothing has changed*. Then a quiet vise squeezes his heart and he dies, leaning against those embroidered pillows, which gives Minny some satisfaction upon waking, as she believes this means he chose to spend his final moments with her.

*Ah, Carl*, she tells the ladies at church later, wiping her eyes. *He was such a devoted husband*.

### **Who comes to the funeral?**

He has family, of course. Tom, their son, died several years ago, before marrying or giving grandchildren to Minny, who wanted nothing more than to see his beautiful bloodline continued. Anita, their daughter and the oldest, moved west after school to Oregon with a dark-eyed minister who has a way of shaking his head when he speaks to people. She has five children, none of whom particularly delight Minny.

Anita gathers her brood, or what she can of them: Martha, the oldest at twenty-one, is willing to undertake a bit of romantic traveling, but the twins, Luke and Hadleigh, are discovering the joys of belonging to a fraternity and are left to their exams. Bobby, fourteen, and the closest in resemblance to dear Tom (not that Minny has noticed), goes to keep his mother company because he feels guilty that his father, visiting Israel, cannot. And Callie, at seven, has no choice.

Carl also has friends: old members of the Legion, who quietly think him lucky for having died with his feet in his slippers and his ass snug in bed. At this age everyone wants an open casket to reassure them of something they've been coming to suspect: that the spirit is in no way tethered to the body.

### **Where is his remaining child when she gets the news?**

She is in the basement of her husband's church, eating cake left over from a Sunday school birthday party. Her husband flew out only yesterday and is scheduled to return in two weeks. It's rare that he misses a slice of leftover cake; she eats two for him. One of the ladies from the Auxiliary Group answers the phone in the study and holds the phone up to the glass partition to signal Anita.

“Why aren’t you at home?” comes her mother’s voice. “I called three times.”

**How does the house feel after all these years away?**

They arrive the day before the funeral, in the afternoon. Anita sweeps in rather grimly, face lined from the thousand-mile drive. Martha whispers in her ear, “Mom, are you alright? Are you sure you’re up to this? Maybe you ought to lie down first? We could find a hotel?”

But she finds the living room filled with the bustling cheer of her own church basement: red-cheeked gray-haired ladies, seated in groups on the settee and various folding chairs or swooping in and out of the kitchen with biscuits and tea and sterling crocks of warm milk.

One clanks her cup and rises to grab Anita’s head with both hands, crying, “You must be the daughter, oh, look everyone, doesn’t she just have Carl’s eyes?” She shakes her head—Anita half-expects the woman to pull her head to her breast—and murmurs, “Poor thing, such a shame, such a wonderful man.”

Minnie, a petite woman in a teal polyester pantsuit, comes out of the kitchen and says to each of the children, “Give your Granny a proper hug, now.”

After she and Anita exchange a clammy embrace she reminds them all of the only other time Callie and Bobby have met her: on a rare visit to Portland, where Callie, then two, raised solemn eyes to her grandmother and bit her in the leg. (Callie remembers none of this, though upon Minnie’s final pronouncement—“You sure didn’t make yourself my favorite grandchild!”—Bobby uncovers his own faint recollection and grins with pride.)

### **What does Callie think of being the youngest child?**

Like most youngest children, she calls it a predicament if pressed. Her friend at school, Libby, is also the youngest. They agree it's the worst.

In truth, she's felt special all her life. Her sister Martha, at fourteen, hadn't been thrilled with her birth, but within a few years she'd begun testing a private theory of hers that boys are attracted to a girl who knows her way around babies. So Callie was coddled by the hip and elite of Lincoln High School.

Her brothers have been wonderful. They rough-and-tumbled with her and brought her a kitten for her fifth birthday and played neverending games of pretend involving wild car chases and daring jungle explorations.

(And Martha has told her, several times, to forget the dreary hand-me-downs—the main thing is that Callie's dating years are going to be *enviously easier* than Martha's, now that their father has dealt with the first girl and been overwhelmed by the twins. “Really, I envy you,” Martha assured her. “It isn't fair.”)

But what really makes her life special is the uninterrupted time she's had with her parents. The way her mother hipped her up and down the produce aisle, lets her play at her feet in choir practice, and reads drafts of letters aloud to her in the sunlit corner of their living room. “My little monkey,” Anita calls her, lifting her up until she gets “way too big for this kind of thing, you little monkey.”

The way she gets to stretch across the backseat on the way home from an evening service, when her siblings have gotten rides with friends. Her parents talking in low voices, laughing, her father's hand on her mother's wool-skirted knee across the

gearshift. Falling asleep with her head tilted back to look up through the window, at the night sky and the trees interrupting the soft glow of streetlights.

**What does Anita realize, coming home again?**

That she is glad she has many children, so that they all feel equally loved and equally neglected. That she is too old (forty-five) to have such a young youngest child. Having a seven-year-old makes her feel sinfully youthful. More than ever she is aware of her looks: leggy, tall, commanding, with the dark hair and a heady blue gaze she'd inherited from her father's side. Crowded supermarkets aisles part for her. When she has Callie in tow people see her as a young mother.

Also, that it was madness, to have grown up here amongst the stifling rock and sharp words of her mother. In the rented car, Martha up front and the littler ones sprawled in the back seat, they passed through striped gorges and watch furious spindles draw near on the horizon. The Black Hills swallowed them, the Badlands shocked her children into uneasy silence. No wonder she'd left.

She'd wanted to take a train. Her children had never been on one—imagine—and she wanted them to hear the clang of crossing bells and the hiss of displaced steam. She wants to give them the picture of her father she has in her mind: his balding head capped by the neat blue hat, the brass buttons on his uniform, the oil staining the cuticles of his fingernails. “The belle of the ball,” he called her, opening his arms, when she'd bring his lunch pail to the depot. Each Christmas she presented him with new plaid slippers.

But there were no trains, no direct way home.

In Jackson Hole, Wyoming, they stopped for the night and found the place overrun with cowboys, raucous men in hats and chaps and worn button-downs. Martha begged to get dinner in a restaurant with a window booth where she could have a real cocktail and watch the men (though this wasn't what she said; she said "get the cultural Wyoming experience") and Anita had to admit she'd had those same aspirations herself, at that age. But instead she did what Carl would have done: she bolted their hotel door and ordered up mashed potatoes and country-fried steaks.

The next day's drive was silent, presided over by towers of painted rock. Callie got a nosebleed and Anita had to pull over to ask a gas station attendant for the restroom key. She wet a towel in cold water and pressed it to the back of her daughter's neck. There, in the privacy of the buzzing light and the space above Callie's bowed head, she looked at her father's eyes in the mirror and cried, wiping her nose occasionally with her free hand.

"Mother, it's cold," Callie whimpered, "aren't I done yet?"

Anita used the compress to dab under her eyes while her daughter straightened. "Of course, darling," she said, patting the girl's hair. "Do you feel better now?"

### **How do you pass the night before a funeral?**

They attempt to go out to a family dinner, Minny accompanied by her close friend Gelda. Each of them finds they've ordered the wrong dish, quietly covets another's, and reprimands themselves for even feeling hungry at a time like this. Except for Martha, who tests another theory of hers: that spiritual ill *can* in fact be conquered by material goods, so really the consumption of materials is for the betterment of mankind. She fills

her belly and contemplates shopping for a pair of cowboy boots and feels, on the whole, much better.

Over dinner Minny tells Anita how surprised she is that Harold didn't come. Anita reminds her how difficult it is to change travel plans in the Middle East, to which Minny responds she always respects a preacher who realizes his work is here. Anita wipes her mouth with her napkin and tells Callie to eat up, she needs her vegetables. Callie pushes two lumps of broccoli off her plate and into her napkin when she thinks no one is looking. Bobby elbows her. "You owe me," he whispers. Then he checks to make sure his mother hasn't noticed, folds his hands on his lap. This is the longest dinner of his life.

Gelda studies them, perching the glasses that sway from a gold chain around her neck back on her nose. "Why, I declare, Minny, isn't that boy just the *image* of Tommy?"

"Not really," Minny avers. "Tommy had high cheekbones, and the curliest brown..." She sobs into her napkin, setting a fist right in her mashed potatoes. "I'm all right!" she shouts, when Gelda on one side and Anita on the other try to pat a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Can't an old lady grieve for one damn minute?"

Her hand, when she raises it to ward them off, drops a satisfying glob of potatoes on the linen tablecloth.

### **How do they all fit in that house?**

Back home they divvy up the beds: Anita with Martha in her old room, and Bobby in Tom's (really, the two are one room divided by a shaky partition). Minny doesn't want company, thank you, and that leaves Callie on the living room sofa.

“Maybe you could squeeze in with your sister and me,” Anita says.

“Oh, come on, Mom,” Martha says, “I slept with her last night and she kicks like a jackrabbit.”

“You’ll be okay out there, right, baby?” Anita asks. Callie nods bravely and accepts her blanket.

In the dark Anita panics. She hasn’t had proper time to remember her father and mourn him, and now she has to give him up. Trying to remember his face, she can conjure only photographs. She imagines the sound of a train pulling in to the station, chugging and clacking, exhaling swathes of steam, until it fills her head enough to see him swing down from the rear car and open his arms.

*There she is, the belle of the ball.*

Beside her, Martha’s face is slathered with night cream, her slender form still. Anita listens to each light breath flutter in and out of her nostrils. Soon the girl will be lying next to her own husband, finding her own way. Somehow she doesn’t think her daughter will marry a minister. It’s unfortunate, the way she swoons at men in motorcycle jackets.

### **Does the big bed feel empty to Minny?**

This is her third night alone. She stretches to touch her big toe to Carl’s side, the right side, thinks she feels a dip in the mattress. Her foot comes back to rest where it belongs. Well, she never was one for sprawling out anyway.

She wishes that Tommy could have lived to see his father in retirement. Those last few years he’d dug the model trains from the attic and pieced them together again,

polished the dust from the tracks. He'd bought the trains as Christmas presents for Tommy and Anita both. Those Christmas mornings Tommy would be at the foot of their bed hours before dawn. Bobby really does look like him.

Maybe they should have moved closer to the grandchildren, as Carl suggested. But Tommy's grave is here. And Carl would have missed his friends, the old grumps at the Legion who ran the trains with him out of the service. She settles her hands across her stomach. She'd done what was right.

### **Would Callie even recognize her grandfather?**

In the middle of the night—perhaps later, because the light has become almost blue—Callie wakes with a jerk when the loudest thunderclap she's ever heard breaks the sky open over the house. Flashes of light make the curtains translucent once, twice, three times. Through the thin walls she hears Martha exclaim "Holy shit!" and her mother's immediate admonishment. More thunder, searingly loud, and then footsteps and the creaking of a door eased open. Her mother appears and sits next to her on the couch. Callie curls around the familiar hips.

"Did that wake you up?" her mother whispers.

"Is it going to hit the house? Is there a tornado?"

"It's a thunderstorm. Won't last much longer. They're just loud here." Her mother strokes her hair. "You've never heard a storm like this, have you?"

Callie shakes her head. She doesn't like the way her mother's face appears and disappears in the blue light; it looks flat and unsettled, like a cartoon.

"I'd forgotten what they were like, too. It's kind of fun, isn't it?"

“Why’s it so loud? It sounds like it’s hitting the house.”

“You’ve only ever heard thunder from far away. This is what it sounds like when it’s close. It won’t hit the house. You’re safe here. I’ll sit with you until it passes, huh?”

Callie shuts her eyes and concentrates on the sweep of her mother’s hand from her hair to the middle of her back, hair to back, hair to back. The lights outside the window cool and the thunder stops cracking and rolls. She pictures big fat thundercloud bellies, like the belly of her goldfish at home, getting dragged over the tall rocks they’d seen on the car ride and pierced open so that buckets of rain slosh down and change the color of everything. She touches her finger to bands of color on the rock going from brown to purple, red to black. They bloom darker and brighter and form whirling constellations.

She opens her eyes when the couch shifts under her mother’s absence. She hears her mother jiggle the doorknob, say something softly to Bobby, his murmur, the creaking of the bed as she swings her legs in.

Callie becomes aware again of the horrible ticking of the clock that stands in the hall looking at the front door. It had taken her ages to get to sleep at first. Beneath the sheet the couch is nubby and smells like old ladies, like face powder and spilled milk. The blankets are heavy but when she pushes them off the air in the room moves and pulls her arm hairs up. Tick, tick. She watches the room get bluer and the lines of the chairs resolve themselves into arms and cushions. The refrigerator shudders to life. Gradually she relaxes and begins to feel safe, as her mother said she was. Out of the corner of her eye she thinks she sees her mother coming into the room again but it turns out to be a man, a tall man, but somehow not as big as her father. He goes past the arm of the couch and into the kitchen and then turns around and smiles at her. He has her mother’s eyes.

That breathstopping blue she's never seen anywhere but in her mother's gaze, the one Martha pouts about not inheriting. This must be Grandpa Carl, she realizes. The right thing to do is smile.

### **How does the solemn caravan go?**

In the morning everyone is subdued and cranky. Martha tries to help her mother get dressed but Anita brushes her off, refusing the bobby pins and the camisole and the offer of a steady hand. Minny is silent, and pale. Callie dresses herself and submits to her mother's hairbrush, the no-nonsense hand adjusting her collar and straightening her socks.

Anita drives them all to the church in her father's Chevy, though Minny complains it needs to be cleaned. It smells like tobacco and shoe polish, a scent she hadn't realized was a part of her childhood. She must have smelled it every hour, pressed to her father's breast as an infant. When she was born, Minny had gone away to a sanatorium to be treated for melancholia, something she told Anita in rare confidence when Anita was pregnant with Martha, her first. Anita thinks this must be why she'd sworn to Tommy, when they were little, that she'd never have children or even marry. He'd lived to see the first three born; when the twins came, he'd asked, laughing, how many more are you planning on?

### **Why did they have so many, anyway?**

Wasn't that what ministers' wives did? Ah, wait, that was the Catholics. (They were Lutherans, the happy heretics.) She couldn't explain their abundance—aside from the fact

that the presence of each one of them, resting there under her heart, gave her a joy that was almost painful, so gladly did it fill her—until this trip, actually. Remembering what it was like to be one of two children, when only the other was loved. She did it to prove to herself that she could love more than once. Not a particularly noble goal—perhaps one she ought to pray about. But not now, not while driving. Even the Catholics would advise against prayer while driving.

### **Should Callie tell her mother what she saw?**

In the car she starts to tell Bobby, but he shushes her and says they shouldn't talk about Grandpa Carl in front of Mom.

The pews at the church are long and dusty. Callie sits to one side of her mother, Minny to the other. As soon as the minister begins talking, Minny reaches for a hankie and blows her nose. A few faces turn toward her, frowning in sympathy. Anita stares straight ahead.

Callie tries to keep from fidgeting, as Martha has instructed her. She can't stop watching her mother, thinking, she just lost her dad, her real dad like my real dad. How does that feel? She tries to imagine it, but not very hard. It makes her stomach swoop so low she almost bends over in the pew to catch it. She hopes her mother won't cry, the way that several ladies around them are sobbing into their hankies and blowing their noses and moaning. She doesn't want her to look like that.

Finally the minister tells them they can rise and view the body, if they wish. Amid the swishing of skirts being smoothed and thumps of hymnals being laid down, Callie tugs on her mother's hand.

“Mom.” She tries to whisper. “I saw a man go into the kitchen last night.”

Her mother looks at her for the first time all morning. “What do you mean? Was it Bobby?”

“It was a man. He was bald on top and he had bright blue eyes and slippers on. He walked through the living room into the kitchen and then he turned around and smiled at me.”

Her mother crouches until their faces are level. “Were you scared, Callie?”

Callie thinks. “I was before. About the thunder and being alone in the dark. But not when I saw him.”

“Do you know who that was?”

“I think it was Grandpa Carl.”

“I think so, baby.” She kneads the back of Callie’s neck for a moment. “I think he came to say goodbye.”

### **Does Anita believe this?**

She does—more wholeheartedly, even, than she feels her husband’s sermons. There is too much *thinking* involved; some things you have to feel under your skin, filling you up. She follows her mother, who is motioning with her black gloves, into the aisle and up the velvet steps to the casket. There is the body of her father, looking not exactly waxen and gray as she’d pictured but somehow bereft. She’s never seen him with his eyes closed. He looks so much older than she remembers. There are his hands, liver spots exposed, folded across his stomach. She’d never realized how *private* hands were, how you chose to show them or not. These hands that used to wave and part the air to welcome her into a hug.

She becomes aware that she has been standing too long at the casket. The line is waiting. Her children are crowded beside her, Bobby with his hands behind his back, Callie grasping the edge of the casket, Martha holding one hand flat between her shoulder blades; funny, she hadn't felt it. She hadn't meant to let Callie see the body, but then she'd thought it might help the child to see the figure behind the projection, to cement the memory of the visitation, of its benevolence.

Her daughter is lucky. She wonders, if she'd stayed on the couch after the thunderstorm would she have seen him too? Come to say goodbye. So lucky.

### **What is left?**

They stay that night, their last and Anita cannot resist getting up to prowls the house every hour, a ghost herself in her nightgown, worried she'll startle Callie. But no apparition comes, no roll of thunder or shift in the light.

Bobby lies on his bed and thinks over and over that he's seen his first dead body, that it wasn't lifeless and dramatic as in his comic books, that it wasn't *creepy*, exactly, but not something he'd want to see again, either.

Martha stuffs a pillow over her head and lifts it enough to peek at her mother every time she settles back into bed after walking the house. She has a funny feeling, a feeling she's realizing is an eagerness to get home and see her own father, who really hasn't been so bad since she went away to college. He's funny, endearing even, for a dad.

In her cavernous bed, Minny dream-catalogues each item in her house, which have all been appraised and assigned to different relatives. She changes this list often, almost daily, occasionally with the help of her lawyer. The most precious goes to

whoever has won her favor. The opal ring that Carl gave her on their engagement may go today to Callie, who has been a good child in all the hubbub and not cried once, at least in front of her. She dreams of the look on Callie's face when she is old enough to inherit the ring (not yet, of course; children can't keep nice things).

But it ought to go to Anita, she knows, almost waking—Anita who came all this way and still calls, after all, once a week. Because Anita deserves a bit of history to keep, doesn't she, and because Anita is a good mother, the way she ushers her brood through life with such genuine fondness, and bequeaths them everything. It would be wrong of Minny, unmotherly, not to bequeath her favorite possession to such a good mother. And she would not want her own measure taken against *that*.

## TINY ROOFTOPS, TINY HOMES

FOR THE THIRD anniversary of Hartman's death, Cooper decides to take his daughter on a plane ride. He's been feeling low in the days leading up to this—the years, maybe—but there are other things to consider: his daughter is old enough to notice the world around her; they are moving and he wants to see his neighborhood like this before it's no longer his; Hartman loved flying. In fact, Hartman loved flying so much that in the years before his death he'd gotten his pilot's license and built his own plane, a buttery yellow bush plane, which even now resides at the Seaside airfield, owned by its inheritor, their mutual friend Randall, who has expressed on more than one occasion his willingness to take Cooper for a ride.

He doesn't remind his wife about the plane's owner, or about the anniversary. She always remembers, this time of year, but they've both learned that things like appointments and dates and even birthdays get submerged in the clutter of moving. Boxes, everywhere. It astonishes both of them, when they totter through the stacks to bed at night. They have cleaned out the liquor shop's storeroom every Thursday (delivery day) now for months. A box proclaiming *Tanqueray* entombs their record collection. *Cutty Sark* holds their daughter's baby clothes. He'd had a sense of unease, watching Christie fold the teddy-hearted onesies and crocheted booties the size of matchbox cars, hotel soaps. The fact that they were carrying them on meant that they would use them. When Emma was born Christie had half-laughed-half-gasped, "Never again! Six years, at least!" When he'd related this to the family, his father scoffed, "That'll be good for about

a year.” He indicated Cooper’s mother, a grandmother many times over. “She fed me that line after every one of you.”

If Christie is hinting, it’s been gentle. She presents Emma with stuffed animals, announcing, “Here’s your new little brother or sister!” But no talks late at night, no sudden questions after a long smooch. And the moving business certainly pushes all that to the side; the farthest in the future they can envision is that first night in their new house. But he has a feeling that another baby is what comes next once you get all the boxes emptied and the lamps lit.

Emma is not yet four. When he tells a childless friend about the airplane ride, she asks why they don’t wait till Emma’s older and can remember that sort of thing. He would’ve thought that himself, a long time ago. But she remembers instances that should have sunk in the tender putty of her brain—the cracked pane of glass that slit her finger, the ladybug that drowned in the shower. And she sees a giant world inhabited by giant feet and giant tables and giant rooftops. He lies on the floor sometimes to see what she sees. The undersides of things! There’s a whole opposite surface-world the grown-ups are missing out on, he tells Christie. He holds Emma above his head but everything still looms to her; he can tell by her eyes. He wants to take her in the air, show her how the world looks to him.

“I don’t know,” Christie says when he brings the plane ride up, wiping her brow with her forearm. “It doesn’t seem safe.”

“Of course it’s safe. They have years of training under their belts.” He helps her stack lampshades, upended, in a Corona box. He likes working opposite her, like this. She has been wearing the same “moving outfit” for days: navy tank top, ass-skimming

khaki shorts, bare feet. She goes braless, leans over constantly, breasts pendulous. He catches whiffs of her sweat, its secret beginnings under her arms, at the small of her back, the base of her throat. If he makes a move she laughs or growls, depending on what she's holding and how heavy it is. At night she is too tired to make love, to even pull back the covers. But during the day, if Emma is napping, if she sees a picture or coffee mug that reminds her of the old days...

"I worry too, though, you're right," he says when he sees her look. "Don't you want to go?"

She wrinkles her nose. "Those tiny cabins? I'd get claustrophobic."

Emma has her own box, in which she stacks the wooden blocks he'd had as a kid. The triangles are stained orange and the columnar rectangles green. Now he realizes they look like carrots and celery.

He stands over her. "You want to fly in a plane, poopmonster?" She looks up at him briefly, then back to work, lips pursed.

"Coop," Christie says. "Forget it. Give me a hand with these."

THE BABY STUFF alone takes up a roomful of bags. The contents of bathroom cupboards roll beneath books in boxes—the books on top, he realizes, so he won't notice all the half-empty soap bottles Christie has packed. Twice they have decided between the front door and the U-Haul that this piece of furniture isn't worth it: to the curb goes the green brocade armchair, the creaky wicker chest. He doesn't want to think about the kitchen, all the wedding-present crockery and innumerable dull knives.

They both anticipated the treasures they could unearth, the long-forgotten letters and pictures and china, but mostly they find junk and grime, forlorn dusty cotton balls and broken dishes no one liked in the first place. What they don't expect is what they lose. Everyone has told them, *you always lose pictures in a move, keep an eye on your pictures*, but what Christie loses right away, despite her impeccable planning and labeling, is her jade ring. Not an engagement ring, but close enough: the first piece of jewelry he'd gotten her, from an artist's fair down the coast.

"What the hell," she says at the end of the day. "I thought I took it off before we started but I must've been wearing it." He watches her remember all the things they packed that day and curse, softly. Emma is asleep on their bed.

"We'll find it." He grins. "When we unpack."

She surprises him then and starts crying. "That's all we have from before we were married," she says, plopping down on the bed, bouncing Emma a little.

"What? That's not even close to true." He chucks her under the chin. "It'll turn up."

But in the morning, when he gets up, she has already rummaged through half the boxes downstairs.

"I think it's gone forever," she greets him. At least she isn't crying. "I went to the store yesterday. And I cleaned up the yard. It could be anywhere."

The fact that she's so upset about an artifact from the *before* time, he reasons, means she may not be ready to have another baby. "I'm telling you, we'll find it," he says. He's right, but not for another fifteen years, when they'll find it looped on a strand

of unopened Christmas decorations in the attic of the no-longer-new house. For fifteen years he's wrong.

WHEN HE'S MENTIONED the plane ride to Christie enough times to wear her down, he calls the airfield. The voice on the other end sounds like a kid's.

"I'm looking for Randall," Cooper says. "Randall Luth."

"He's not here."

"He's not there at all or he's not inside?"

"He's workin on his plane."

"Will you tell him I called? I want him to take my daughter and me up. To see the area."

The kid exhales. "What's your name?"

Cooper gives his information and hangs up, defeated. Christie looks at him from across the room. He nods his head toward Emma.

"We'll teach her some manners, right?"

Randall calls back almost immediately. He leaves Christie on a stool in the upstairs hallway, dismantling a light pendant.

"So a plane ride for the baby," Randall says. "Is that all cleared with the little lady?"

Cooper can see the tops of her feet through the staircase railing. "Sure," he says.

"Then come in tomorrow at two. I'll get her all shined up. You haven't been up around here, have you?"

"Actually I went up with Hartman a few times," he says. "Before."

“Hey,” Randall says, “did you recognize the kid?”

“Who?”

“The one who answered the phone. He’s not supposed to.”

“Who is he?”

“Hartman’s kid. You know, the oldest.”

When Cooper is silent, Randall continues, “He and his mom moved back to town, practically next door to the field. He asks if he can come help out, learn stuff on the days I’m here. Doreen asked, too, or I would’ve said no. He’s only nine or ten. She thought he’d be lonely with the new school and all.”

“Huh,” Cooper gets out. “He didn’t sound too excited.”

Randall snorts. “He can be a shit, actually. But he catches on quick. Anyway. See you and the baby tomorrow. Is Christie coming too? It’ll be a tight fit.”

“Nah,” he says. “She gets nervous, you know.”

He is helping her with the next light fixture when the phone rings again. He thuds down the stairs.

“Cooper!” Christie yells. “Can’t it wait?”

“Sorry,” he calls, picking up the receiver.

“I know who you are,” the kid says.

The sea washes in his ears. He steps backward until he can see Christie’s feet again, the delicate way they peel from the stepladder when she reaches up to the ceiling.

“Yeah,” he says, after the beat. “I’m an old friend of your dad’s. Do you remember me?”

“I just wanted you to know,” the kid says. (Seth, Cooper remembers. Irrepressibly curly hair, face like his father’s. His pajamas with the little feet on them.) “I recognize your name. I remember who you are.”

THE TRUTH IS, Cooper is a lousy father, the opposite of fathers. The child from his first marriage is now a high-schooler stuck with a drug-addled mother in Colorado, and it’s his fault that he doesn’t see her more, that he gave up waiting, that he got a new wife and a new daughter.

And it’s his fault that Hartman died, that Seth has to grow up a lonely little shit without a father.

Now that Cooper’s faith is rattled to dust he can sit and play the blame game all day long with nobody but himself. Sooner or later Christie reminds him—or he reminds himself—that it went as God ordained: courts don’t award custody to fathers (*you did all you could*), and Hartman was ill, very ill (*you did all you could*). It’s true, he admits—for you can’t help others before you’ve helped yourself—and yet, it’s an easy thing to say: he did all he could.

THE NEXT DAY he buckles Emma into the car seat in the Jeep, Christie watching, hand on hip. New tank top. Khaki shorts: day four. Her bare toes nestle in the grass.

“Do you want me to drive you? Do you want me to go?”

“Will you go in the plane?”

“No! Are you crazy?”

“Then stay here,” he urges. “Watch for us in the yard. Wave at her.” He tickles Emma’s belly button beneath her sweater.

“You’re right,” she says. “I’ll wave.” She kisses their foreheads. “Where’s the ladder? Can I get up on the roof?”

“Are you crazy?”

“Are you sure it’s safe? Does it have a car seats?”

“Off we go,” he says, shutting the door. “Wave, Ems. Wave to Mommy.”

BUT OF COURSE it isn’t safe, he thinks, gripping the seat as they lift off. How could he bring his child in this tin can? The plane rattles and Emma tries to scrunch up her face to cry, but it’s held tight under the goggles and leather aviator’s cap. He aims a finger out the window along her line of sight, hoping to distract her but knowing he can’t—shouting is pointless.

He isn’t thinking about Hartman, or the kid, or even Christie; he’s thinking that for a moment he and his daughter are seeing the same, feeling the same, tiny the same. The sky filling the world, everything they touch shaking. Now they are tiny and the world is giant—they sit together in the back to peer out the window, watch the ground swoop away—and then, as the plane climbs, they are giant and the world is tiny. The tarmac is a line in the sand. The trees are blades of grass. They head straight over the river, its disorderly progress into estuary. Funny how it breaks the blocks up, makes a town that has always seemed charming and rundown to Cooper look industrial. He picks out his mother’s house, built in ’38. When she was born the town was a jazz-age wooden boardwalk and a sprawling manor-house resort, where ladies with parasols and jersey

swimwear strolled. They pass the blocky aquarium, once a natatorium pumping seawater over the fifteen rocky feet of beach. They pass the patchy dune grass, the Scotch broom clumped darkly like lost cattle, the dun stretch of sand in place of the old rocks, now two or three hundred feet, striated by an outgoing tide. It is a rare sunny day; beachgoers dot the tideline. Even from here he can tell the bare-chested from the windbreakered. The plane lumbers on and upward, over the waves. He'd expected them to be orderly from here, to make sense, but they reign unevenly, with long impasto smears trailing like capes. He remembers to point for Emma, who has grown wide-eyed and silent with awe.

“I'll take you out to the lighthouse,” Randall yells, and the plane veers south. Cooper forgets to point as they shave the impossible rise of Tillamook Head. He imagines that they pass bears, mountain lions, folk living in secret beneath the emerald greenery. The cliff shears down to the sea, now white-capped and violent against the rocks. Skirting coves he's only heard about, from more adventurous climbers and surfers who had to be rescued by helicopter. He puts a hand on Emma's knee, another around her slight shoulders, their rodent quickness. She wriggles and points, and again it is humbling to feel equal to her, to chart the landscape anew.

Randall swings them out, westward, and they close in on the lighthouse on its lonely rock. He wants to explain everything they see to Emma. It is such a holy and beleaguered position, to have lived in this tiny place all his life, to know everything about it and have so little to show for it. He wants to tell her about the lighthouse: a cursed place, decommissioned and made a columbarium for the loneliest souls. The way the spume of a wave could crest the tower in a high storm. It occurs to him that this is the sort of description that Annabelle, his daughter in Colorado, would enjoy. Despite her

rocky childhood, she is studying history and geography with a steady interest. But when he writes her letters it becomes hard to put so trivial a detail down; he ends up saying the same thing every time. *We love and miss you. Emma remembers who you are when we say your name.* Whether she honestly loves Emma or just pretends, when she visits, he can't say. Either way he is grateful to whatever instinct she acts upon: the instinct of the lonely to bestow love, of the left-behind to encourage. He looks at Emma, bouncing in her seatbelt, and wonders if she'll grow up to harbor a debt to her half-sister, the gratitude for undeserved acceptance. By all rights he should love no one but Annabelle's mother. Of course, by all rights Hartman should be alive and cured of the foolishness that kept them both from taking him to the hospital.

Once it had been the four of them: he and Annabelle's mother, Hartman and his wife. But they disintegrated, as ties do. To *dis integrate*—the saddest word, the saddest process, in the world. And when Hartman's wife called to say *I think he's really sick, I'm not sure what to do*, and when both Hartman's and his own answer had been: *pray*, they were all detached enough by then to trust that this thin cerebral process would hold the very real flesh-and-blood Hartman together, hot and breathing. It was not until Cooper reached their far-off house that he realized Hartman needed what God alone would not bring: cool white coats and hallways, syringes, charts with orderly check marks. *You were supposed to take him to the hospital*, the kid, Seth, had said. He was old enough to know, and tell, the truth.

Finally, when Emma seems overstruck and the plane's whine gets tired, they circle Gearhart and the shingled house she's grown up with. Cooper searches for its

pitched roof and his wife, a tanned figure waving a white towel on the lawn. From here the pines he's planted, with Emma nosy at his side, look like cabbages.

“There's your mom!” he shouts, flashing her a reassuring smile. “Do you see her? There's Mommy!”

He watches the glint of Christie's sunglasses as she tracks them across the sky, waving her towel in what he is sure are distress signals. Randall waggles the plane's wings and Emma shrieks in nervous delight. In that moment, just for a blink, he knows where the jade ring must be, catches its quiet glimmer amidst the boxes. But just as quickly the image is gone.

THEY HAVE A bumpy landing, during which he clutches Emma and imagines their heads bumping together, his skull cracking hers, and decides that would be better anyway. Quick and soothing, attributable to the known. For those long seconds all he can picture is a yellow yolk, leaking traitorously from a fractured egg.

When the plane noses to its berth Randall slides his goggles over his forehead. “Want to take me for a beer?” he asks.

They drive just across the highway in Randall's ancient truck, to the stone-hewn pizza palace known for ever-changing owners and cheap beer. He twirls Emma on a red-lacquered stool before setting her in his lap, safe and grounded. She falls asleep after motoring his fork around the counter for a minute. His stomach still lurches after the climbs over stiff peaks and sudden falls over forested dips. Try as he might, he can't see the pizza palace as it was from the plane. Already the whole grid fades and the buildings

become real again, real and significant. They take their time with their first beer, order a second.

“So?” Randall says. “How was it?”

“I just kept thinking that her whole life my mother’s never seen that view. That she spent her whole life here, and I did too, and that we never even knew what it looked like.”

“Take her up, next time. I’m sure she’d get a kick out of it.”

“Yeah.” Cooper swizzles his beer. “Did Hartman show you all that?”

“Not legally. I got my pilot’s license the hard way, with somebody else. But he used to take me up and show me his favorite places, let me try out some tricks. I would’ve shown you a few if you didn’t have Emma. And the lovely wife.”

“I’m sure she’d appreciate that.” Cooper laughs. “Man. You had some of the last good times with that guy.”

Randall looks seriously at him, nudges his beer. “I don’t know,” he says. “I think he looked up to you more than anybody. I know Doreen was really grateful that you came and tried to get him to the hospital.”

Cooper barks a laugh and takes a drink to wet the roughness it leaves. “Lot of good that did. Wish we’d’a known what we were doing.”

“Nobody did, my man,” Randall says, clinking their drinks. His moustache gives all his smiles a somber quality, Cooper thinks.

“What about the kid,” Cooper says. “Does he ever talk about Hartman?”

“Not about when he got sick, if that’s what you mean,” Randall says. “He has lots to say about—”

The swinging doors burst to admit a soggy afternoon light and Christie, who, he notices, has not changed her khaki shorts but somehow looks different, incendiary. She gives a little moan when her eyes clear the dark and she sees Emma.

“I thought you crashed,” she hisses, lifting Emma from his lap and cradling, pooling, as much of the child as she can against her neck. “You should have been home thirty minutes ago.”

Cooper shifts in his stool against the new lightness in his lap. “Shit, you’re right,” he says, casting Randall an apologetic glance. “I should have called to tell you we were headed here. We thought we’d catch up. I didn’t think you’d even—I didn’t think about it.”

She waits till Cooper has paid the tabs for both unfinished beers and drops him off at the airfield to get his car. Emma is still sleeping, flushed, in the car seat behind them.

“This kind of thing...Cooper, sometimes I don’t think you even remember that I’m part of the equation,” she says, easing the car into park.

“I know,” he says, staring straight ahead. “I get distracted too easily. It isn’t fair to you.”

She taps the wheel and turns the ignition off. “I remembered about the anniversary on my way,” she says. “Hartman’s. I’m sorry I didn’t before.”

“You know his son works here? Shadowing Randall, sort of, and that old plane?”

She blows a long stream of air between her teeth. “Did you see him?”

He shakes his head. “I think he remembers me, from that night. He talked to me on the phone when I called for Randall. It was so easy to forget about him growing up all this time.”

“You could talk to him, you know,” she says, running a thumb along the wheel.

“Tell him about his dad. I’m sure he would appreciate that.”

“Maybe.” Cooper pushes his door open and swings his legs out, leaning back in to brush her cheek in a kiss. She smells like cardboard and spackle and sweat, like the past few weeks and the future. “I’ll see you at home.”

Walking toward the airfield control house he thinks of things he could say to Seth, ways of beginning to assume the duty he’d long left neglected. *Your dad first got the idea to fly when we were on a plane to Hawaii. I was there the day they knew your mom was pregnant with you. I knew your dad when he had curly hair and buckteeth like you. And boy was he ugly...* But then he hears the sputtering roar of the yellow plane as it bumps along the runway, the heads of Randall and Seth shadowed by the waning sun against the windshield. Cooper watches it lift, improbably, into the air, and jingles his keys in his pocket. He turns and sets back toward his car without watching for the waggle of the plane’s wings. Probably Randall has told the kid everything, will tell him all that he needs to know.

## THE AGE OF SAIL

### I.

THIS FIRST MORNING in Alaska, Marie Hastings wakes in a snow globe. The storm that blew her in has swept everything up and resettled it, neatly, so that she feels she's gone properly into a new world. Her marriage, her ailing mother, her blooming catering business—all gone, back on the wet driftwood beaches of Bellingham. She can hear Lillian, her sister-in-law—ex-sister-in-law—making a careful clatter with the teakettle in the kitchen, which is adjacent to Marie's newly appointed bedroom. "I'm sorry it's downstairs," Lillian apologized the night before, swinging the door open. "It's a small house. You'll find it's colder down here, but I've loaded your bed with every spare quilt I could find."

It's charming, Marie thinks—the patchwork quilts burying the rough footposts of the small bed, the thick rug laid down for her bare feet. Though she is nervous about sharing her life with others. She and Lillian have been close over the years, but she senses her divorce has given her life a distinct and disrespectful bohemian air, one that puts an intimidating distance between her and a happily married mother-to-be.

She dresses, peeking through the curtain at the snowlit yard, and cleans her teeth in the adjoining powder room. Stepping into the kitchen, she flaps her hand at Lillian. "Here, let me do that."

Lillian startles. "Goodness, I'd nearly forgotten you were here." She waves Marie's hand away. "I may look ready to burst, but I can handle a kettle, trust me. Coffee

or tea? I've switched to tea, myself—this baby's given me so much indigestion.” She pats the swell riding high under her robe. Marie takes the cup she's offered. Even in the morning, with cheeks flushed from cold and warm blonde locks lank from sleep, Lillian looks as sweetly beautiful as she did in her Homecoming crown.

Lillian gestures at the wireless, on so low Marie hadn't registered it. “We don't have a television up here yet—we always meant to, but the radio picks up news from Anchorage. They're still talking so much about poor Kennedy and how Jackie's managing.”

“It must be a shock, to hear news like that in your state.” Marie nods at Lillian's belly.

“You know, it was. It made me realize how emotional this pregnancy has made me, and how hard a time I was having, keeping up with the house and the bakery. That was certainly the first time I thought about calling you.”

“I was glad to come. I needed to get out of there.”

Lillian looks away, embarrassed.

Marie hesitates, stands. “Not because of your brother. Logan and I are completely amicable, as I'm sure he told you. I just needed a change of scenery.” She takes the kettle from Lillian, fills both their cups, and guides her to the table, where fresh sprigs of juniper poke out of a blue glass pitcher. Their white dog, Molly, sighs under the table. She stands as tall as Marie's thigh; the eagles snatch small pets, she's been told. She buries her hand in the scruff of Molly's neck.

“Of course,” Lillian says. She folds into the chair, sighing. “I’m sure you needed a break from worrying about your mother.” Then she gasps. “That didn’t come out right. I meant—of course you still worry.”

“I know what you meant,” Marie says. “It’s all right.” Her mother, diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease several years earlier, is back at her own house in Bellingham, probably smoking in an armchair near the window, trying to remember what season it is. “You know, she loves her nurse. That woman is so good with her. I always upset her when I visit. She doesn’t want to be coddled, but she gets so angry when she can’t do something on her own.”

“That must be hard. I hope I won’t do that to you, when this thing gets so big I can’t walk.”

Marie laughs. “I’m just thankful for the checks from my father’s insurance. It’s not much, but it comes every year on the dot and it’s enough to pay for the nurse.”

“Well, PAF was nice about some things, I suppose,” Lillian says. Pacific American Fisheries, which had employed Marie’s father until he was killed in an accident south of here, had been a source of great money for its seasonal employees and great anger for the Alaskan fishermen whose territory it usurped.

They hear a noise of dissent from Ben, emerging from the stairs. His right leg, stiffened from a childhood bout of polio, drags on each step. “All our dads hated that company so much. Mine won’t even talk about it.” He nods at them. “Morning, Marie. Just the company, not the men,” he adds.

“I forgot what a history you have here,” she says, standing. “Let me get you some coffee.” She waves off his protest. “I’m here to help you two out. Let me.” She watches

Lillian squeeze his knee as he sits. He's tall and dark-haired, good-looking except for that leg, which she has never seen uncovered. She imagines it is twisted or shriveled; she's never asked Lillian. She'd heard, lying awake last night, the unmistakable sounds of lovemaking in the room above. The creaking of a bed bigger than hers, Lillian's whisper—reminding him, no doubt, to be quiet for their guest. She looks at her friend in the crook of Ben's arm, at the pleasing lines of their bodies pressed together, and, for the first time since she and Logan brought up divorce, wonders if anyone will ever touch her like that again.

THE TOWN OF Homer sits on the benchland lining Kachemak Bay, one of the last stations of hospitable wilderness before the icy northern shores of the Bering Sea. Even here the country threatens to take its land back. The houses stand in the spiky shadows of Sitka spruce and Western hemlock. The muddy roads skirt creeks, sloughs, and the marshy grasslands which will, Lillian assures her, be beset by itchy-horned moose nibbling the first tender willow shoots in the spring.

The sky clears, a brief respite, and once Ben leaves for work, taking the dog along in the truck, Lillian bundles Marie up to show her the town. Much of the vegetation and weather is familiar to Marie, who spent her whole life in northern Washington, but here everything is grander, sharper, more dangerous. Across the bay, the Kenai mountain range guards the horizon like a snowy fortress. Marie can't imagine what the first homesteaders felt upon landing here. Did they know how the long winter would close in on them, leaving only the bay to feed them and their own pitiful fires to keep them warm? She decides that she would have braved it. Anything for a new life.

They head out along the pebble-strewn beaches of Coal Bay, which hugs the eastern curve of the Homer Spit, the four-mile peninsula housing the town's harbor and much of its businesses. From here they stare straight back at the ice-hooded mountains across the water. Even over the lapping waves—gentle, like the ruffling of a disturbed lake—and the seethe of water snaking back from the black pebbles, they can hear the sounds of the harbor: whistles, heavy bells, shouts and guffaws, clangs of machinery and humming winches. Along the water, black-bellied plover cry softly, paying no attention, dressed in their quiet winter plumage. They watch them forage by sight for food.

“See that?” Lillian points out beyond the mouth of the bay, toward where Marie knows Kodiak Island must be. “That little curl of what looks like smoke on the horizon? That’s Mount Augustine. It erupted in October, scared me to death.”

Marie shields her eyes to bring the thin plume into focus. She pictures the red glow of lava, but all she sees is a fine haze that could be fog, or her imagination. “That’s a live volcano?”

“I’m not sure how long it’s been since it was active. I think in the thirties. When it erupted, I was so thankful we don’t live closer to it...there was a huge pyroclastic flow, looked like the pictures of the A-bomb, and it caught the whole face of the mountain on fire. It was overcast that day anyway, but it got a lot darker. And then there was another big explosion, only a couple days before the assassination. Actually, when I realized something big was happening on the TV, I thought at first it was another big one. Since then it’s just been this little trickling of ash, though. We’ve all been nervous. That ash can travel the sky for hundreds of miles, you know.”

The ash looks harmless to Marie, lulled as she is by the hypnotic swelling and sinking of the low waves. She turns her eyes to the harbor, where the water smacks and splashes against the docks. They bustle with fishermen and bait cutters finding things to do, bears itchy from hibernation. They check and recheck the machinery above and below the oiled decks, rubbing their hands over faithful pulleys and masts and ancient wheels, some torn straight from the helms of their fathers' abandoned boats. Many of those wooden beasts are still in use, Lillian tells her; some long scattered to the seas, and others still relics in the yards of old men, affectionately patted like good dogs and horses by passers-by.

“They usually go out sport fishing around now,” Lillian says. “Sablefish, grey cod, octopus—mostly for shack. Bait. They can’t stand to be off the water for too long.”

Most of the boats have set out. There are a few still docked, their men clambering over jugs of water and neat coils of rope as the great hulls heave up and down like eager horses with the wake. Lillian points out those that have left already, making their way out of the bay into the dull sea. Most of them are nakedly sailless and they look both brave and foolish on the broad waters. It is a cloudy day, like most, and quiet. Several others have turned up to watch the leave-taking now that church has let out—the fishermen like setting out on a Sunday, she’s heard. Paying our respects, they say.

Marie shades her eyes with a hand to better discern the shapes but the fleet is becoming untraceable—the white smudges on the gray water, heading right into the gray sky, occasionally hidden in sudden troughs as if the horizon has finally swallowed them. From one of the boats at the dock comes a great clanging, a bronze bell, and the men cast off, winding their mooring ropes up. The water is humming with the chug of engines, and

here and there trail sheens of oil, washing up against the rocks. She watches for the secret green in the swells of water.

Lillian points to one of the boats, a grayed single-mast twenty-meter schooner, with two men on deck. Marie can see a figure at the helm inside the cabin. “That’s the *Halldóra*,” Lillian says. “It belongs to Johanna’s husband. I’ll take you to meet her tomorrow at the bakery, and then you can decide if you really want to take over for me there.”

“Don’t be silly. I promised I would.”

“Well—just don’t let Johanna make you nervous. You have far more experience baking than I did when I started. She can be a crank, I’ll admit, but she was an angel to me the times I—the times I miscarried.”

Marie squeezes her arm, feeling the give of pillowy flesh even beneath her parka. “You’ve been so brave,” she says.

Lillian picks up the silence that follows. “And you’ll like Andres—that’s her husband. I don’t see what they have in common, but he’s the most cheerful man I’ve ever met. Lots of his friends, and Will’s, have crewed under him over the years. Will’s his son,” she says at Marie’s blank look. “He and Ben grew up together. When Ben first moved me up here he still crewed it sometimes when they fished for sport. Just for fun.”

“Does he miss it?” Marie asks. Several more engines have started up and she has to speak loudly above the noise. The two women are standing close together, instinctively, arms touching.

“Ben?” Lillian considers this. “He was so young then. I think he still thought his leg would miraculously get used to it and he’d be able to crew for real, go out during the

season. Well, he thought it was just a matter of hard work—I thought it would take a miracle. I hated that. Sometimes he couldn't even move his leg, waking up in the morning. I was so relieved when he got the job at the cannery."

"Have you thought of moving, then? When the baby's old enough?"

She half-shrugs. "I don't think we'd want to leave." She gestures around her—the spit, the bay, the dots of white houses in the greenery behind them. "This is what I know now. I always thought it was funny that I ended up here and not Logan. When we were kids we used to talk about running away to Alaska. Which is exactly what I did. I think we got the idea in our heads because we knew some of the dads would come up here to fish during the summer. I knew that yours did. I remember that sometimes he would leave before the school year ended and then you might miss a few days. I always thought it was because you were staying home to keep your mother company because she missed him. I was thinking about that the other day, you know. I thought it was sweet. I always envied you a little for that—I wanted to spend time with just my mother. My dad was so loud around the house and Logan was just like him, always yelling and teasing me and trying to steal things from my dresser."

"My goodness, I can't believe you remember that," Marie says. "I'd forgotten all about that."

"I've had a lot of time to think about my childhood and wonder how different it would be for my daughter, if I had a girl. When I came here with Ben I knew we'd raise our children here. But I didn't think it'd take so long."

"You've been here what, eight years?"

Lillian counts back. “Eight, nine? I was too young to raise a child then, but that didn’t stop me from trying.” She interlaces her fingers over her stomach. “It was a miracle to carry this one to the third month. I couldn’t even bring myself to tell Ben until I was showing. And now—”

The noise from the boats has receded in their wakes. Marie puts a hand over Lillian’s. She had been afraid, upon coming here, that intimacy between women is only a schoolgirl’s gift, impossible after a certain age. But there had always been an easy affection between them, when they met as sisters the first time Lillian was pregnant, and it remained still, and grew.

“And now?” she prompts.

“We’ve never had a child in the house before. We’d pretty much stopped trying before this. The news kind of threw Ben for a loop. You hear all those—stories.” She takes a breath. “How having a child is the kiss of death for a marriage.”

“Oh. But you seem fine! Happier than any other couple I know.”

“I’m afraid we’re too—I don’t know, too used to the way things are now.”

Marie moves her hand to Lillian’s shoulder. “I think you should see this as a gift, Lillian. You and Ben had all those extra years together to figure out how you would weather a storm and come out stronger. You built a solid foundation for a family, and you’re better set than all the young parents to do this right.”

Lillian nods along with her words.

“Anyway, I don’t think either of you will think about things like that once you see your baby.”

Lillian squeezes her hand. They start back home.

“Why didn’t you and Logan ever have children, Marie? If you don’t mind my asking. Last time I visited you two you seemed to be ready to get pregnant. Logan and I—we talked about it a little, when you were at work.”

They walk along for a few steps and at Marie’s hesitation Lillian adds, “I’m sorry—a lot of women have trouble like that—like me.”

“No,” Marie says quickly. “There was—a chance, a long time ago, but it didn’t work out. And it never was the right time after.”

“It’s too bad.” Lillian glances sidelong at her. “It might have changed everything.”

Stung, Marie keeps her head down as they skirt snowdrifts and glossy puddles. What does Lillian know, she thinks. Lillian married out of love, not sheer confusion and a desperate attempt to make sense of the future. In fact, Lillian has no idea—no idea, she thinks fiercely—how lucky she is, that her decision to follow a boy to the wilds of the last untamed frontier turned out to be more than youthful folly. But perhaps she and Logan would have fared better if they’d had an adventure like that to undertake. She doesn’t want to think about it. It’s over now.

## II.

JOHANNA IS NOT tall, but the steel straightness of her spine, and the sharp lightening at her temples of what must have been white-blond hair to begin with, lend her an aura of authority. Her eyes are a troubled gray-blue. Beautiful, Marie thinks, taking her hand. To age with such grace. Her own mother is lined and stooped, though only in her sixties. The world was not kind to her.

She drops Johanna's hand, taking the bakery in. Lillian heaves herself into a nearby chair. They'd driven the four miles from Lillian's cottage to the bakery, which sits a ways down the spit, near the harbor and the town pub, The Salty Dawg. The room is small but airy, with high open-beam ceilings and tall clean windows. The air is fragrant with the rich scent of yeast and hot flour and something else, sweeter, like blueberry jam.

Johanna gestures for her to sit beside Lillian, pulling a chair out for herself. "How do you find it here, Marie?" she asks.

She is from Iceland, Marie remembers—to her untrained ear, Johanna's accent sounds like the lilting, girlish Norwegian her mother's mother had spoken. The soft turns and hesitant vowels remind her, somehow, of snow.

Marie smiles, gratefully. "Not too different, really. A little greener. A little colder. I've always wanted to visit because my father used to work in Alaska for PAF. But I hadn't given much thought to your polar night. I don't think I'll get used to it soon."

Johanna smiles too, carefully. "Some say it can drive the right person mad. It's different for everybody."

“You don’t notice it, so much, after the first few weeks,” Lillian assures her. She turns to Johanna. “Marie and I grew up in the same town and just look, I’ve been here what, eight years, Johanna? And I don’t mind it a bit. Gives you more time to think.”

“Too much time,” Johanna says. “It’s good to keep busy.” She turns to Marie. “Normally I get all the baking started at eight, or you will if it’s my day off, if this works out. In the summer we start at six, but there’s no use trying to get anything done in the winter when the mornings are so dismal. You’ll probably want to sleep late, anyway, till you get used to the dark. When your hand’s steady you’ll do the filling and decorating of the cakes and buns and such. Mostly I just need a friendly face for the customers, someone to keep the coffee fresh and scrub the pans clean. I expect anyone can do that.”

Marie fights to keep her hands still in her lap, like a schoolgirl. She recalls that Lillian said Johanna has a son—does she speak so imperiously to him? And to her husband, with whom, Lillian noted, she seems to have nothing in common? Perhaps it’s made her lonely, and sharper. Marie resolves to be kind to her, as kind as Lillian probably is.

“Will you be driving here?” Johanna asks. “Sometimes the roads are bad; you’ll want to plan for that to get here in time.”

“Actually, I thought I’d ride, like Lillian,” Marie says. She waves a hand toward the truck, parked outside the front windows. “We brought the bike with us.”

“Speaking of which,” Lillian says. “I’m falling asleep here. I think I’ll head home for a nap, and I’ll leave you the bike, Marie? If you’re planning on showing her the ropes,” she adds to Johanna.

Johanna nods. “I thought we’d go over making some basic loaves, to get her started. Lillian told me you’re a pastry chef, Marie?”

“Sort of.” They follow Lillian out the door and Marie wrangles the blue bicycle from the truck bed. “I baked and decorated cakes for my catering business. But I’ll have to learn the croissants and things, I’m afraid.”

Lillian slams the truck door and leans out the window to brush Marie’s cheek with her lips. “You’ll be fine,” she whispers.

Inside, Johanna lifts the counter gate to let Marie through, and finds her a clean apron. Marie ties it and sighs with happiness at the neatly ordered shelves and the warmth emanating from the oven hulking in the corner. She tails Johanna around the kitchen, feeling that she’s standing too close, that her arms hang awkwardly straight at her sides, but soon the worry disappears as Johanna shows her the loving knack of bubbling the yeast, kneading the dough on the floured counter. The older woman gets a soft smile on her face, as if she hears a favorite tune in her head. “Work it until it reaches the texture of your earlobe,” she says, “and once it rises we’ll punch it back down. Soft, like this.” Marie watches with pleasure as the indentations their knuckles leave in the dough fill back up with slow determination. Together they braid short ropes of bread and brush butter over the nearly-baked crust for a deep auburn glaze.

They work in silence, broken by the occasional customer coming in and tinkling the bell on the door. Johanna introduces her as “Lillian’s friend, visiting from the States,” and Marie begins to realize that the older woman would rather not acknowledge her divorce. As the afternoon climbs, the sun breaks through the clouds and fills the windows

with a bright summery light. Johanna glances outside and says they'll close up early, enjoy the sun.

“How did you end up making cakes?” she asks, when their hands are immersed in dishwater and the soapy warmth fills the bakery with too much silence. Marie likes working side-by-side, though. It's been a long time since she was around an older woman who showed so much life.

“I didn't intend to,” Marie says. “Logan and I moved to Bellingham to work at PAF, where his uncle had a good position. I was bookkeeping so I worked shorter hours than him, and I wanted to put a square meal on the table every day. It was just my mother and I, growing up, so I didn't have a lot of experience cooking for someone else. I took this cooking class, and then a baking class, and you know, I really loved it. I ended up offering to cater a small dinner for someone, last-minute, and it worked out.”

“It must be hard, to be expected to work like that,” Johanna says.

“Well...I hadn't thought about it. My mother always worked. And you have, haven't you?”

“Yes, but I wasn't expected to. Even in a place like this, where everyone must pull their own weight, at first, or perish...we were expected to help with whatever came with homesteading, but not to go out and get a public job.”

“I admire it, then,” Marie says, smiling at her. “What you did.”

Johanna turns away. “So you began a catering business, then? Lillian didn't tell me that.”

“Oh, sort of. It happened by accident. I catered a few dinners and was offered a birthday party, for a ten-year-old, and it went so well that it became a business.” She rubs

at the counter with her thumb in a rag. “I really loved it. Made a special cake for each one. Never a bad birthday, at that age.”

Marie sees two men coming down the sidewalk along the bakery windows, one her age and one Johanna’s. They slow and peer in the window, pretending to cup their hands around their eyes and squint. Johanna smiles and lifts her hand to wave them in but the older man pulls back and strides on past the cafe, no longer looking in, calling something to the other over his shoulder. Johanna lowers her hand in something like embarrassment, which Marie pretends not to notice.

“Sometimes they were a mess, of course,” she continues. “I’d have to hire banjo players or clowns or balloon-tiers, and the couple times they didn’t show I’d try to do some of it myself. Logan didn’t think it would work out. But it did.”

The bell tinkles against the door and the young man comes in.

Johanna had set her to work stacking some of the dishes in the high open shelving above the counter; she stands in her clean stocking feet on one of the chairs, lifting up on her calves to shelve the thin white crockery, looking out the dusty windows at the sun-tilled streets. The man walks right past Marie’s blossoming skirt and she twitches around in surprise, pressing it to the sides of her thighs to keep them from revealing anything. But he barely gives her an upward glance and instead slides open the glass of the pastry box, snatching a lone tart.

“Out,” Johanna says, bringing an armload of dishes up from the drying rack.

“How was your day, Mother?”

“Fine,” she says, stacking the plates under the counter.

So this is the son—Will. His hair is sandy, much darker than Johanna’s must have been, but she can see from here that he has his mother’s eyes. He jerks his chin in the direction of Marie, who is polishing a silver cream pitcher with even strokes of her apron, going over the same place again and again as she watches. “And this one let you do all those by yourself?” he asks.

“Ha!” Marie says—really it is almost a snort—and they both turn to look at her.

Will comes around the counter and takes the remaining dishes from Johanna.

“Close up,” he urges. “I want to walk the newcomer home.”

Marie sees that she is wiping the same vanished thumbprint over and over, and sets the pitcher down.

“I see,” Johanna says. “Marie, this is my son Will. Will, this is Lillian’s sister-in-law—well—her sister-in-law. From Washington.”

“I see,” he says, nodding. He pats his mother on the shoulder and walks over to Marie, gesturing for her hand.

“That’s a nice idea, but I think I’m working,” she says. She looks from Will to Johanna. “Am I?”

“I suppose we’re closed up,” Johanna says. “That’s enough for the first day.”

Will takes Marie’s hand and helps her down from the chair. She doesn’t look at him, bends to slip into her boots. But she turns to Johanna. “Can I do anything else?”

“No.” Johanna gives a curt nod. “I’ll see you in the morning. Eight o’clock.”

“WERE YOU GOING to ask me if I would like to be walked home?” she asks, when they get outside. She glances over her shoulder at Johanna in the window. What a chill, she’d felt leaving.

“I’m actually here on an errand. I’ve been sent to retrieve you to meet Ben and Lillian at the pub. And I thought I’d give you a little tour of the spit.”

“Oh,” she says, taken aback. “Well, thank you. Although I don’t think I’ll get lost.” She gestures at the narrow strip, the scattered buildings.

“Ah. But you don’t know the true Homer. It holds a secret landscape. Beneath its vast exterior. This old thing, for instance,” he says, nudging a rusty pump outside the entrance to a bakery. “It still works occasionally. It worked quite well when I was a kid. This is the site of my appearance in this world. My mother’s water broke right here. Water calls to water.”

“She gave birth to you right here.”

“No,” he says, “of course not. She and my father rode to the hospital.” He points northwest, up toward the hills. “It’s up there on Diamond Ridge. She likes to say that’s the only time she was too lazy to walk somewhere in this town. Fifteen square miles, I think. Land miles. Plus ten or so of water.”

He points to their right, at the squat blue building hulking along the marina. “And that’s where Ben works now, the cannery. Waiting for all us little guys to get in with our haul.”

“They buy from you?”

“Most of us. They do very well. We all do. But there’s always room for expansion. Everyone wants a bigger boat, a heavier haul. Soon they’ll start bringing in

those floating processor barges, and those would hold a crew of a hundred fifty, two hundred men.”

Clouds crowd the sky here and there but great tracts clear for the weak sunshine. Marie feels the cold through her stockings: a clean, wet, salty cold, stopping just short of clamming up the skin. They turn onto the ramp leading to the docks. Marie grasps the railing, smooth from decades of rough hands.

“So what brought you up here?”

She shrugs. “I came to keep Lillian company. Their family is so small and scattered. And since she moved up here I’ve always wanted to visit—my dad worked in this area when I was a girl.”

“So you know her well?”

She hesitates. “Not very well, really. That was why I came.”

*You are bereft of female companionship*—something her mother had said to her when she’d still been married to Logan.

“Is it very different, being here?”

“It didn’t seem so different at first. The gray water, the salmon, the rocks, the Doug firs—it’s like this where I lived with my husband, it’s like this where I grew up with my mother. But there the landscape is part of the city or the town. Cultivated. Here it’s as if the town is camping. It’s impermanent.”

“I can assure you it’s permanent.”

“Of course it is colder in general. The smells are sharper.” She hesitates again. “It’s good to be alone. I’m feeling more myself. I’m trying to figure out what that is.”

“Ah,” he says. “So you’re starting over.”

She looks at him sharply. “I guess it is that simple,” she says.

He shrugs. “My parents did it, coming here. Though I’ll admit, doing it alone takes a nerve. Sometimes I think I’ll do it myself some day.”

“It’s a long way here from Bellingham. I can’t even imagine coming from another country.”

“Well, that was all my dad,” he says. “He thought Reykjavik, the whole country, the fishing, was getting too crowded. He wanted the new frontier. But I don’t think my mother had too much say in it. See, he came right over from Iceland once he convinced my mother to marry him, and he likes to say that if she hadn’t been all dazed from the wedding she never would’ve agreed to it. It took some getting used to for her. When I was a child she was still filled with the fear of the old country.” He laughs.

So that’s it, she thinks. Johanna’s sternness is just way of keeping a firm hand on the till in an unsteady sea. “What sort of fear?”

“Fear of retribution,” he says—he seems mostly joking, she thinks. “The entire Nordic myth system is based on this great fear of consequences. She raised me to believe that it was better to leave that to the rest and just stay out of the line of sight of the gods. Not that literally, I mean—it was more of a principle with her, to not tempt fate. I think my father wore her out. I think she thought that once he made enough money to build the house and save up a cushion that he would get out of fishing, apprentice me to some productive trade on land. She was always encouraging me to build things with my hands. The woods at the end of our street are littered with my attempts at tree forts.”

Three men tromp by, heading down the docks. They are older than Will, bundled into cable-knit sweaters. Will nods at them. “Hey, son,” one of them says. “See you out

there tomorrow.” She watches him fill a bucket and sluice fluorescent blood off the deck of his boat.

“But you loved fishing,” she prompts.

“My father loved fishing. He used to promise her he’d get out of it once he hit thirty, and then forty, but he had the same sickness all the other men at sea have.”

“It seems like a cult here,” she says. “And you have it too.”

“Of course. It’s hard to explain what it’s like.”

“I guess I can’t imagine it, except getting sick.”

“Well, you get used to that. And the wood amplifies all the sounds in the water—currents, whales sometimes, that sort of thing, so your body uses that as a reference point. You hear all the inhabitants of the ocean and that locates you. Steadies you. It’s the only time I ever truly feel there’s an actual planet we’re on. A host.”

He sees her look. “It does get scary sometimes, sure. A different kind of fear though—not like if someone were pointing a gun at you. I think it’s a good thing to feel—it’s more like being at the mercy of those gods, the way my mother always felt. I think it’s the only way I’ll ever feel anything that big.”

She makes a point then of noticing his good looks, the strong foreign beak of a nose, the fair Nordic skin turned ruddy in the wind off the water, the lanky strength that would make Marie, would make any woman, feel small. She thinks that he has probably “described” his work to other women in just this way, that his looks and this story are a surefire tactic for him. But also he does not move to touch her, to put his hand to the small of her back, say, and the only time he takes her arm, to steady her when she wavers

on the rocking dock, his grasp feels sweetly general, as if he is helping a mother or a sister.

“That’s my boat,” he says, pointing toward the gray schooner she’d seen yesterday. “The *Halldóra*. My grandmother’s name.”

“It’s beautiful.” She surveys the clean lines of the bow. The sun strikes the salt-sprayed glass of the cabin windows. The afternoon is radiant, here on the dock with the gulls crying. “Did it used to be your father’s?”

“Yes. Well, it still is, technically. He promised it to me when I was a kid, and this fall he decided it’d be his last season. We longline for halibut in the summer and we like to do a little trolling for king salmon in the winter, so we’ll probably go out together over the next few months. Then he’s going to hand it off to me officially in the spring, if all goes well.”

“Won’t he miss it?” Will frowns. She’s said the wrong thing. “I mean—retired people go through a period of transition, of course—”

“It’ll be an adjustment, for both of them,” he acknowledges. “My mother’s not thrilled, especially since they moved to a smaller place closer to the bakery and left me their house. So I’ve taken over both their domains.” He gives a wistful smile. “My dad practically lived in that boat when I was a kid. I hardly saw him. Ben and I used to think our dads were salmon pirates, when his dad crewed with mine.”

Marie laughs. “A what?”

“You know. When PAF took over all the water from Seattle to the Bering Sea with their giant floating traps, there were groups of fishermen who would go out and raid their traps, take our haul back. Like Robin Hood. They called ’em pirates.”

A wake lifts the boats in a quiet sequence. The center of each swell is a green window to the life below. Somewhere, she hears the men calling to each other, trading laughs and insults.

“Wow,” Marie says. “I had no idea.”

“How could you not? Aren’t you from Seattle? This went on for decades.”

“Bellingham.” She scuffs her boots on the splintered dock. “Actually, my father worked for PAF. He died when I was eight, and my mother sort of refused to talk about him or his work after that. And I guess I stopped being curious after a while.” She shrugs. “That’s not a very good excuse. I’m surprised, to tell the truth, at how many times I’ve already heard PAF mentioned since I got here.”

“It was a pretty big deal here. People shooting at each other and everything,” he says. “I guess it was our civil war. I’m sorry about your father.”

“Thank you.” She squints up at the sky. “Shouldn’t we get to the pub? Are they waiting?”

He flashes a grin. “I forgot. It’s back up by the bakery. Shall we?”

THE SALTY DAWG is a damp, crowded bar, fluttering with thumbtacked dollar bills, part of its ancient and raucous charm. They find Ben and Lillian sitting at a table pulled up to the window.

“Marie!” Lillian waves them over. “Come sit! It’s a celebration!”

“Of what?”

“I felt better than I have in weeks after my nap.” She scoots over to make room, patting an empty chair. “It’s because you’re here.”

She is surprised to see Lillian so jovial, flushed, possibly not even with drink but simply the merriment of being out. Ben—dark-eyed, intense—is flushed too, smiling. He claps Will on the back when he pulls his chair out.

“What did we interrupt?” Marie asks, accepting a beer Will pours from a pitcher.

Lillian drops her voice soberly. “Actually we were talking about it again, the assassination. We were wondering what it was like down in the States. With all those people.”

Lillian says she was listening to *As the World Turns* on the television in the next room while doing the dishes and that she was so shocked when she heard Cronkite’s voice that she dropped the white plate she was sudsing right to the floor. Will says he was on the boat and didn’t even know until he docked and saw the flag on the spit at half-mast. Ben insists he doesn’t even remember, that the day is a strange blur. Lillian says that she ran to find him as the bulletins became more specific, that she, like every other woman, pictured Jackie Kennedy in that car and ran to find their husbands, to make certain that their men were untouched, still safe, that their luck as women still held.

“It was a reminder,” she says, “of how lucky you were.”

“So where were you, Marie?” Ben asks.

In fact she was working, applauding as the birthday boy blew out the last candles on the cake at a particularly sweet children’s party.

“We had the television on to keep the younger kids entertained,” she says.

One of the fathers had turned it to the soap program as a joke, saying that this was what the children loved the most, since they watched it more than anything else at home with their mothers, who delayed getting lunch to the table until the credits were rolling.

“At first everyone was so unbelieving it didn’t even occur to us to turn the children’s faces away.”

Lillian moves one hand to her stomach and pats it gently.

The adults had begun crying, all the women, some of the fathers, and the children were so bewildered by this complete reversal that they cried too, but silently, hopeless and unchildlike. People were crossing and re-crossing the room to turn the television up, to hear again what could not possibly have happened and yet had, to turn the television down to argue about whether it could possibly have happened, to distract the children or usher them out of the room. Marie herself carried the cake into the kitchen without knowing quite what she was to do with it, staring down at the charred tips of eleven green birthday candles, and when she turned she found that all the children had filed after her and gathered round her feet, blinking up at her with wet lashes clustering together. She set the cake on the kitchen table and the children ate pieces with their hands—it was yet unsliced and they simply dug their grubby fingernails in and lifted great gobs to their mouths, chewing with great concentration, learning one of life’s most important lessons: in a tragedy it is food that focuses grief, makes it manageable.

Soon the adult chaos would make itself manageable, divide itself into desperate errands—fathers would carry their children home and tuck them into bed much too early; wives would dash to their husbands’ offices and pat their faces, their still-rounded craniums and shadowed chins, with great relief; brooms and cloths would erase the telltale traces of dishes dropped in kitchens and on neatly arranged coffee tables.

“I suppose it was a little overwhelming,” Marie admits to them, “living somewhere where everyone you meet is probably a stranger. In the days afterward

everyone wanted to tell their story, their *where were you when* story, to every other stranger they met.”

Everyone had an epiphany and had jumped, ferociously, as a dog will not hesitate when it goes in the water after its stick, back into their life and reordered it, remembered what it was supposed to be and made the necessary adjustments. People described it as if it were a bank holdup, or a terrible wait in a stalled elevator for an indefinable period of time. They realized, in the cloistered heat of unfamiliar bodies, fighting down panic and then elation, that they wished they’d given their wife a last kiss goodbye, or thanked their mother for their unmarred childhood, or not sought out that abortion doctor, or started that diet already, or hadn’t deprived themselves for the millionth time of the éclair in the window of the bakery on Everett street, or prepared those divorce papers to be filed by the end of the business day, or slept with their sailing instructor, or not slept with their sailing instructor.

*I realized how short life is*, she remembered her neighbor exclaiming. *I mourned, too, of course, but within a few hours darned if I hadn’t bought those tickets to Bermuda we’d been talking about for years.* Behind her, the neighbor’s husband fingered his white beard and nodded enthusiastically.

And gradually Marie had grown aware that she had not come to a realization, that she had not felt a dread or relief that could be settled on one thing in particular; that she, like the children trailing the cake at the birthday party, holding out their dirty fists and blinking dumb tears from their eyes, felt only a numb bewilderment.

“I understand how you can’t remember where you were,” she says to Ben. “It feels like something we all experienced together. Sometimes when I think back to it I

almost think I heard about it on the car radio, or that I was in the bathtub like my neighbor.”

“Pretty sure it wasn’t that,” Ben says, and they laugh.

In the slow wake of the assassination—and how it changed things, sombered faces, recalled in disbelieving minds the words of that shocking speech just a few short years earlier where he’d said, so simply, that the key to our future on earth would be landing a man on the moon—she’d realized with no small guilt that it hadn’t shaken her life to the core the way it seemed to have done with everyone else. That great upheaval felt natural, as if she were already unsettled, had never settled. She’d almost called Logan—a reaction against the uneasiness this gave her.

She can’t explain that to them; it sounds too callous. She says simply, “I was so glad, after all that, when Lillian called and asked me to come up here.”

She looks at Lillian, radiant in her fecundity, smug in the earned way of a happy mother, a still-loved wife. Her own mother, Marie thinks, must have looked like that once—she can even recall envisioning this future for herself back at her senior prom, when she had no way of knowing how the years would glide by unprotesting. It was the simple wheel of the constellations at night. You drifted off for a moment and they snuck away from their familiar places.

THE STARS HAVE burrowed out when they leave the pub. Marie tilts her head to look up at the great milky swathe across the sky. The earth feels pleasantly unsteady beneath her feet, as if they are on the docks again.

Lillian loops her arm through Marie's and she rubs her cheek against Lillian's shoulder for a moment. She feels Lillian's breath against her face, heavy and moist with the heat of the beer.

"I'm so glad we did this," Lillian sighs. "What a good idea. I've been such a hausfrau."

"You two can't hold your booze," Ben says. "Is the bike at the bakery? I'll toss it in the truck."

"Actually, I think I'll ride back," Marie says. "It's so beautiful. And I could use the air."

"Oh Marie, it's cold!" Lillian calls, hefting herself into the truck's cab.

"I'll walk her," Will says. "She can wear my hat."

"Don't let him get you lost," Ben calls.

The truck trundles off down the spit, crunching pockets of snow.

"Damn," Will says. "We should've given them the bike."

"It's okay," she says. "This way if a bear comes you can distract it while I escape."

They walk slowly, wheeling the blue bicycle between them. Their breaths plume ahead of them. For much of the time they are silent. The moonlight reveals that the road here is bordered by river rocks. Every few steps small red flowers cluster together in the crannies of the rocks, little flags. The spokes of the bicycle make a comfortable clicking sound whenever they encounter a patch of weeds. When the bike hits a rut between them and the chain slips off the front wheel, Will bends to fit it back on. His hand slips beneath the frame and clasps her ankle. Briefly she feels the heat of his palm, the reassuring

pressure through the thick cotton of her stocking. She looks down, looks him in the eye, and then he lets go and they both look away, straighten, begin walking again. That's all. That's enough.

### III.

THE DECISION THAT married Marie was made on the night of her prom, which was held in her neighborhood's church in 1955. She waited for Logan, leaning against the bottom post of the staircase railing. Her dress was midnight blue, its décolletage cut by a sweetheart neckline fashioned by her mother's hand, her neck strung with pearls from her mother's throat. Her mother waited in the armchair by the door. She had met Logan before and she maintained that he would grow up to be a perfectly well-off boar of a man, always slightly blind and slightly frustrated, connected like all local men to the canneries or the fishing boats. All the towns there had been made wealthy by the canneries, maws open to feed off the Puget Sound salmon flux.

She was just shy of her eighteenth birthday. Her body felt this acutely, she remembers. Her limbs, stretching in the backseat of Logan's new Chevy, felt so fine-skinned and full of promise that she could dew them with her mother's pearls and watch each one roll down in a straight line, undeterred by imperfections of any kind. The spring winds coming in the open windows stirred not the slightest hint of gooseflesh. She thought her body knew what it should do; she thought and it acted and later, many years later, tonight even, she still regretted that all her senior prom meant had been this, that all her lovely dress was good for was draping over the rearview mirror to keep the lights from the church out.

Later that night she told her mother that Logan had an uncle in production quality at Pacific American Fisheries in Bellingham, where her own father had started out, and that after graduation in a few days they would marry and go to work. Her town was the

farthest north she'd ever been. His sister was Lillian, whom Marie had known but not well, and she used her name in the argument with her mother: that Lillian, who was beautiful and could only be successful, had done the same thing a few years earlier: run off with a handsome man to the booming fishing industry in Alaska. It was the way of a small town, the way of a body in youth, she knows now.

And her mother gave in, knew better than to combat the wills of the body. *Maybe if your father was here*, she began, but that was all; she had no other sway over her daughter.

Their marriage was a fairly standard one, as she understood it: the heated car windows on the night of their senior prom, the promise of a future in a town far from their lonely high school, then the long hours of factory work, the rapid dwindling of sex and touching and affectionate conversation. In fact, when she looked at the marital wastelands of many of her friends, she considered herself lucky; if anything, she and Logan had grown closer because of the long difficulty and boredom of marriage and lower-middle-class life. If they had nothing else but a bowl of soup together on the couch at the end of another day, it was a reason to feel solidarity. She wondered, sometimes, if she was doing this all wrong, without the model of her parent's marriage to use. Her father was absent most of the summer—salmon season—and home most of the winter, but when she tried to envision him sitting on the couch with her mother, or helping himself to a glass of milk in the kitchen, or even tucking her into bed at night, her mind played only a curiously blank loop of memories, blurred and unspecific.

Occasionally she and Logan had sex that was sweaty and unifying and made each of them think, for the duration, that the act itself was enough a foundation for a life

together. Marie, at least, felt the urge to rub her nose against his before they pulled away, thinking, my partner. Partnership was satisfactory. Mostly they were sweatless and perfunctory, each waiting their turn for the bathroom in their morning slippers, hanging their keys on the key ring beside the back door. Logan handled the bills that accumulated on the sideboard in the dining room. Marie generally put the meals on the table; she had become a good cook early on but sometimes the sheer weight of the day kept her from lighting the gas burners for anything but tea.

Just what that weight was was anyone's guess. Another bit of luck: the occupation of her days. She didn't have to mope around the house filling hours, as did the well-off wives of her acquaintance; neither did she have to slog through an eight-hour day alongside her husband at the cannery, as she had when they first moved here. Marie spent each week planning and putting on the birthday parties. Her methods varied with her clientele, but the check was always enough to stock the fridge, and over time became enough to ensure a certain freedom, though she never believed she was planning any escape.

The cooking classes she'd taken in Bellingham to occupy her time and fulfill her new obligation as a wife had stirred such a strange hope in her. She learned to whisk the béchamel and plate tiny gorgeous landscapes of food, and after hosting a few taste-testing dinner parties, she found herself accepting offers to cater, informally and then more formally, to friends and associates. As Logan garnered years and promotions at the cannery, Marie found that she was able to leave her job and its busy hours to focus exclusively on children's birthday parties—always the most successful of her catering attempts.

Whatever their religion, whatever the furnishings in their middle-class housings, whatever problems their parents were having, openly or in separate states, all of her children reacted to the candles on the cake with the same gap-toothed little dinosaur smiles. She arranged for balloons, balloon animals, clowns, magicians, accordion players, pajama party favors, Shetland ponies. She led sing-alongs, supervised donkey-tail pinnings, braided beads and feathers into the flaxen hair of innocents. She baked each cake with a picture of the birthday boy or girl in her mind, polka-dotted yellow icing or sculpting creamed turrets with a dreamy half-smile tugging her lips. Other women's children: they were so adorable, so vulnerable, given to strange fits and whims, so polite and obnoxious by turns—she couldn't imagine having the audacity to have a child of her own, having the strength to keep it safe from the cars on the road and the many invisible pathogens and lies in this world, to trust sitters and doctors, to trust, even, her own husband. She dreamed and dismissed dreams with her baking and icing and assumed she would one day feel prepared, feel a change.

And anyway, there was always a moment, the moment after Marie flipped the lights out and before she led them in the birthday song, the hesitation when they opened their mouths in the dark and the candlelight bathed the children's faces in a light that was warm and ancient, where she felt she was exactly where she ought to be. Contentment is a clever scaffolding, building itself cunningly and leisurely: rooted laurels that become easy to rest on and difficult to remove.

The divorce was a surprise, to Marie at least. Their sexual routine was simple and infrequent; she hardly thought of it as the potential deciding factor in their remaining together. She did not look much to anything further and assumed that, after several years

of marriage, Logan didn't either. He made advances seldom enough that she was usually willing to accept (sometimes with a readiness that she found reminiscent of their high school years, a resemblance that made her at once nostalgic and curiously envious of her mother, who, having lost her husband, had only the memory of perfect lust and not the pang of its intermittent and lusterless returns). Theirs was a marriage marked not by sharp words but by an almost tender indifference. He'd gone early to a life of hard work, and she'd discovered just as quickly a passion for her own job that outshadowed most else in her life. The only time she ever really felt, with embarrassment, that her life was a pale imitation was when she visited her mother, that mirror.

When one evening she brushed him off he sat back against the faded green velvet of the loveseat and said, "Ward told me the other day that he and his wife haven't slept together in twenty-two months and so he goes to a massage parlor every Thursday."

"A massage parlor," she repeated. Ward and his wife were friends from the cannery; Marie had thrown their son's seventh birthday party only a few weeks ago.

"Where they finish you off," he said, and made a rude face, sucking his cheeks in and opening his mouth with a pop.

"To each his own," Marie said, and turned the television off. "I'm going to bed."

"The point is," Logan said, "that's just the part he wasn't too embarrassed to tell me about."

"What is that point, exactly?"

"That you reach a certain limit, Marie. Where the sanctity of marriage seems laughable enough to make a Thai woman's mouth look holy. You know what I told him? That it sounds like a good deal."

“You’re crude.” She snatched up his empty beer can and went into the kitchen. Her hand shook when she set the can on the counter. When he didn’t follow her she went back out into the living room. He had switched off the lamp and only the light from the kitchen fell on his face.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I know we never talked about what we would do if it was like this all the time.”

He was silent.

“What does Ward propose you do? Does he get a finder’s fee at the massage parlor? Is he trying to get up the courage to leave his wife?”

“It’s not courage,” he said. “What leaving takes—it’s not courage.” He patted the cushion beside him. “Come sit next to me.”

She sat.

“We have to work out some practical arrangements,” he said.

When he opened his mouth to continue she said, “Let’s just get a divorce, Logan.”

“The hell with that, Marie. That’s not an option.”

“Why not?” she asked. When his mouth set she wondered if she’d hurt him. “It’s on the news. Couples are getting divorced every day. Nobody wants to stay together.”

“That’s what you want to be like,” he said, disbelieving. “One of those women out in the bars, looking for the next husband, same age as last time.”

“Who do you want to be like?” she asked. “Ward? If that’s where we’re headed, I don’t want it.”

“It’s hardly any different than how we live now,” he said. “Anyway, I’m not saying that’s what I want to do.”

“I can’t do that, Logan,” she said. “You don’t understand. I would be humiliated to be Ward’s wife. Having his indiscretions passed around the factory. I hope to God you keep yours to yourself.”

“Now that’s not fair,” he said. “I never stepped out on you.”

She looked down and rubbed her arms.

“And I could say the same for you,” he continued.

“No, you couldn’t,” she said. And looking at him, at his eyes fixed on the carpet, she softened. “You wouldn’t, anyway.”

Logan ran a hand over his head—he still had a thick straw-colored thatch of hair; they were in their prime; she could not for the life of her remember that—and she caught his hand when it came down.

“We’ve made a mockery of this marriage,” she said, earnestly. “Let’s just end it.” She couldn’t deny that in this moment she saw her own bank account, a vision of checks piled neatly in a little vault; the door was open, the world vast and exciting and waiting. Then the vision cleared; she let go of his hand when she realized, again, that her own was shaking.

Logan did not concede that night, and she let it drop, but the following week he came home early from work with a paper on which some instructions for seeking a divorce were printed. She didn’t ask where he’d gotten it. The divorce took the better part of a year, and she moved back to her mother’s house, where her mother’s decline became shockingly apparent.

Lillian had called Logan before Marie, to ask if Marie would come to Homer. The first time she was pregnant, when they were all much younger, Lillian had visited for a

month. When she left, Marie promised to come for the final months of the pregnancy. Of course, Lillian miscarried soon after, and there'd been no mention of a visit the second time she became pregnant—a pregnancy that was even more short-lived than the first. Marie assumed they'd stopped trying.

And then Logan called—the first she'd heard from him since the divorce.

“She said she wanted to do it right this time, the way she always planned,” he told her. “And that includes you.”

She could envision Lillian's shaky smile. “But I can't,” she said. “It's too strange for me to come. I get dirty looks just being a divorced woman here. How much worse will it be in your own family's house?”

“You don't want to go at all?”

“That isn't even the point, Logan—”

“You know what Ben said? He said, ‘we all need a change.’”

“Profound.”

But she'd never been so far north. Snowy mountain peaks loomed in her mind, irresistibly.

“Let her get used to you,” he said. “Give her comfort. She needs it. It won't matter, how we turned out.”

“That's a terrible idea,” she insisted.

But the peaks, looming. She went.

SHE IMAGINES, LYING awake that night, trying to explain the dissolution of her marriage to Lillian. She becomes aware of a scratching at the door, gentle but impatient. She gets up to let find Molly the white dog outside the door.

“What are you doing down here?” she whispers.

Molly licks her lips and wags her tail. She follows Ben around all day, even to the cannery, and keeps her nose close to Lillian’s heels when she shuffles around the kitchen, but she hasn’t paid Marie much heed.

“You want to keep me company? I could use some company.”

She pats the bed. Molly vaults up and settles at the base of the bed. Marie scrunches her feet up and turns her face to the window. She hears a creaking from the room upstairs and wonders if she’s destined to hear another reminder of Ben and Lillian’s passion for each other.

How could Lillian comprehend it, even if Marie were to try to explain? The very happiness and simplicity that marks her marriage is what keeps her from understanding Marie’s position. Impossible, to explain that her marriage bed had been as free from passion as the one she shared with Molly tonight. Impossible, to explain that the divorce was one of the few decisions she and Logan made together, one of the few decisions that did them any good. Impossible, to explain to Lillian Will’s hand on her ankle. Explain that the whole world opened up.

At her feet Molly heaves an arduous sigh.

“I know, girl,” Marie says.

#### IV.

THE NEXT FEW days pass easily, as Lillian spends most of her hours in bed, though she complains it is impossible to sleep, and Marie gets used to Johanna's chilly rhythm. She looks for signs of the fear Will said beat in his mother's heart, but all she sees is what she would call a stiffness. She is slow to smile but quick to scold, if Marie makes a mistake. She does reveal much affection for Lillian, but never gushes in the same way, never reaches for an embrace. Still, seeing the proud tilt of Johanna's chin as she surveys Lillian when she stops by makes Marie miss her own mother, in the days before Marie married: the way her mother reprimanded her in one breath and kissed her the next, the dresses her mother sewed for each dance.

Johanna's husband comes in, one morning, when Johanna is in the back room. Marie has not yet met him and before he introduces himself he orders a blueberry scone and looks her up and down, at her hair pulled into a twist and her flour-printed apron. Finally he gives her a kind smile and leans across the counter.

"How's it going?" He lowers his voice. "I hear she's terrible to work with."

He looks like Will, she realizes. The eyes are darker, but the nose, the way he fills the room—these are the same.

"Pretty bad," she agrees, as Johanna comes out. "But I hear her husband's even worse."

"You've warned her about me," he accuses Johanna.

She shrugs. "Word gets out. Andres, this is Marie. Now don't distract her. I need her to get the scones out of the oven."

Pulling the rack out, Marie watches them: Andres leaning over the counter, Johanna scrubbing at a spot beside the till. She seems indifferent to his charms, the good weather he brings into the room. Marie supposes you would be, after decades of marriage. Perhaps Logan was charming too, and she never noticed. But then, look at Ben and Lillian. They smile at each other like no one else is in the room.

She thinks about that when she goes home in the afternoon. Lillian is propped up on the loveseat, reading. She holds up the red cover when Marie comes in and switches on the lamp: *The Feminine Mystique*.

“Have you read this?”

Marie drops next to Lillian. “Sure,” she says. “It made the rounds with my friends back home.”

Lillian makes a face. “I’m only on the second chapter. You know, I believe that all these women are unhappy, but I don’t think I can relate. And I resent being told that what I have isn’t good enough.”

“I think it’s a little different, being up here,” Marie says. She uses her heels to pry off her boots and they hit the floor with a gratifying clunk.

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe you would feel stifled back in the States, where it’s easier to have all the things you’re supposed to want. But you have to work harder here, for everything. And that makes it more satisfying.”

“I think I would be perfectly satisfied not working at the bakery, if Ben made enough to take care of me and the baby.” Lillian places the book facedown on her knees

and folds her arms over it. “And that’s suddenly bad, right? But maybe I’m wrong. Maybe I would be unhappy.” She cocks her head at Marie. “Were you?”

Marie laughs, nervously. “Well, I loved my work. I would have gone crazy keeping the books at PAF, and I think I would have gone crazy just staying home. But that was—I might have felt differently, if I hadn’t married so young.”

“Or if you hadn’t married Logan?” Lillian taps a finger against the book’s cover. “You were the age I was when I married Ben.”

Marie shrugs. “Yes, I suppose that was the heart of it. We just didn’t have—we didn’t have anything to talk about. We weren’t the way you and Ben are.”

“I’m sorry,” Lillian says, “I just can’t imagine it.”

“Be grateful for that.”

It was the way Ben kissed Lillian when he came home, without even thinking about it, as he did that evening. That ease, the unconscious need for closeness. If you had it, of course you couldn’t see how others didn’t. Impossible, for the fulfilled to imagine an absence they’ve never had.

AS SHE’S CLOSING up the next day—her last, before her Sunday off—Will comes in.

Again he goes straight to his mother and kisses her cheek before turning to ask, “Walk you home, Marie?”

She’s beginning to get a picture of herself, coming in faintly but steadily: a young woman, a stranger, coming into a small town and presenting something, a sort of receptiveness, which they were not used to but which changed the currents in the town, brought to the surface items long unconsidered. She’s never thought of herself like this

before, as an instrument of change. She feels a kinship with Mount Augustine, spreading its ash through the town.

Will asks her how her job is going, whether she and Johanna find much to talk about.

“Why wouldn’t we?”

“Not much in common?” he says. “She’s known the same people for most of her life. I think it’s hard for her to imagine a life outside of Homer anymore. Of course, she had to get to know Lillian, but that was easier, Lillian was married to someone she knew. She practically raised Ben. Ben’s mother practically raised me.”

“We talk about plenty,” she says, though this is not exactly true. She knows he’ll understand this. “I like working there. All that baking reminds me of the good things about being back home. We talk about that sort of thing. What do you talk about?”

“She tells me fishing’s an unsafe livelihood and that she hears the sea’s running out of fish. And I tell her I’m lucky on each count. Then she berates my father for consigning me to this life. It’s our tradition.”

“I met your father yesterday,” she says. She pulls her hood up; the sky’s underbelly has gone leaden with unshed snow.

“He give you a hard time?”

“He said your mother was terrible. She flapped a dishrag at him.”

Will laughs. “Sounds like him. He’s seemed a little off lately. I think he’s a little down about not fishing anymore.”

“I don’t suppose you’re going to banish him from the boat.”

“I just can’t imagine what it would be like, to know it can’t be your livelihood anymore.”

She thinks back to what Lillian said about Ben, thinking his leg would get used to the rolls of the boat, his luck would change.

“Did Ben want to fish, before the polio?”

Will flexes his grip on his side of the handlebars. “We all did. It’s what you expect, growing up here. It’s a birthright. But we didn’t talk about it, after he got better.” He glances over at her, a warning. “Don’t bring it up to him.”

“No,” she says. “I wouldn’t.”

When they get to the house, Will comes in with her, and Lillian invites him to stay for drinks. Ben will be home any minute, she says, and tomorrow’s his day off.

Drinks turn into dinner, a roast chicken and squash from the cellar. Ben and Will get into a lively argument about the price of halibut, whether it will stay the same or skyrocket next season. Ben stretches his crippled leg out in front of him, brushing Lillian’s beneath the table. Marie refills their drinks, reaching into the freezer for a handful of ice. An arm reaches alongside her, Will’s; she feels him standing close behind her.

“I’m glad you came in,” she says. “You should walk me home more often.”

DECEMBER CLIMBS TOWARD the solstice. The nights get darker, stay long unwelcome hours. Sometimes it gets to her, the uncertain gloom she feels upon waking every day to the dark of a night not yet lifted, but by the time she’s jolting over ruts on the blue bicycle on her way to the bakery she feels content, and as the afternoon hours begin to while

away until the time when the bell on the door signals Will's arrival she feels downright excited. Will walks her home every day he's on land. At first Lillian teased her about it, but when she saw the way Marie flushed and turned away she began to hold her tongue and, Marie can see, worry.

Marie herself feels less worry each day. The bread rises beautifully under her hands, Lillian's due date approaches without mishap, and Marie finds an ease with Will she's never achieved with other friends. The country is still young and wild enough to make her feel like a homesteader, arriving by train or wagon and taking her chances, surviving that first hard winter and emerging—there—into the spot of bright light that means she will make it, she is transformed. Alaska's wildness is not strangely paradisiacal, as she had expected in secret. It is not bountiful, yielding to those deserving; it is itself hungry, lean, laying out its own snares and waiting. It has not long to wait; Alaska is a dream-state, she thinks, where selves come to be realized—and they always come. Every person here—Johanna, Lillian—came seeking something.

It occurs to her that she has engaged in this place, this time, with the thorough fervor of a tourist. A vacationer, a young camper on her first delicious excursion from both the view and purview of kind but watchful parents. She finds herself filing away moments to pull out later, back in some dull but content routine. The sudden thrum of a grouse bursting from cover when she's lost in the pleasurable work of weeding Lillian's garden, the first really spectacular gathering of storm clouds extinguishing the light outside the bakery window, an easy laugh of Will's at something she said over the handlebars of the bike that makes her think *I've gotten to know this person somehow*—such quiet moments establish themselves with the brilliance of treasured memories and

an immediacy that startles her. It's as if her brain takes out a pen and jots down, *I must remember this*. It is treacherous behavior, this unconscious safekeeping, for its effect is to jolt her into wondering what on earth she'll do when the baby is born, when Lillian grows accustomed to its schedule and turns an eye again to her husband and her job, when Marie herself is unballasted by either.

Meanwhile, more and more these memories add up to Will, to his strong frame just on the other side of the blue bicycle, the practical warmth in his stories, the picture it makes altogether in her mind: of the flesh and blood and scent and dreams of a figure who has become more real to her than the rest of the world, who somehow occupies a space previously filled by mother, lover, husband, those intimate figures looming largest. How they fall away and become indistinct, replaceable. This secret expands in her at night, buoying up and coming to rest gently on the underside of her ribs; in the dark when she has no sight to anchor her thoughts she turns involuntarily to this new, secret, second life. It is accompanied by its twin, guilt, but then like all involuntary movements it is a reflex and easily explained—for, as Johanna says one day in the tone that suggests she knows everything, “It is simple how a man and a woman are attracted to each other.”

She says this with her usual disapproval and she says it about The Salty Dawg's barmaid, Rosa Carsten, and her new, younger beau, Simon, but there is an edge to her voice that makes Marie pause in her sweeping. As comfortable as their routine has become in the short weeks she's been here, it is the shortness of those very weeks that are stacked against her, ready to render her a newcomer all over again in one swipe.

Finally Marie says, “Come off it, didn't you and Andres make sparks with your big courtship?”

“Make sparks?”

“Set tongues wagging. I know you were both handsome. I’m sure you were the talk of the town back in Iceland, bigger even than Rosa and Simon.” Marie resumes sweeping and dares to look behind her, where Johanna is stacking pans in the sink.

“Ridiculous.” Johanna’s accent comes out thick and the tone of disapproval is not feigned, but she is startled, Marie can see out of the corner of her eye, into a genuine smile.

“And I suppose your son finds himself the talk of the town often enough, as well,” she says carefully.

A stony clatter of pans. Marie sweeps herself into a corner where Johanna won’t have to look at her for a minute. She is surprised herself, at her own daring. If she didn’t have someone to laugh with about this she would be embarrassed. But she has Will.

“TONGUE WAGGING,” HE repeats when she recounts the exchange for him. They are walking to Lillian’s, wheeling the blue bicycle between them. He shakes his head. “My mother seems to think she’s the only one who should be allowed to do that. She really doesn’t like when I’m the subject.”

Marie has noticed, has fretted about this.

“She’s a tough old bird,” Will says. He lifts his broad hand from the handlebars and places it on Marie’s, settles fingers between fingers, smiles sideways at her. “She’ll survive.”

This is the first time he kisses her, across the bicycle. She can feel the cold bars pressing against her thighs, the rough scrub of his unshaven cheek against hers. It is just

dark enough, in the lane, that if Lillian were to peer out the window she wouldn't see the way Will takes his hand from the bar and grasps the back of Marie's neck, the way Marie leans into him, as though the bike isn't there.

"Do that again tomorrow?" she asks, leaning the bike against the porch. She sees the flash of his smile in the dusk, watches him fade down the lane. She likes this, the pace of it; it feels like high school. But she is a divorcée, being courted again, something she hadn't thought possible only weeks ago. What had she thought possible?

The question doesn't bother her, standing outside the door in the fast-descending dark. Whatever had filled the empty days hardly matters, now. Now they are full. She takes a deep breath and the night air feels full of secrets, of promise. She feels an owl pass above her and turns to watch it glide, no rustling of wings to give it away. She will try to be like that, to keep it secret, to pass unnoticed in the night. It's a gift to herself, this secret.

BUT SECRECY IS difficult to attain, here.

Marie spends so much of her time with Lillian, who reminds her, now, of nothing so much as a mother duck, waddling around the house as if a serene wake follows her every move, washing up against kitchen chairs and pearled drawer handles. She shifts her massive stomach and behind with each step, until Marie tells her to quit bustling around the house and take to bed rest.

At times it's a strange position. At first she felt like a guest in their house, chatting with Lillian over coffee at the table and falling silent when Ben came home, happy to change her own sheets and plump her own pillow and grateful for any privacy afforded

her in the little downstairs bedroom, once a sewing room. Now she brings Ben supper in the living room and mops his footprints off the clean tiled kitchen floor. She sits at Lillian's side in bed and tucks the covers around her chin or pulls them down to the hipbones, no longer visible, depending on Lillian's complaints of heat or chill. She's the last one to turn out the lights and savors closing her own door, submerging her head in her pillow, pretending, *This is mine, this is my own space.*

The fact is she has always lived in someone else's house, and nowhere has she felt this more acutely.

When Marie lets herself in the night Will kisses her, Lillian turns a knowing eye on her.

“Another walk with Will, then?”

“He's—yes,” Marie says, flustered. So her comings and goings are not—not nearly—as private as she imagined. It hasn't occurred to her before now to hide any part of her life here; in fact she felt nearly invisible. She stiffens as she imagines all the eyes that could possibly be on her. Her daily endeavor, her step both quick to hope and hesitancy, is an entertainment show to the great jumbled family of Homer. To smile at or cluck their tongues over.

“He just walks me home,” she explains that first time, taking a breath. “He comes in to see Johanna and we walk home together, since your house is on the way.”

It is true but Lillian makes it seem like lies, the mild way she turns away and puts her hand on her belly.

“All right.”

BUT THE VERY next night, when Will drops her off at the porch, kissing her farther down the lane, in further darkness, holding on more tightly, Lillian has more to say.

Marie fills the tub when she comes in, and helps Lillian into the bath. The time has come when even in bed the pain persists; Lillian feels ungainly and aching all the time. The doctor has told her that the ligaments have loosened in her pelvic joints—“just preparation for labor,” Lillian assures Marie when she makes a face—and that’s why she has so much trouble walking.

“Oh,” she sighs as her heavy feet slide in, “that feels so nice. I know it’s not for another few weeks but I feel like I’m going to pop any minute.”

Marie, left holding the robe, folds it over the chair in the bathroom. “Do you want to me to—soap your back, or anything?”

Lillian looks up, briefly. “No,” she says. “Thank you.” She leans forward until her breasts, heavy and pointed, are submerged. They look tribal, Marie thinks. She can see where the thin gold chain of Lillian’s necklace, a cross, left a red line in the fold at the back of her neck. She sighs again.

On her way out she hears Lillian say her name.

“Hm?”

“Are you seeing him? Will?”

She hesitates in the doorway.

“I’m sure you think it’s none of my business,” Lillian says, lifting her head. “But it is. You just divorced my brother. And you’re staying in my house. I don’t mean to be harsh, but that doesn’t look very good, even way up here, if you’re running around with someone else.”

Marie stiffens. “We’ve been divorced for months, Lillian.”

“I’m not saying anything you don’t know.”

Marie comes to sit in the chair beside the tub. “Does it really matter to *you*? If I’m trying to be happy after going through a divorce? I loved your brother, you know. But like I said, not everyone’s like you and Ben. I think we got married just to get out of that neighborhood. We tried for a long time to make it work. It’s not that I’m flighty.”

Lillian drops her head and shrugs. “I believe you,” she says. “I’m not trying to be cruel. But you *have* to know by now that Will’s had plenty of girlfriends.”

Marie listens to the water sloshing in the tub.

“I’ve heard,” she says. “It doesn’t matter. We’re hardly seeing each other.” She has gone over these words each night in her head and still, she notes, they sound childish and hesitant.

“What’s more,” Lillian says, “I don’t think he’ll ever get married until he finds someone Johanna approves of. And I don’t see that happening, frankly.”

“Again, it isn’t—”

Lillian reaches out and puts her hand on Marie’s arm. A swell rides up to the faucet. “I just don’t want to see you made a fool of,” she says. They hear the sound of the kitchen door opening and Marie moves to get up.

Lillian lowers her voice and says urgently, “I don’t want you to get in over your head. I’m sure it must be very hard to be divorced, but don’t make any mistakes.”

Ben calls out, “Anyone home?”

“I’m in the bath,” Lillian shouts. To Marie she says, “You could talk to me, you know. I don’t want you to feel like you have to hide anything.”

Marie looks away, feeling shy and cold. The feeling from her old life has come back to her—or she has not yet escaped it—that she must not disclose too much of herself, that she must keep shuttered all that she would not give away outright. “Of course,” she says.

“But you’ll take my advice?”

Marie hesitates. “I understand what you mean, but there’s nothing to worry about.”

Lillian scans her face and relaxes, withdrawing her hand. Then she laughs. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I’ve gotten your arm all wet.”

LILLIAN’S ADVICE HAS put her on edge. She can’t shake the feeling. Will doesn’t come the following day; he’s out fishing, though the water’s rough, and Johanna seems grumpy with the knowledge. When Marie returns home Lillian is pleasant, their conversation forgotten or carefully stowed away. At the sight of her open face, round now and always flushed (full of a brightness that comes, Marie supposes, with certainty of purpose), Marie feels her hold on her own irritation slipping away.

“Look at me,” Lillian sighs, lolling from side to side on her bed’s heavy coverlet. “Ben’s never going to touch me again.”

“I doubt that,” Marie teases. “You seem to have an exciting life in the—in the bedroom, after all these years.”

Lillian blushes; even her neck and arms blotch red. “Well—yes, I do think that’s—important—to a marriage.”

“Oh come on, Lillian, I’ve known you forever, I remember when you and Ben met. You were all over each other. And it worked out well.”

Lillian fans her fingers across the bedspread. “Is that why you and Logan got married? Just a circumstance like that, that didn’t work out so well?”

“Not because it was so great,” Marie laughs. “Just because it happened. I can laugh about it now, but that’s awful, isn’t it. Getting stuck in a marriage for the rest of your life just because of that.” She pauses, studies Lillian’s face. Lillian looks away. “I don’t mean to speak ill of him. I was just so *stupid* when I was a girl. I just wanted to get out of my mother’s house.”

“I just can’t imagine being with someone else,” Lillian says softly.

“You’ve never thought about it?”

She shakes her head. “It seems so wrong. Just the thought of it makes me want to die. I think that—once you do that, be with someone else, it would change you. Turn you into the kind of woman you never thought you’d be.”

“Well, what I *can* imagine is being alone. I saw my mother alone every day. And that seems wrong. That’s not what I want.”

“I think you need to take your time,” Lillian says carefully. “It’s not high school anymore.”

Shouldn’t that make it better, Marie wants to ask. Make it easier. But no, she knows the answer: the stakes are higher now. They are weaker. Gone is the infallibility of youth.

SOMETIMES SHE THINKS in the night, Am I crazy? The first real friendship she can name since she's been married, and she's jeopardizing it for high school kisses, the way his hair smells always of salt.

*You are bereft of female companionship.*

But there is not enough room for her, certainly not enough for her and Ben and the baby. The baby is due January eighteenth, days of terrible cold, days when the kitchen in Lillian's house will be warm and crowded and full of joy. She thinks of Will's tall frame, the boat he says he'll take her on, the house she has not yet seen. She has a hunch there is plenty of room there, plenty of room.

SHE REMEMBERS THAT she saw herself as an instrument of change, a new force that could disturb what was concealed in the hearts of the townsfolk, and now she sees how that change could be sour. Johanna comes to work late one day; straightening up behind the counter, Marie sees her arguing with Andres around the corner of the bakery, just visible through the side window. She can only tell from the way Johanna shakes her head back and forth, the way Andres hangs his. The wind, steady today, takes the sound from their mouths. What could you fight about, she wonders, when you've been together so long. Surely you'd grow used to whatever was the matter, by now.

Johanna is brisk inside, bustling with an energy Marie would have mistaken for cheer if she hadn't caught the glimpse of its true source through the window.

"That man," she says, shaking her head at Andres' retreating form. Marie would have searched for affection in her tone, before, but now she wonders if the note is sweet with scorn. "You know, all the boys in town wanted him for their father. They think he's

lenient but wise. He makes it look like he always knows what he's doing. Tell me about your father, Marie. What was he like?"

"I don't remember him that well, honestly," she says, folding and refolding her rag. Will must have told his mother that her father is dead; she hasn't mentioned it.

"Was he quiet, like you? Boisterous, like Andres?"

"He was very kind," she says slowly. "I don't remember him and my mother ever fighting. I remember that my mother was happy. I remember thinking that I wanted to get married when I grew up, too."

Johanna moves as if to hug her but draws back, pulls her apron on instead. She goes home early that day, with a headache.

Later, Will appears in the doorway as Marie puts away the till, her last chore.

"Where's my mother?" he asks.

"She went home early."

"What? She's never done that in her life."

"Well, she's never had an employee she trusted as much as me."

He laughs.

"Actually, she looked a little sick. Should we check on her?"

"I'll give her a ring later. She doesn't like people to see her sick. You look a little funny yourself," he says when she closes the door behind them. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Mm-hmm, yes." Then she confesses, "I'm not sure what to say. I had a strange talk—"

“I would have come by earlier,” he says. “My father and I have been planning this trip, a sort of pre-season farewell trip together.”

“That sounds nice.”

“Nothing fancy. I think he’s feeling a little out of sorts at the idea of retiring, and I got the idea we could do something fun before he hands over the title.” He closes his hand over hers, briefly, on the handlebar nearest her. “Other than that, I don’t think you’ll find that much has changed. I thought I’d show you my house today. Since you haven’t seen it yet.”

They walk more slowly today—making decisions, she thinks. Part of her hopes Will doesn’t have his mind made up. Part of her hopes he does.

His house—the house Andres built for Johanna; Marie can’t help picturing them here together, young—is a two-story cottage, shingled and weathered and full of peaks. He leans the bike against the stair railing and ushers her through the door with a hand on her back.

“What if the neighbors see?” she whispers on her way through.

He looks around. “Does it matter? Nothing stays a secret here for long.”

“Do you want the tour?” he asks. “This is the grand foyer my father built. Four feet by five, as you can see. And this is—” he leads her through a doorway to their right—“is the kitchen, which my father built overlooking the bay since my mother spent so much time in here baking.”

The living room has little furniture in it, well-weathered chairs and a low gray table hewn from driftwood. The windows display the black winter waters of the bay and a few winking lights from the spit, almost blue through the afternoon fog as it rolls in.

“Do you want to see the upstairs?” he says, not looking at her. “Or maybe we should save that for another day.”

“No,” she says. She is proud of her tone, its firmness. “Later.”

He cocks a sideways grin at her. “Good girl.”

“It’s not just that,” she says. “Lillian gave me a lecture last night. She asked if I was seeing you.”

“And?”

“I said I wasn’t, really. I didn’t know what to say.”

“I don’t either, to tell the truth.”

“Is that all?”

He tilts his head to look down and meet her eyes. “I won’t lie, it’s a little strange that you spend the most time with my mother and the sister of your ex-husband,” he says. “But there’s no reason it should matter. I don’t see why this should be a secret, except for privacy’s sake, which seems unreasonable to ask for in such a small town anyway.”

She burrows her head in his neck to contain her happiness and he pulls her closer. But after a moment she says, “She said not to make a fool out of myself, that you’d—courted a lot of girls.”

“I don’t see how that’s her business.”

“I didn’t, either—but she was looking out for me. I think she worried that we were—well, doing this. Which I assured her we weren’t. And she didn’t want me left high and dry.”

“Now what kind of thing is that to say?” he asks.

“And I think your parents suspect, and they don’t like it. They don’t want you picking up damaged goods. Your mother’s been acting strange with me, I’m sure of it. And your father avoids the bakery.

“You’re being paranoid,” he says, kissing the top of her head. “Lillian’s still got too much stateside prim and proper in her, she’s got you all wound up. Come to dinner in a few days, I’ll have my parents over. You can get to know them outside of work. You’ll see that it’s all in your head. Saturday, so you have the next day off.”

“And in the meantime?”

“In the meantime,” he says, “we’ll keep doing this. Agreed?”

## V.

EVERY OTHER DAY Marie washes and sets her hair, lingering in the warm amber light of the bathroom, standing on a chair and angling her body this way and that to see it anew through the steam. This is the only time she takes for herself these days. She cleans the mudroom after Ben's boots, crafts vegetable dumplings for Lillian's queasy stomach, braids her friend's hair loosely when she complains of a headache, rings up flaky pastries with the same dopey smile for each customer, sweeps the cafe, sweeps the living room, sweeps the porch. She scours endless pots. Her legs have grown hard from bicycling the four miles to work each morning. She can see in the dark. She remembers which constellations point the way home. She is watchful. She is learning the ways the land can encroach on the town. Baby spruce in your gladiola bed. Grizzly scat on your driveway. High tides flooding the slough. The gates of her heart have overflowed.

Most days Will jingles the door open at closing and looks right past her at his mother, as if they didn't have a million small, breathless things to say, to exchange, light touches with the pad of a finger, the brush of a palm. They keep their distance on the walk. The hairs on her arms stand up at times. She feels the beat of excitement drumming under her skin, the feeling that made her sneak out her bedroom window to meet Logan all those years ago, tiptoeing past her mother's room.

Sometimes in the half-sleep long before dawn she dreams of cooking tiny strange desserts: pots du crème with a heady lemon and cinnamon sauce, chocolate ganache dusted with hot chili powder and whirled into crème fraîche. She salts slices of mandarin orange and arranges thin cuts of jalapeño on star-shaped cupcakes. In her dreams she

knows these are for Will and she wakes up smiling, ravenous. On days off she cooks according to Lillian's strange appetites and picks delicately at the results. She unpacks a net of silver dragées, unused since the days of the birthday parties, and brings them in to work, garnishing each frosted cake with the sweet metallic pearls. Johanna squints at them disapprovingly. Each customer who buys a cake closes his eyes with delight at the final bite. She saves the last cake for Will.

How easy to fall in love, when it's been years since you've done so.

Marie savors these days, tells no one—not Lillian; not her mother, who asks, when Marie telephones, how “the Arctic circle” is treating her; not Johanna, who is, at times, brisk and silent for hours. Even the threat of scandal lifts for her, each day, with the gloom of the polar night. A sweet routine, simple and constant and full of little surprises. She finds everything to love on their walks. Pebbles darkened with water, wet shingles siding the boxy houses, needles of rain, pelts of rain, gray sluicing waves, forgotten berries dried to husks on the brambles. Wet spruce needles. Black-capped chickadees coming out, huddled, after a rain. The ridges of a pine cone buried in fresh snow. The details that signify home.

JOHANNA SEEMS HAPPIER when the date of their dinner arrives. She informs Marie cheerfully that she has decided she and Andres will cook, as they don't want Will's cooking to represent their family. Will comes to gather them at the bakery in his father's truck and so they all three arrive together, Marie chattering and Johanna telling her to mind her step, it's icy, and Will toting a basket of dinner rolls behind them.

Andres opens the door for them when he hears their voices. He has on Johanna's nice holiday apron, as a joke.

"Looking good, Dad," Will booms, sweeping in behind the ladies. "Fancy."

"Go on," Johanna says, batting at Andres. "Have you got everything in the oven?"

Marie takes Johanna's coat from her hand, hangs it up. "Let me help," she says.

"What can I do?"

"Nothing, nothing," Andres says. "Sit yourself down and rest."

They are all still stamping the cold out of their feet, flushed, smiling, not yet uncertain. Andres hugs his son and then Marie.

"We're so glad you came," he says, holding her by the shoulders.

Andres has prepared the caramelized red potatoes and smoked pork he grew up with, and Johanna pulls out of the oven a dense loaf of sweet rye bread her own grandmother taught her to make. Watching her shut the oven door and fold her hands in the towel, a routine Marie's mother performed for some thousands of nights, Marie is struck by a pang of homesickness. Dinners alone with her mother were quiet but comforting, shadowed by the soft static of jazz on the local radio station and the promise that they would lay the third place setting for her father again someday.

"We thought we'd feed you something from the old country," Johanna tells Marie at the table over sherry. "Since Will here's not much of a cook."

Of course, Marie thinks, her mother had never made a joke in her life. She likes Johanna's sharp tongue, the way she throws a secretive loving smile at her son even as she casts the barb.

"So you prepared some *hákarl*, did you?" Will asks.

“Of course not,” Andres says.

Marie lifts her eyebrows. “What is *hákarl*?” she asks.

“An Icelandic delicacy,” Johanna says. “It’s traditional. Not everyone likes it. Foreigners don’t... appreciate it.”

“You take a big old basking shark or Greenland, and you hack its head off and gut it,” Will explains. “Then you take it down by the sea and bury it in the rocks and hope to the heavens that you won’t be able to smell it from the house.”

Marie wrinkles her nose. “For how long?”

“Months!”

“Six weeks,” Andres clarifies. “In the summer. Two or three months otherwise. It varies with the season, see—the warmth helps with the curing process.”

“And do you know how you know it’s time to dig it up?” Will asks Marie.

“Will,” Johanna says.

“No,” Marie says. “Do tell.”

“When it smells like old piss,” Will says.

“It’s the ammonia,” Johanna explains. “You actually can’t eat the fresh shark.”

“And they wanted to find a way so badly that they came up with a method for rotting it out on the beach for months.”

“Well, not us,” Johanna says. “It’s a traditional dish in Iceland. You have traditional dishes everywhere, do you not?”

“And then you dry it for another few months, hanging up,” Will continues, “and when you go to eat it on a toothpick or whatnot you have to plug your nose because it *still* smells like old piss.”

“Will,” Johanna says.

“Personally, I like it,” Andres says. “It has a subtle nutty flavor.”

“It tastes like rotten shark,” Will says. “They made me taste it one time and I have never forgiven them. You have to chase it down with the Black Death.”

“The what?” Marie is laughing. Even Johanna laughs. Will was right, she thinks. Lillian had made her paranoid.

“*Brennivín*,” Andres says. “It’s a strong schnapps. It complements the *hákarl*, really.”

“It makes you feel like a true drunk,” Will says. “The lowest of the low.”

“I’m intrigued,” Marie says. She nods to Johanna and Andres. “But thank you for not preparing that.”

The rest of the evening passes beautifully. They finish two bottles of the Riesling Andres brought up from British Columbia for Johanna’s sweet tooth. The candles gutter; low shadows on the tablecloth. Johanna laughs, really laughs, and Andres speaks fondly of his days as a young fisherman. He always wanted to fish, he tells Marie, not just because it was so integral to Iceland’s history, but also because he remembered the tall sailing ships gliding in and out of the harbor at Reykjavik.

“For a long time we lived in the golden age of sail, when those ships ruled the world,” he says, glass in hand. When his eyes cloud with drink they look far darker than Will’s or Johanna’s, she notices. “They represented wealth, commerce, power—and, above all, expeditions. How can I explain—have you ever even seen a sailboat, dear? Besides the relics here? These days no one needs them, they look at them as a waste of time.”

“Of course,” Marie says. “Every city’s a port, where I grew up. They keep them as novelty vessels now, or museum pieces.”

“Well, when I was a boy they still meant something. Those white sails said new trade routes, new currency, new territory to explore. And making a living on the water is part of that tradition.”

Johanna has her chin in her hand, watching him steadily. “Of course,” she breaks in, “those kind of things don’t last.”

“What kind of things?”

“What you’re talking, men invading territory and taking it over until it has nothing left to give. What did the Americans call it.” Her hand grasps at the air.

“Westward Expansion. Working a gold mine until they hit only rock and then the whole town’s empty. That’s what plenty of towns around here were.” She leans across the table, speaking to Marie and Will. “When we first came here, the herring were so thick in the bay that the salteries would catch more than they could hold and throw the rest overboard. The water was filled with rotting fish. And then the herring left and didn’t return.”

“Actually they did come back,” Andres corrects. “It just took a few years. And then we had newer methods and newer equipment.”

“Those things don’t last,” Johanna says.

“Will here,” he says, “used to draw those Viking longships on every piece of paper he could find. Before we even taught him about that, I swear. He has it in his blood.”

“I had a book,” Will says. “I liked their helmets.”

“You were very artistic,” Johanna says. “I always thought you should go to art school. Or learn a trade, like carpentry. You used to build treehouses as often as you fished.”

“Unfortunately treehouses aren’t selling well right now,” Will says. “I wish you’d quit needling that every chance you get.”

Johanna falls silent and nudges her plate; Andres moves a hand to her shoulder. Marie offers Johanna a smile but watches Will, out of the corner of her eye. He’d said his mother wanted him off the water; he hadn’t said he wouldn’t stand for it anymore. But then he leans back in his chair, grinning, and pats his stomach.

“Well, I’m full,” he says. “How about you all?” He rises to clear the plates and Marie jumps up with him.

“Let me,” she says. “I have to thank you somehow.”

In the kitchen she expects him to whisper an apology, or to fall silent, but instead he nudges her, winks. “Wasn’t so bad, was it?”

LILLIAN IS AWAKE when she returns. Now that the indigestion and breathlessness have dropped, as the baby sinks lower in preparation for the birth, Marie has noticed that Lillian keeps odd hours, shuffling around the house in the middle of the night and sleeping for long stretches in the afternoon.

“How was your meet-the-parents dinner?” she asks from her couch.

“Oh—it wasn’t exactly—”

“Marie, why can’t you just admit to me that this is what it looks like? I’m pregnant, not stupid. Why won’t you tell me?”

Why can't she? She feels like a child, standing there fumbling for a lie. "Because you disapprove so much," she says finally.

"Of course I do!" Lillian says. Her face is heated; even her ears are red. "I'm sure a lot of people do! You hardly know him, Marie. And this is a small town, people talk. I'd rather not have them talking about my brother's wife."

"But I'm not his wife," she says. She tells herself to be firm. "I'm not your family anymore. I'm your friend."

Lillian softens her voice. "And that's why I'm telling you you're making a mistake. Because I'm your friend."

Marie wonders briefly if it's unhealthy for a pregnant woman to get angry, to hear a hard truth. But she has to say it. She takes a deep breath. "Lillian, just because you have a perfect marriage and a perfect home and a perfect family doesn't mean you know what's best for everyone who isn't you."

"What I *know* is that you're supposed to be helping me out, not having your first fling as a divorced woman," she fires back. "For Pete's sake, this isn't why you came here."

"I suppose I'm not doing enough to earn my keep. Do you want me to leave?" She waits half a beat. "Lillian. Do you want me to leave?"

Lillian shakes her head back and forth as if struck by a slow palsy, but says nothing. Marie pulls her half-shed coat back on and goes back out the door. She hears the back door open as she starts down the steps; Ben catches her on the lane. He is out of breath—from hurrying on his bad leg, she realizes.

“I didn’t want to interrupt,” he says. “But she’s just scared. Give her a break. Just come back when you’ve cooled off. She sees your life changing and she’s afraid hers will too.”

“Of course it will,” Marie says. “But she knows it’ll change for the better. Not everyone has that luxury.” Then she thinks of Lillian’s miscarriages, two long periods of misery, and blushes. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I sound like a child. I’m just going to leave her be for a while.”

She touches his shoulder before starting off. He’s not even wearing a coat. “Thanks,” she says softly.

JOHANNA AND ANDRES are gone, thank goodness, when she reaches Will’s house. It takes him a minute to answer the door. He holds a bouquet of wine glasses, freshly washed, upside down. She hears them clinking as he opens the door. He sets them on the hall table when he sees her.

“Back for seconds?”

“You never finished the tour,” she says. “I want you to.”

Will leads her up the stairs. With the slow creak of each step Marie asks herself if Lillian is right about her, if Lillian’s view is the way the world works. But I’ve earned a little happiness, she tells herself. Will’s smile confirms this.

His bedroom, where his parents used to sleep, overlooks Kachemak Bay and the soft lights in the harbor. They cast a yellow glow on the long swells rolling into shore. The rafters of the ceiling are exposed, heavy and stained dark with creosote—railroad ties, he explains, hauled up by Andres off the abandoned tracks left over from the age

when this town was only a coal mine. She notices his sweaters, folded and stacked on a rickety chair. His bed is unmade.

To be in a bed—illicitly, but without shame. Marie feels nothing like the person she was so bored with in Bellingham. She pulls the blanket up higher against the chill. Under the cozy coverlets in the big room facing the bay she feels the rest of their lives melt away. They could go on like this forever. If, back in the world, any eyes rest on them for a beat too long, she'll let it pass. They are yet undiscovered; who they are together is locked away under the weathered eaves of that room, the railroad ties that watched over other lives, other people.

WILL WAKES HER in the morning. A watery light comes through the big windows. She stretches, feels a shy smile creep across her lips.

“I thought you'd be glad to be reminded you don't have to go to the bakery,” he says.

She groans. “She's going to know. How can I face her?”

“She won't notice anything if you don't get all giggly around her.” He rubs his eyes and leans back against the pillows, arm pressed against hers. “You could stay right here and take tomorrow off too. We could go out in the boat.”

“Lillian probably told her already. She was so angry with me.”

“Hey,” he says, turning his head to look at her. “Don't worry about that now. You two are close. She'll cool off. This isn't the nineteenth century.”

“That's pretty easy for a man to say. She is right, you know—people will talk. It does bring a little shame down on her house. I was supposed to stay married and have

children with Logan...” She frowns. “I do want children,” she says softly, to the ceiling. From the corner of her eye she sees Will raise his eyebrows. “I’m not saying... not now. I thought I was pregnant when we first got married, and I was so relieved when I wasn’t. I just always expected one day I’d want to. Have kids. And now I do, now that I’m not married.” She laughs. “I’m pretty sure Lillian would die to hear me say that. I’m sure it’s the last thing you want to hear, as well.”

Will lifts his hands, palm up, and shrugs against the pillow. “Can’t say it’s what I expected to talk about this morning.”

“Did you have a plan?”

“I planned as far as pancakes,” he says, throwing the covers off. “I planned that last night. Sound good?”

She smiles. “Sounds like you’re way ahead of me.” A feather needles its way out of the cover and settles on her breastbone. She resolves not to push him, not to rush—well, not to rush anymore than they already have. Life here is defined by the seasons: when the salmon run, when the aspen drop their leaves, when the men can fly the bay and stay on the open water for days. This, too, will follow its natural progression. She pulls her dress from the floorboards beside the bed, slips it over her head, and follows him down the creaking stairs.

OF COURSE, BENEATH her calm about the certainty of their season she finds the old tourist’s desire to store up the photographs of this day for later, for after. It is a perfect day. Will convinces her to try on Johanna’s old ice skates and they spend the early afternoon gliding over the new ice at Beluga Lake. Lillian’s house is near the shore but

Marie gives up fretting. The neighbors begin to filter back from their lunch after church, dressed in their nicest wools and fur-lined collars. Will waves at those who look over and they wave back, tentatively. It begins to snow, very finely, and Marie looks away from the churchgoers, tilting her face to the sky. When the snow defeats them and they trudge back to Will's, dangling the skates by their limp laces, he heats up a thin chowder and they eat in bed, watching the sky turn gray out the window.

When the phone rings, breaking the silence of the snow-muffled house, Will shifts the covers off and says, puzzled, "Huh. I get so few calls I don't even remember I have a phone most of the time."

But Marie knows, instantly, that this call is important, that someone is calling to take their happiness away. It's Lillian.

But Lillian sounds contrite, nervous. "I wasn't sure if you'd be there," she says. "The nurse called. Your mother's aide. She called the bakery, looking for you, and Johanna rang me... Marie, your mother's had an accident. I'm so sorry."

"Is she all right? Is she alive? Just tell me if she's alive."

Across from her, Will widens his eyes, raises his hands.

"I don't know," Lillian says. "She didn't—she just said you need to call her. Marie—"

"Thank you," Marie says, hanging up.

Will steps toward her. "What is it? Is it your mother?"

She nods. "I can't call."

"Don't you—do you want me to?"

She finds she is shaking her head. “I can’t call. I knew she would die, I’ve know she was dying for a long time, but she can’t be dead now. I was only going to be away for a couple months. She’s supposed to have years left.”

Will gives her a look so full of kindness it makes her feel worse. She wonders if he has ever lost someone, or if his confidence comes from staying lucky in a dangerous game, watching his pals keep their luck too, thinking they were touched by the gods. He says, “I’m really sorry,” and hands her the phone.

THE NURSE IS sorry, too. Everyone is sorry. Her mother tried to go outside—she never tries to go outside, Marie says, and the nurse agrees—and didn’t make it past the street. The driver is sorry. He wasn’t even going very fast. She was standing on the curb and then she was in the lane. “I explained to him that she couldn’t control her movement very well,” the nurse says. “He felt terrible.”

But her mother is alive, half-alive, even less than before, in the hospital. There was significant cranial damage, the nurse warns her. So she should come home as quickly as possible. Marie sits on the cold floor. She feels the chill of the boards creep up her spine and anchor her. She knows that her mother would not get it in her head to go outside if her daughter were there to care for her, to help her into a chair on the porch, to stop her. She won’t get the chance to right this, to move back in and spend the last few years together. She never planned ahead.

Will is telling her he can get her on the train in Seward in the morning, that she’ll fly out of Anchorage, the way she came in.

“We should get you to bed,” he says. “We’ll have to leave early. You should try to get to sleep.”

The night creeps on without sleep. Johanna knocks on the front door and Will goes downstairs to send her away. Marie hears them on the porch: their voices are sharpened by the cold but the words indistinguishable. He comes back to sit at the edge of the bed and stroke her hair. She asks him to tell her a story. After a moment he tells her he was reminded of something from his childhood today. The ice-skating on Beluga Lake reminded him of it, he says.

A day in January, 1947, when he saw the other children turning away from the schoolhouse door and running to the bay. This was the coldest winter recorded in North America, and he had just turned ten. That morning the bay had frozen over, the very center of it iced and dark. The children were running in their red and blue parkas, hoods pushed back: bright colors bobbing against the snow. Will joined the pack, thundering from the shore to the endless stretch of ice. A few of the teachers had leaned out the schoolhouse windows and were now running down the road, calling out *Stop, come back!* But Will and the others surged forward, watching for seams and ridges beneath their feet.

At the center of the bay, still far off, the ice was dark and thin where the water refused to be sheathed. The children were slowing as the shore receded, a few of them still kicking ahead, wanting to be the one to go farthest. The headmaster was taking tentative steps onto the ice, waving his arms. Will sat down and slid onto his back. Lying down and turning his head to listen to the ice, gasping as the cold shavings melted at the touch of his ear, a hot shell, he could hear the boats groaning to break free of their moorings, rubbing against the ice. He wondered what was beneath the boots stamping

behind him, whether the sound reverberated down to the inhabitants—the salmon nosing along the pitted surface, eels rustling in the depths, the stately humpbacks waiting at the edge of the bay. He heard too the scrabbling of the younger children wiping circular windows in the ice, cupping their hands and peering through to discern dark shapes of whales, sounding out this new tunneled passage; they believed they stood over the unfathomed beasts. He closed his eyes and turned his face to the sun. He was floating out to sea.

Lying down in the dark she feels it too, the inevitable current, the lifeblood pumping below. She focuses on his face against the far-off rafters of the ceiling. Sometime in the night they make love, and she lets her mind rattle around like the snow globe, till the white obscures everything. Toward morning she falls asleep, slumping against the wooden headboard. She is floating out to sea, floating out to sea.

## VI.

THE NURSE, ANDREA, is a petite woman with a red-tipped nose and quick, capable hands. She is distraught—they are not used to conditions changing so quickly, so violently, these home nurses—but competent.

Marie arrives with a clearer head. On the train and then the flight she leaned her temple against the cold glass and thought things through, made plans.

Her mother would pull through. She was weakened by her state, but the accident couldn't have been so bad, could it, if she'd stayed alive long enough to reach the hospital? Marie would sit by her side and make amends, fill the hospital room with white flowers, go home with her, dismiss the nurse at night. She would stay. And Will—Will would be in Homer, and perhaps that would be that.

“Will you come back?” he'd asked, before the train blew its whistle.

She shook her head, clutching the valise he'd picked up from Lillian earlier. “I can't say. I don't know. I don't know how long—I can't think.”

But the trip had cleared things up for her. What did she have in Alaska? A fantasy, an impermanent job, a community to which she was only an outsider.

She'd tried to form a clear picture of his face when he looked at her. The high color in his cheeks, the troubled blue eyes. Photographs, for after. She didn't want to think about whether there would be a next time, another man. Whether she would become the kind of woman Lillian told her to be wary of. Or whether she would remain alone, like her mother. But she was part of what made that aloneness. This was what she kept coming back to, on the train.

Andrea meets her at the front of the hospital. She must have been waiting there, pacing beside the armchairs, all filled.

“I’m so sorry,” she says. Her voice doesn’t waver, though her face is mournful. “She passed away three hours ago, while you were in flight.”

When Marie doesn’t respond, she adds, “You can see her. The hospital agreed to wait until you arrived. I can take you upstairs.”

She embraces Marie.

“No one told me,” Marie says, stupidly. All that clarity of mind, gone. A cotton ball where the clean snow had been.

“We didn’t—I didn’t see how we could get ahold of you at the airport.”

“I want to see her.”

She follows Andrea over the tile and into the elevator, valise bumping against her numb legs. “Oh, let me take that,” Andrea says, when it bangs the doorway. The wood panel slides shut.

HER MOTHER’S BODY: what familiar terrain to her. Before they’d decided she needed a full-time nurse Marie would drive to the house every day after work and help her mother sift through the day, finish what had been left undone. In the evenings, as the tremors progressed, Marie soaped her mother’s body and brushed her shoulder-length gray hair. Never had she known her mother’s bedroom so intimately. She remembered she used to tiptoe past it when she was sneaking out to meet Logan: it was just a quiet cavern with the shadow of the grandfather clock in the hall falling across its doorway. But in those later years she opened the closet doors briskly, choosing robes to help her mother into;

she fluffed the pillows and respread the coverlet and righted the lipsticks and powder jars her mother had upset in the morning.

Her mother had smooth skin, even when she was older, with very few hairs and several light freckles. Marie inherited her small shoulders, her fine dark hair, the elfin points to her ears that she took care to hide. Marie would wash her and then take time over her neck and shoulders with the rag, so that her mother relaxed in the water and smiled.

“You’re so good to me, my darling,” she’d say.

Marie asks Andrea to wait outside, and closes the door behind her.

A thick wrapping of gauze covers the top and most of the back of her mother’s head. The lower jaw is slightly off, misaligned, giving her a look of rumination. Her mouth hangs open; her lips are pale. Her eyes are closed, of course. Marie checks the window of the door and then steps further into the room, sits at the edge of the bed. She reaches an unsteady hand to her mother’s eyes and pulls one lid up, gently, terrified she’ll harm it. Beneath she sees the color of her mother’s eye, yes, the same dark blue she inherited, but only a painting of an eye: flat, dry. Marie closes the lid and leans her face on her mother’s chest. She smells starchy gauze, antiseptic, dried blood, the smell of her mother’s body—the sweat and breath of it, the smells she knew intimately—turned up higher. She catches a whisper of her mother’s perfume, incongruously dressy. She remembers nights eating at the Italian restaurant three blocks from their house, when she was twelve and her mother was teaching her to eat like a lady. The way her mother would dab a pinky’s worth of that perfume at the base of Marie’s throat. “I know how to do it,” Marie would scowl.

“A mother never stops teaching her child,” her mother would say.

THERE ARE ARRANGEMENTS to make, arrangements her mother must have made for her father. The day of the service, the number of white lilies. She chooses a dark blue suit for her mother to wear, one she remembers her mother ironing for the days her father was due to return from the long trips north. After a moment she finds a silk scarf and mists it with her mother’s perfume. The bottle is nearly full.

Will calls her mother’s house with the number she’d given him and she feels too distracted to talk, to make sense. On the line his voice recedes from hers until he is a distant note on the horizon. He will give her some time, he says. He understands she needs time to pull her head together.

Her mother’s body, like her father’s, is cremated, and the ashes laid to rest in Bayview Cemetery. She does not look at the ashes—she has heard they resemble coarse sand, contain bone fragments like tiny limpets and cone snails. She saw her mother’s body; she has no wish to see it broken down.

Their small plots look lonely, huddled together. Her mother’s parents are buried in Minnesota—Marie remembers visiting, once—and her father’s in Ohio. Marie never met them. Her parents had been immigrants too, she realizes—they trekked to the promise of a new life on the water in the same way that Johanna and Andres had. The same way that she had, that Lillian had. Now she wonders what drove them all to leave. Were they just unhappy? Were they so seduced by an empty frontier and the chance of a flourishing market? They hadn’t won that gamble, her parents.

Logan approaches her after the service. She'd seen him sitting a few rows behind her, jaw set grimly. He takes her hands, then pulls her into an embrace. It feels good to be comforted by someone she knows well. Then she wonders, and dislikes herself for wondering, whether he can tell she's been with someone else.

"At least she lived long enough to say she was right about us," he says finally.

A dry laugh escapes her.

"I visited a couple times," he adds. "She seemed cheerful. She wasn't alone."

"She never mentioned."

"I spoke to Lillian."

She stiffens.

"She says she misses you. She said you fit right in up there."

"I had plenty of experience being around people who smell like fish all the time."

She blinks, shakes her head. "Sorry. My tongue talks and my brain has to catch up."

"Nothing new," he says. He squeezes her shoulder. "Let me know if you need help. I know you've got a lot to sort through in that house."

HER MOTHER WORKED for several years at a local bank, and an old coworker, a good friend, volunteers to help with the task of tidying up the house. She finds the woman's presence steadying. The woman is older than her mother was but trim and sprightly; she scrubs the sinks and floors, strips the curtains and linens and gives them a good washing with lemony soap. Marie packs all of her mother's clothes in a box to keep, then unpacks them and sorts through what should be given away. The box for her, bags for the Salvation Army. She keeps brooches she knows she'll never wear, bottles of scent too old

or strong for her own taste. She polishes a cracked hand mirror, sets it in the garbage bin, retrieves it.

“You can always just put everything away for a few years until your mind’s clearer, dear,” her mother’s friend tells her. “She won’t be bothered by it. It’s easiest that way.”

From the bottom of a dusty hatbox she lifts a faded envelope, its corners trailing sticky strings of cobweb and the curled husk of a potato bug.

*You would not believe the hate here between the local fishermen and the company watchmen, she reads in her father’s loopy hand. Some of them acknowledge we’re just doing our job; some of us feel mighty uneasy at taking up so many of their bays. Some of them curse at us like we killed their mother. Still, the mountains up here around Kodiak, coming straight up against the water, are the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen. When things get better I’ll bring you up here on a nice cold tour. My love to the little one.*

There is no date on the letter, nothing particularly remarkable. Still, she catches her breath at the thought that she’s seen those black mountains, collared by the fog coming off the water. He wanted her to see it.

So he had loved the place, too. She wonders if it made him feel he’d accomplished his pioneer dreams, struck gold, to brail the salmon out of those traps. An old sailing word, brail, meaning *to furl the sails*. To take back in. She’d looked it up, when Will mentioned it.

Then again, his letter suggests that it was the opposite, that it emptied him somehow to march around those hulking traps, taking up entire inlets while the local fishermen in their boats watched their decks remain empty. Now that she knows how

PAF wronged the men who could lay true claim on those waters she can't help but wonder if her father felt lessened for it. She herself feels guilty for working for them. Of course, what they had done was what the first homesteaders had done to the Alaskan Indians, really. She means to ask Will about that if she sees him again. You can't waste a phone call on questions like that.

This is all she finds of her father's that she hasn't seen before. Perhaps her mother kept it because it was the last letter to come from him. She grits her teeth; she wants to ask her mother why so little of him remains in the house, why they never spoke of him. Whether her mother carried the weight of lifelong grief, carried it so well that Marie never saw how she hunched. What was her father like before she was born? Who had chosen her name? She doesn't even know. In the photographs he is stout, dark-haired, smiling but not brightly.

In one she is a little girl, swinging between them, each hand encased in one of theirs. She feels a new sadness, fresh fear at going forth. She has no instruction on how to raise a child. Her mother used to tell her that the birthday parties prepared her for the happiness and hysterics of children, but that nothing could prepare her for the nights spent awake with a sleepless child, for the explanations you could not give to a child's questions, for the million rampant jealousies and fears and ecstasies a child could harbor and also awaken in you.

Marie does find a few of her own baby clothes in the closet. Ruffled dresses with tiny pockets. A finger-sized pair of saddle shoes, unscuffed. A clipping of her just-grown hair. Into the box they go.

WHEN HER MOTHER'S friend leaves for the night, promising to be back in the morning to help with the donation bags, Marie noses in the high cupboards of the kitchen until she finds a bottle of brandy. She sits at the kitchen table with her parents' wedding photograph and tries to write a letter to Will. She cannot get past *I've been thinking about you*. Finally the phone rings.

"You said you'd be around in the evenings," he says. "Is this all right? Are you busy?"

"I'm not," she says, tilting another dram into a glass from her mother's only set of cut crystal. Another item destined for the box. "I'm all done for the night, in fact."

"How was your day?"

She hears his face dragging across the receiver and she pictures him rubbing the shadow on his chin. Strange, that only days ago she was kissing that mouth, she was forgetting anything existed outside of Homer.

"We got most of her stuff packed up. I have things I'm keeping." She pauses. "I don't know what I'm going to do with them though."

"Will you be—will you live in the house?"

She considers this. She has been considering this since the day the nurse called. The thought does not make her recoil; rather, it comforts her. And it makes her very sad.

"Part of me wants to. But I don't know if I can. I don't know if I should."

"What would you do there?"

She shrugs, catching her reflection in the dark kitchen window, bare of shades from the cleaning. "Restart my catering business. It hasn't been very long."

"It seems like it has, hasn't it."

She hears him strike a match. He'll be smoking his pipe, a thing she's seen him do only once. She smelled it on his father's jacket as well. The smell of salt and smoke, and oil from the boat. Tell me to come back, she thinks.

"How are things there?" she hears herself asking.

"My mother's been very cranky," he says. "I think she misses you. And I saw Lillian. She feels terrible that your visit ended so rockily."

Ended.

"My father and I are going out for salmon tomorrow. He hasn't come with me in a while. I wish I could have taken you on the boat."

"It wouldn't have looked appropriate, I suppose."

"We don't care about that now, do we, Marie?"

"It certainly wouldn't help anymore, would it." She washes the brandy around in her mouth, feeling it burn the side of her cheek where her teeth have been worrying.

"You should go," she says. "Long distance. And I should get some sleep."

She hears the hiss of the line and pretends for a moment it's the sea, not the rough waters off Bellingham but the quiet lapping of Kachemak Bay.

"I miss you," he says finally. "Take care."

LOGAN SURPRISES HER by arriving shortly after her mother's friend the next morning. He loads the bags into his truck and swings the tailgate shut.

"Are you sure you want to get rid of all this?" he asks.

"I told her to think on it," her mother's friend offers. "But no one ever does. Deaths happen in such a hurry, don't they? It feels like you have to clean up after the

mess so no one will know it ever happened.” She gives a sad smile to Marie. “I’ve been to plenty of them, at my age.”

“I kept some things,” she tells them. “The ones that have memories for me.”

When they return she offers coffee and cake, but her mother’s friend backs away, holding her hands out. “I’ll leave you be now. You’ll want some time to think about things. You need help, just ring me up again.”

Marie turns to Logan. He stands on the porch, surveying the living room furniture through the open door. He points to the stairwell.

“That’s where you were waiting when I picked you up for Prom, remember?” He laughs. “And your mother was sitting in that chair right there, glaring at me. Jesus, Marie, what are you going to do with all this stuff?”

“It’s not stuff. Some of that came with my grandmother from Norway.”

“You know what I mean. Will you stay in the house like your mother? That’s morbid.”

“Logan, you’re not being much of a help right now. I’m trying to figure things out.” She walks past him into the house. “Do you want cake or not?”

He follows her, closing the door behind him. “I can help you out with things, if you decide to stay.”

She wonders what he means by *things*. “Are you seeing anyone?”

He shrugs. “Not particularly. A little. Still getting used to being a single guy.” He looks at her sideways. “Are you?”

She looks at him and away. “A little. Not really, anymore.”

“I know.” He leans back. “Lillian told me.”

She exhales. "I knew it."

"She felt bad, Marie, for giving you such a hard time about it. She said she was reading that book and thinking more about it."

"Betty Friedan?"

"You think I didn't read it. I read it, some. Sure recognized you in there."

Before she can speak he holds his hand up. "I told her that we just got tired of each other, and that kind of tiredness doesn't go away in a marriage."

"Thank you," she says. "Thanks very much."

"I'll take that cake now."

As she cuts him a slice the phone begins to ring on the counter. She slides him the plate and answers. At first she doesn't recognize the voice. The accent is much thicker through the distance.

"Will tells me you don't know if you'll stay there or not," Johanna says.

"He does?" She leans against the counter. "I don't."

"We've been getting more customers these days. And I figured it out. They like your baking. Your funny little cakes. I don't want to tell them it's you or I'll be out of business. I'm thinking we could keep you and Lillian on, see if there's enough room for that kind of expansion. I like to keep things simple, you know, but I suppose it makes sense."

Marie opens her mouth but nothing comes out. Logan looks up from his cake quizzically.

"Of course I could just throw our profits away on this long distance call," Johanna adds.

“I don’t know if I belong,” Marie gets out. “Where would I go?”

“Lillian has a bedroom for you,” Johanna says. Then, “I get the feeling my son does too.”

“Why are *you* calling?” she asks. “I didn’t expect to hear from you. I don’t mean to be rude.”

Johanna’s voice, when it comes, is soft and studied. “I’m sorry about your mother. You’re very young to lose both your parents. I think that—I was harsher than I needed to be, on you. I think Andres and I would like to get to know you. And I know my son would.”

“Don’t they hate when their mothers speak for them?”

Logan looks up again and she waves him away.

“I know my son,” Johanna says firmly. “And now I’m going to ring off before this call bankrupts me. I expect it will be a few weeks before you get everything settled, but I know Lillian would appreciate it if you were here for the birth.”

“Who was that?” Logan asks when she hangs up.

“Actually,” she says, “there is something you could help me with.”

ON THE DAY she arrives in Homer the town is shrouded in a mournful fog. Or perhaps ash, she realizes. She saw, on the water, that the Mount Augustine is still steadily puffing away. She is wearing mostly black, as has been her habit since the funeral. But her heart rocks upward with the lift of the dock as she steps off the boat.

She'd expected Ben to pick her up, or to meet no one at all, since Lillian's date is only days away, but it's Johanna and Will she sees, heading toward her from the far end of the dock.

Johanna gives her a brisk hug, patting her back. "I was beginning to think you had decided against my offer," she teases.

"I think you knew I couldn't turn it down," Marie says, setting down her suitcases—many more this time, and weighed down with all the funny little scarves and bottles and books of her mother's that she couldn't leave behind.

Johanna steps back and looks politely away when Will enfolds her in his arms.

"I wanted to tell you to come back," he murmurs. "For the record."

She pulls back to look at him. How strange, to see a face you've imagined for weeks in the flesh again, to have the angles you'd tried to visualize instantly erased by the real model. She has wondered, of course, if he's seen anyone else in her absence. It would have to be another stranger, she imagined, bumping into town like her. But her heart tells her there hasn't been, that just as there is a bedroom waiting for her at Lillian's there will be, in the future, a whole household waiting for her at Will's. There is no rush. These things take their time.

"We'll bring you to Lillian," he says. "Ben tells me she practically hasn't left her bed since you've been away."

They pile in the truck, jostling down the road in the close warmth of the cab. Marie looks behind her and sees snowflakes falling to litter her suitcases in the back. In the house Molly welcomes them with thumping tail from under the kitchen table. They

find Lillian, as predicted, in bed with the covers off, her face tired but unlined and content.

“Oh, Marie,” Lillian exclaims, holding her hands out. “I was so afraid you wouldn’t make it in time.”

Marie goes to her. “So was I. Look at how big you’ve gotten!”

“These last few days won’t be so bad,” Johanna says. “You’ll be amazed at how quickly they go.”

Lillian gestures for Marie to feel her stomach. “You can feel him kicking. Not as much as he was a last week. He’s quieted down. I swear I can hear him though.”

Marie presses her ear to the tight curve of Lillian’s belly. “My God,” she says, “listen to that.” Inside is awash with gurglings and an almost imperceptible patter that Marie imagines to be a tiny pulse, though she knows she’s probably wrong. “It sounds like waves,” she laughs. “Like when you were a kid and you would hold a seashell to your ear.” She closes her eyes and listens to the swells of that inner sea.