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TANTRUMS
AND OTHER STORIES

by

Alyssa Lauren Kopanyi

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

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This collection's first section of interrelated short stories is centered on the lives of those working in a clothing store in a coastal New Jersey town. Hungarian émigré Ili manages the Lucky Lady Boutique on the Seaside Park Boardwalk. Her abusive husband Pista owns the store and the arcade next door. Ili strives to make a life for herself free from Pista's cruelty. Angie, Ili's young salesgirl, attempts to support her ill mother after her father's death, but she struggles with the financial and care-giving responsibilities this entails. The stories in the second section of this collection explore the troubled relationships within one family. Judy becomes unexpectedly pregnant in college, and her decision to begin a family with her boyfriend, despite her ambivalence, results in heartache years later, when the marriage fails. She is unwilling to accept support from her sister Michelle because she resents the history of their parents coddling her sister. The sisters' mutual resentment is a legacy to Judy's daughter Sarah and tensions between the three women are inevitable.

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PART I: LUCKY LADY

THE ANGEL OF THE SEA

I. 2001

Greg was eight and Angie ten during their family's last vacation, though the children didn't realize it would be their final trip together. Their parents, Jon and Dot, weren't yet sure this trip to Victorian Cape May would become their last vacation, but they knew it was reckless in light of their finances. Following a discouraging visit to an internist over Jon's recent, rapid weight loss and fatigue, Jon and Dot rationalized this excursion to a bed and breakfast that they couldn't afford with their impulse to make memories—*while we can*.

The Angel of the Sea, the old house was called, and it was painted lavender with accents of white and grey. *All the true Victorian houses are tri-colored*, Jon told Greg and Angie, and Greg repeated this again and again, *tri-colored*, rolling the words in his mouth. He took gleeful notice of the peeling sign out front; on it, a painted mermaid rested on a rock and was nude above the waist. Strands of her dark hair splayed over her pale breasts and across her stomach.

Inside, their guest room had a double bed for their parents along with a daybed. The room's décor demonstrated the owners' zest for Victorian taxidermy, and Angie shuddered at the vacant-eyed beasts and fowl mounted high on the walls. Greg climbed onto a chair to reach a stuffed hawk with its wingspan fixed wide open into a menacing curve.

“It’s not so bad, Angie.” He stroked its slick feathers coated in dust and shivered.

“Get down from there,” their mother said. “Don’t touch that thing. It’s probably diseased.”

“It’s not diseased. It’s dead,” Greg replied.

Greg hopped off the chair and wiped the dust from his fingers onto his shorts. Angie was sure she could smell the death in the room.

Greg lost the daybed to Angie in a round of rock-paper-scissors and slept those four nights on a cot with a pancake mattress that smelled sour and musty like their basement. He lay low to the floor and was kept awake by the glass-eyed stares of the creatures pinned to the walls and the sounds of the old house settling in the night. He longed to climb into that familiar pocket of narrow warmth between his sleeping parents, but he was too old now and too proud; instead, he shut his eyes to the dead animals and listened to the floorboards’ objections and the tired efforts of the plumbing in the shared toilet down the hall.

Each morning at the beach, their father staked a great umbrella into the sand. Greg and Angie’s mother feared the sun and grew nervous watching her children spend hours outside of the umbrella’s wide swath of shade. Greg returned to her when she beckoned with the sunscreen bottle, and he made a show of groans and eye-rolls. Yet, he quietly enjoyed returning to the startling cool of the shaded sand and his mother’s flinch when he dove, cold and salty with ocean spray, into her lap and dripped water onto the pages of her magazines. His mother’s hands were firm as they smoothed the sunscreen onto his back and arms.

The final morning, at Greg's insistence, their father brought them to the beach for a last visit while their mother packed the bags. It was early, and only a few other towels were stretched over the sand. Yards away, the lifeguards hauled their stand upright and began their watch. Feeling generous, Angie let Greg bury her in the sand, starting at her feet. He worked his way up until she was sand-covered to the waist and he was bored with the endeavor. He saw, though, she wanted him to continue, so he did until she was packed in to her neck.

Their dad yanked Angie free and she chased them both into the waves. Their father took turns lifting each of them by the armpits way above his head and swooping them into the surf, though Angie protested she was too big.

"Too big? Too big?" he called, turning in circles and sweeping her across the waves before tossing her in. He groaned and panted with the effort of his sore muscles, and his children mistook his labored breathing for their own breathless delight.

During their stay, their mother had often called out, "Go easy on your father, Greg," when the boy launched himself at his dad in the shallow surf. Now, free from his mother's rebukes, Greg laughed and braced himself for his turn, for the strength of his father's hands, and for the cold shock of the morning sea.

II. 2008

Dot is at work when the principal calls about her son beating up the boy. She's midway through a routine cleaning, checking for tacky spots on her patient's teeth with a sickle probe, when Lana pokes her head in the exam room. "Call the high school back when you're done. It's important."

“Is it Angie or Greg? What did they say?”

“Greg. They just said to call.” Lana scoots out of the doorway and leaves Dot to stare into the hall. Her patient gurgles below her, and Dot looks down, remembers herself. The patient is a small, bespectacled man. His bald head shines in the lamp’s sallow glare.

“Sorry,” Dot says, and she angles the saliva ejector into his open mouth to suck up his gathering spit.

After speaking with Greg’s principal, Dot’s hand shakes as she maneuvers the mouse on Lana’s computer at the reception desk and opens the web browser. She wonders if it’s a nervous quiver or more of the symptoms her doctor hasn’t yet figured out. Dot takes care to hide her recent trembling hands from others at work. Two days ago, she’d feigned car troubles for an excuse to be late. She hid at home until the tingles retreated from her hand and she felt confident approaching patients’ mouths with sharp tools again. Since Jon died, she’s had to work full-time. It’s likely nothing, Dot thinks of her recent shaking limbs and dizzy spells. But if it’s *something*, she can’t afford for anyone to learn of her troubles just yet.

She pulls up Youtube, searches the keywords the principal has recited to her over the phone, and there it is, a video dated three days ago that the kids at Greg’s school are passing along. *Awesome Beat Down Ocean County High*. She clicks play and at first sees nothing much, just shaky close ups of teens mingled into an outdoor crowd. The camerawork is erratic over sweatshirts and tees and backpacks. The camera pushes through the din and there he is—her son. Greg and a kid she doesn’t know approach each other warily. The pair is hemmed in by a throng of teenage boys. There are fifteen

spectators at least, each clad in baggy denim that crumples over their sneakers, those Vans skate shoes like Greg wears. Their zip-up sweatshirts hinge open with the breeze. On their heads, baseball caps are stamped with logos of punk bands and surf-wear companies. The boys are identical but carry themselves with an arrogant swagger; they are defiant in their similarity.

The camera tracks Greg and the other boy's movement across the circle and Dot notices a clump of girls adjacent to the crowd. With their handbags dangling from their shoulders, their done-up faces, and their heels sinking into the grass, they are overdressed and out of place amongst these untidy boys. Dot recognizes one of them—a blonde who's been over to the house a few times after school. Jessica. Her eyes are rimmed in too much dark liner and she's holding a cigarette up to her mouth in a way that betrays hours of practice but not assurance. In Dot's home, she's polite and mannered, though here her gestures are obvious, desperate. Dot has asked Greg a few times not to invite Jessica over when he's home alone, though he says they're only friends.

"Kick his ass, Greg. Fucking kick his ass, man," a boy in the crowd yells. The others join in his crowing, nodding their heads and pumping their fists in agreement. Dot silences the video and looks around the reception desk. Lana must be out to lunch, and none of the other hygienists are in view.

Greg advances on the boy. The opponent is shorter than Greg by several inches and stows spare weight in his middle. He backs up a few steps, stumbling, and the crowd laughs. Greg bolts forward and takes the first swing. His fist meets the chubby boy's cheek, and after, the boy stares, his face as wide and blank as a dinner plate. The crowd jolts at the inaugural hit and coils tighter around the pair. The boy presses the tips of his

fingers to his pink cheek. *This is the first time this kid's been hit*, Dot thinks. *My son will be remembered by this kid as the first guy who ever hit him.*

The opponent rushes Greg, swings his arm blindly, and his palm lands on Greg's face as a slap. Dot's shocked at her tangle of emotions at the moment—embarrassment and anger that her son is taking part in this despite the care she and Jon took to bring up their kids *the right way*, yet still there's pain and worry for Greg at the sloppy impact of the boy's hand. The crowd is laughing again, delighted. The spectators play-slap each other and jeer. Several are holding up their iPhones and taking their own videos.

Dot turns up the volume, just slightly. The crowd yells encouragement and epithets. The chubby boy looks as though he may cry. Greg lunges for him and they grapple, limbs swinging and tangling, though in moments Greg gains advantage. They struggle across the circle's diameter, and the crowd loosens and retreats for them as they travel. Greg shoves the boy to the ground. He straddles his opponent, rears his arm back, and punches the boy's face again and again. The boy bleeds from the nose and cheek; his blood streams onto his shirt, Greg's fist, the ground. The swings continue, though the boy shields his face with both arms.

Greg stands and hops away from his limp opponent. He shrugs his shoulders twice, a belligerent motion, and spits. Sweat pastes his hair to his forehead. The grimace on Greg's face is unnerving and reminds Dot of a memory she does her best to divert from her thoughts. The chubby boy curls onto his side, as pink and coiled as a shrimp. Dot gets a glimpse of his bruised face, reddened with effort and blood. He's crying. The crowd laughs, high-fiving. The girls watching from the back hold cigarettes up to their lips and whisper to each other.

Greg—her son, the victor—turns. Swiftly, repeatedly, Greg swings his foot into the chubby boy’s gut. The boy shudders and keens at each blow to his middle. Nausea swerves in Dot’s own stomach, and she realizes she’s been sweating. Fat droplets skate down her back and gather in the waistband of her scrubs, and her armpits are humid under her lab smock. She closes the web page and clears the browser history before leaving Lana’s desk.

III. 2005

Watching her father die, Angie discovered a new vocabulary. Metastasized. Jaundiced. Cirrhosis. Angie practiced the words in a whisper when her mother left his hospital room to use the bathroom or when she fell asleep. She repeated them to Greg over the phone.

“What does that mean?” he’d say. “You sound like you don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

Their mother didn’t want Greg missing school as his grades had been tenuous at best this term, and she claimed the hospital would frighten him. Greg stayed at a friend’s house whenever their father was admitted; this was the longest stretch yet, though. Six days had passed. Angie wished their mom would talk to Greg, that she would explain things herself.

Angie’s father did little but sleep for days while machines dinged and whirred along with his body’s increasingly lethargic rhythms. This morning, while her mother was outside for some air, he woke into labored breathing and beckoned Angie to his bedside.

“You’re gonna have to take care of Mom and Greg,” he said, and Angie nodded. She looked into the crease of his pillow beside his ear and hoped he didn’t realize she wasn’t looking at him. She was still shocked at how much a person could yellow all over—even in the whites of the eyes. She didn’t speak. Speech would acknowledge the truth of the situation. She’d have to admit that her father wasn’t dying someday in the misty, approaching future, but *dying*.

You should come. Ask Josh’s mom to bring you, Angie texted Greg, and he did. Upon arrival, Greg glanced at their sleeping father, said he’d be in the waiting room when they were ready for dinner, and skulked from the room.

Later, one of the doctors asked to speak to everyone together, and Angie fetched Greg. “Dinner time?” he asked.

Angie shook her head.

The doctor was a tall, slender man. Angie found him attractive in a tentative, birdlike way. He was very young and very apologetic. There was nothing left to be done but hospice care, and he was sorry. They would make Jon as comfortable as possible, and he was sorry. It could be hours or days until the end, and he was sorry. He stuttered as he spoke. Angie wondered if this was the doctor’s first time breaking this news, if they were his first family he’d had to disappoint, and was surprised to find in this moment she most wanted to comfort him, to let him know he’d done a fine job despite the stutter and that her family would remember his kindness.

Her mother nodded beside the bed. She kept nodding, even after the doctor was silent. Their father was sleeping, still.

“Would you like me to wake him and tell him?” the doctor asked.

“No,” Angie’s mother took her father’s hand and brought it to her wet cheek.

“I’ll tell him.”

“That’s it?” Greg stood from his chair. “You’re giving up?”

“I’m sorry,” the doctor said again.

Greg took him at a leap. Angie had never seen her brother move so quickly—until this moment, his fledgling adolescence was marked by sluggishness, slow and deliberate movements when asked to take out the trash or join them at the dinner table, as though he were perpetually exhausted by their lack of coolness or understanding or whatever it was teen boys found deficient in their families. Greg and the doctor stumbled to the floor, knocking into an untouched tray of broth and water and sending it to the ground. The noise of their struggle felt too loud in the hospital’s quiet. Greg’s fists swung erratically until a punch connected. Blood spurted from the doctor’s nose. Angie tried to pull her brother off the doctor, but his arm swatted her face and she backed away, touching her fingertips to the tender spot on her cheek. Nurses rushed in, followed by two techs, beefy guys in scrubs who lifted Greg into the air and carried him into the hall.

The doctor staggered to his feet, cupping his bruised nose. His lab coat was bloodied. A nurse attended to him, holding gauze to his nostrils to staunch the flow of blood.

Later, in the hall, the unit supervisor spoke slowly and evenly to Angie’s mom, as though she were reading from a script. “Dr. Medina is not pressing charges against your son. However, we are going to ask to you vacate your son from the premises. If you don’t agree, for the safety of the doctor and the rest of the staff, we will call the police to remove him.”

“When can he come back?” Angie asked. A security guard had escorted Greg into the parking lot where he could loose his anger into the open air.

“Angie, enough,” her mother said.

“He’s no longer welcome on hospital grounds.”

“Our father is dying,” Angie said. “You aren’t going to let him say goodbye?”

“Thank you,” her mother said to the supervisor. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you?” Angie repeated. “You’re thanking her for kicking him out?” She leveled the comment at the supervisor’s back as she walked away.

Her mother pulled out her phone. “I’m calling Josh’s mom. Greg needs a ride.”

Angie grabbed the phone from her mother. “You’re sending him home with a friend? He just found out Dad is dying, and you’re sending him away?”

“You heard. He can’t stay here. He’ll be in more trouble if he stays. If he stays, they might make us all leave. He needs to go home.”

“Then we should take him home.”

“We are needed here. Your father needs me here.”

“Greg needs you. He’s lost one parent already. You have to tell the hospital that Greg’s coming back. Dad isn’t only yours, you know. Don’t be selfish.”

Her mother yanked the phone back. “This is not a discussion, Angie. Go sit with your father in case he wakes up. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Angie hurried down the hall, blind to her own intentions, but certain only that she couldn’t bear to look at her mother, that she couldn’t stand the knot of disappointment and anger she felt when looking into her mother’s face.

IV. 2008

“Nice necklace,” Dot says to Angie in her bedroom as she’s getting ready for school. It’s been two months now since the video and since Greg began community service at the police station, and Dot feels her tether on both of her children loosening each day.

“Thanks.” Angie fingers the bauble in the hollow of her throat then swipes a brush through her hair.

“Where’d you get it?”

“The mall. Somewhere.”

“Angie, you need to watch it.”

“Watch what?” Angie drops the brush into her dresser drawer and slams the drawer shut.

“Just be careful, please.” Dot is embarrassed at how this conversation has turned, how she pleads with her teenage daughter as though Angie were in charge. “Your brother got off easy. You may not be so lucky.”

Three times a week after school, Greg is made to soap down the cruisers and wash the station windows. On rainy days, he mops the halls and scrubs the bathrooms. It’s not so bad, he assures her. The worst part is the humiliation of doing the work while an officer watches.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Mom.”

Dot sighs. This is a lie. Angie’s been shoplifting for several months, at least. When Angie leaves the house, Dot visits her bedroom and takes stock of her jewelry box and dresser drawers. New gems arrive—rings, earrings, all costume jewelry, but still more than Angie should afford on her part-time paycheck from the Wawa down the road.

When a new sweater or skirt appears, Dot checks the label to see if it's an expensive designer brand. If so, she examines the garment for holes or ink stains from busted security tags.

“Angie, I don't want to have to take any more rides to the police station, okay?”

Dot looks down at her right hand. It's quivering. She rubs at her palm, her wrist.

“Mom, are you okay?” Angie pulls her mother to her bed and sits her down.

“I'm fine, just tired.” Dot hasn't shared her doctor's worries with the children yet, how he referred her to a neurologist who now wants a lumbar puncture done along with an MRI. Dot thanked the neurologist at the conclusion of the appointment, but hasn't booked the follow-ups. She recalls her husband's experience during his last years, the doctors and the tests. She doesn't want gloved hands prying at her and metal instruments prodding into her flesh.

Angie nods in way that makes Dot think she doesn't quite believe her. “I got you something too,” she says and pulls a pair of earrings from her backpack. A red stone glints in the center of each gold knot. “Garnet, like Dad's birth stone.”

“Angie. How did you afford this?”

“You deserve it, Mom. Don't worry.” She pecks her on the cheek. “Plus, they're fake.” Angie grabs her backpack and heads for school, leaving her mother perched on the edge of her bed.

As usual, with Angie out of the house for the day, Dot peeks through her things and gathers more evidence. Yet always, Angie returns in the evening smiling, her face flushed from laughter with her girlfriends, and Dot remembers Angie's lonely, disconcerting anger during the year following her father's death. She reminds herself of

Angie's words to her in the hospital hall, her accusations; the year of silence with her bedroom door locked shut. Dot thinks of how far they've come together, and she says nothing. Teenage girls swipe things from stores; Dot did so herself, and she grew out of it. This is a phase, Dot is sure.

V. 2005

When Jon lay close to death, enduring the pain of his failing liver, Dot sat and held his hand and stroked his cheek. His skin felt dry and thin like parchment, and over his last days she watched him jaundice like old parchment paper, too. It pained her to look at him, but she forced herself to watch as his condition worsened. It felt to her like a form of penance. She still had her youth and health and future—so much youth and health and future that the notion of truly experiencing the pain felt by her husband was impossible. Could she understand what he was feeling? Could she find adequate words to offer him comfort or relief? She could not. It was only right, then, that she dedicate herself to his suffering, memorize it.

“Dot? Are you here?” Jon had asked. Those would be his last words, Dot was sure.

Josh's mom had come for Greg. Angie had stomped off, who knows where, but she must be close. Dot could call them. They could be here for this—should be here. What would the hospital do—in the moment of Jon's death, could they bring themselves to deny Greg a goodbye? Dot could deal with the police and the charges later, after Jon was gone. There would be time to manage it all. Dot reached into her pocket for her cell,

but Jon was restless beside her. His slack mouth let out soft moans; his hands grasped for hers. Dot turned of the phone and pulled her chair closer to his bed.

VI. 2005

“I want you to know the school is doing everything we can to get the video removed,” the principal, Mr. Neal, tells Dot and the mother of the other boy, the one her son has beaten. To Dot’s weary dismay, both women have been summoned to the principal’s office together yet again, months after she’d hoped the whole affair would be settled.

Despite the school’s attempts to slow the spread of the video, the view count is growing, Mr. Neal explains. It’s imperative to have the video removed and he has drafted email after email complaining to the site runners. Mr. Neal wants—needs—their help, he pleads, addressing them by their first names. Charlene is the other woman’s name. Her son is Chaz. Chaz and Charlene, a pair.

Dot has offended Charlene at the start of this meeting, yet again, unintentionally. Charlene stretched her arm out for a handshake and Dot, too weak on her feet today to stand for the greeting, commanded her hand to clasp the woman’s, but instead it trembled on her lap. By the time she’d lifted her arm, Charlene had dropped her own hand with a sniff.

“These students are minors, and the inclusion of the high school’s name is slanderous.” Mr. Neal recites his most recent email plea aloud.

Dot wants to correct the principal—as the school’s name appears in print, it’s actually libel, and still this isn’t libel if the accusations are true.

When he's finished, he looks up. "We hope that you'll both write in as well. I think, as the parents, you'll have some sway. Maybe the officer overseeing Greg's community service could add a few words about how hard he's worked, how much his behavior has improved."

"I'll ask," Dot agrees. She fears, silently, that it isn't likely. At first, Greg returned home from his afternoons at the police station sullen and shamefaced from whatever chore he'd been assigned. Lately, though, he is blasé as ever, referring to his community service as blandly as he would any extracurricular.

"It's in everyone's best interest for this video to be removed," Mr. Neal continues. "I'm sure you all agree."

"It's in my son's best interest to put all of this behind him. He needs to move on from this terrible chapter." Charlene often speaks this way, couching ugly truths in euphemisms: *terrible chapter, horrifying incident*.

Your son joined mine in that circle, Dot wants to remind her. The boy hadn't been sucker punched.

"It's a painful reminder, the video," Charlene says. "I hope for Greg's sake it gets taken down. But anyone who views it will know Chaz did nothing wrong."

"Oh, please." Dot shifts in her seat, cringing even as the words leave her mouth. The outburst is unintentional.

"Excuse me?" Charlene leans forward.

"Nothing," Dot says.

"I think we should talk this out," Mr. Neal coaches. He did this same coaching with Chaz and Greg, reading cautiously-worded questions from worksheets in a binder

that was labeled *Conflict Resolution Revolution!* The front of the binder had a stock photograph of a pair of teenagers with wide, unnerving grins giving each other the thumbs up.

Oh, shut *up*, Dot thinks. She is exhausted of talking it out with this family, using *I statements* and *brainstorming win/win situations* in this stuffy office, circling the same horrible facts of their situation, of Greg's behavior, until they are dizzy. She presses her palms into her lap.

"Fine. Your son may have lost the fight, but that's not something to be proud of. No one walks into a fight hoping to lose. He would have kicked Greg's ass, if he could. I'm not proud of my son, but at least I admit his part in all of this."

Charlene sits back, stunned. The principal is silent too, a mercy. Dot is sure he's eyeing his conflict resolution binder on the bookshelf across the room.

"Forgive me," she says, bracing herself against the armrests of the chair and struggling onto her feet. "I'm not feeling well."

Dot heads for the door at a hobble, an excruciating pace. As she turns to exit, she catches Charlene shake her head sympathetically at Mr. Neal. Dot is freshly humiliated by the woman's pity, at how, after she leaves, they will agree that her comments were inexcusable but understandable given her stress, given her condition.

At home, she boots up her computer and pulls up Youtube. She hovers the mouse over the "contact" link, intending to give Mr. Neal his email plea, but instead opens up her bookmarks folder and clicks the link labeled "Tax Info." At first, she'd kept it bookmarked as a link labeled "Diet Recipes," but she revised the title in case Angie became health-conscious and curious.

During the wait for the video to load, Dot's chest is crowded with familiar dread. And the fight begins, giving Dot the sick satisfaction of having the ordeal visualized in front of her once again, and exactly as she has memorized it. It has become a relief to see Greg's first, bold swing and Chaz's sloppy slap. Dot has internalized the rhythms of their tussle and is gratified as each blow comes in just as expected. By rewatching the fight, committing it to memory, Dot imagines she can perform penance for raising a boy so full of adolescent rage and exorcise the shame from her gut. Despite the fight's horrible conclusion, she has an advantage on the film, she thinks—now, each time she watches, she already knows how it will end. In this way, she finds comfort in knowing the worst of what is yet to come.

VI. 2001

Their mother settled Greg and Angie, swaddled in towels, into the backseat of the car for the drive home from Cape May. During past trips, Greg often grew restless and angry at vacation's end, and he'd thrown tantrums before grudgingly buckling into his seat. Now, though, his muscles ached with an agreeable tiredness, and he rested his head on the window, anticipating a nap. His teeth chattered with the memory of the waves and his skin grew tight and parched with the salt of drying ocean water. Greg's father noticed his chill and twisted the air conditioning knob to warm, though his mother sighed out, "The heat? It's August, Jon." Sand clumped wet and gritty in Greg's sneakers and in the seat of his swim trunks.

Your father would be so disappointed in you, Greg's mother will someday find reason to say, and on more than one occasion. Would he be? His father might have seen

things Greg's way. He might have taken Greg's side. Greg will never feel certain; he will often wonder, questioning at his father's lost opinions, worrying how well any boy could grow to know his dad by the age of twelve. In later years, thinking of his father, Greg will remember the tremendous, burdensome silence of the hospital room; the crack of the delicate bones of the doctor's nose under his fist, how warm the doctor's blood felt on his knuckles and the startling relief that warmth brought him; his mother abandoning him in that moment by forfeiting his goodbye. He will understand later how her betrayal was a relief to him as well, how his adolescent rage served as a welcome diversion from his grief.

What Greg will also remember of his father is this final vacation's end: the steady chug of the car up the Jersey Turnpike; the car's snug warmth urging him to nap beside his sister while his parents murmur their conversation. And before this, his dad holding him in the surf: the cold, gentle slap of the ocean against his legs on each downward swoop; the sunlight breaking into glitter on the waves; the sturdy strength of his father's arms and shoulders raising him way up into the sky.

LUCKY LADY

I.

Ili, Angie's boss, was late opening the shop, again. Though Angie knew it was Ili's husband's uneven temperament that delayed them most mornings, Ili never uttered a word against Pista. Angie sat on the boardwalk in front of Lucky Lady Boutique and leaned back against the store gate until the metal's heat cut through her dress and into her back. Just north of Lucky Lady, a pair of lifeguards heaved their stand upright in the sand. Through her sunglasses, Angie squinted into the ocean where sunlight fractured on the waves. Gulls gathered above and swooped low, pecking at crumbs in the sand. One lifeguard scrawled the day's water temperature and wave forecast onto the large chalkboard nailed to the back of their stand. 59° and *CHOPPY*, a bit chilly still, and rough, for mid-June on Seaside Park.

"I'm coming, I'm coming." Ili's figure came into view running up the boardwalk to the store, one hand holding an enormous straw hat to her head and the store keys jangling from the other.

Pista followed, shuffling his rubber flip flops at a lethargic pace along the wooden boards. "*Angela*," he said and tipped his Phillies cap, sunbleached pink, in her direction and held her gaze.

"Pista, go." Ili took off her hat and gave her husband a little shove towards the arcade, Lucky Leo's, next door. Her blond strands frizzed into curls in the salty, humid air.

He leaned in for a kiss and Ili murmured something in Hungarian into the sunburnt skin of his neck. Ili swatted his ass and he ambled to the arcade. He paused at the locked door, keys in hand, and Angie felt his eyes on her as she stood, taking pains that as she stood her skirt covered everything, or everything essential.

Ili was all chatter in the shop, taking twice as long to dress the mannequins and fill out the morning paperwork. Twice she interrupted herself while counting the opening funds in the cash register and had to start over when her total came up short. It was stuffy in the shop; Ili had begun turning the air off at night to save on the electric bill. Angie, as Ili was distracted by her little pile of stubborn cash, slid the knob on the thermostat down a few more degrees.

“Still short.” Ili shook her head and pushed her long bangs from her forehead with the heel of her hand. “Finish the ladies, will you?” She gestured to the two dress forms that would flank the boardwalk entrance once the shop was open. The mannequins and forms were *ladies* to Ili, and they were dressed to Ili’s rules. *An outfit is like a sandwich*, she liked to say. *It needs some BLT*, meaning a bottom, a layer, and a top. All mannequins had to be dressed in no less than three garments at all times, as this was *suggestive of outfitting*. This applied to Angie as well. Three garments made an outfit, and if she came to work in anything less, Ili’s reaction would have been tantamount to Angie showing up naked.

Though Lucky Lady belonged to Pista, it was Ili’s pet. Pista purchased it along with the arcade next door five years ago when they moved from Budapest, where Ili had danced with the corps in the Hungarian National Ballet, to New Jersey. The space had been empty but for a broken cash register and some teetering, rusty rounders. Now it was

warm, stylish, and slightly bohemian, just as Angie would describe Ili herself. The shop was outfitted with pale green walls, wrought iron fixtures, and an oversized velvet chaise lounge that was always occupied by customers resting their limbs wearied by the relentless sun. By closing each night, the lounge was dusted with a fine, iridescent layer of sand. A huge chandelier hung as the focal point just inside the boardwalk entrance and swayed with the ocean breeze. Its delicate, varied beads reminded Angie of spun-sugar candies. Underneath the chandelier, Ili housed the jewelry display in a birdcage nearly as tall as Angie. Ili burnt incense when the smokey-sweet tang of sausage from the Midway Steaks Shop south on the boards overwhelmed the salt of the sea air.

Ili's vision was, Angie admitted, a diversion compared to the other shops lining the boardwalk. Sometimes, she wondered where Ili housed her nerve. Inside Lucky Lady, where oldies or jazz piped through the speakers and beautiful clothing fringed the walls, customers could forget that just outside, a line of tourist traps slouched along the boardwalk hawking overpriced t-shirts with silkscreened offensive sayings across the chest. Adrenalin, the tourist trap-body piercing parlor, just 50 feet north on the boards, had a big seller already this summer: baby onesies airbrushed to proclaim *My Mom's a MILF*. Kevin, the owner, performed piercings himself in a back room under questionable hygiene standards. At 17, Angie had Kevin pierce her belly button there on a dare.

Angie felt Ili's eyes on her as she sorted through the racks and pulled garments for the dress forms. Ili wanted hip and fresh, and so the forms that flanked the boardwalk entrance were changed daily. Usually, Ili yelped corrections or pulled tops from Angie's hands. Ili tossed other, better garments her direction in ribbons of soft, light fabric. Today, Ili was quiet until she remarked, "We're twenty short."

“Really? Yikes.” Angie trained her gaze on the scarf she was draping. Scarves were always awkward on dress forms—something to do with the lack of a reasonable neck, she thought. “Maybe last night’s deposit was over?” She kept her voice low, aiming for a tone of mild interest without alarm.

“Maybe.” Ili sighed. “We need small bills. No time for the bank. Go ask Pista, hmm?” She pressed bills into her palm. “Two hundred dollars.”

Pista’s promises were scrawled in neon all over Lucky Leo’s front windows. *BEST LUCK IN TOWN; NO ONE LEAVES WITHOUT A PRIZE; AIR CONDITIONED; AUTHENTIC JERZ SKEE BALL.* Inside, the air conditioning let out asthmatic sputters and the speakers amplified coarse rap lyrics in between swathes of static. The red carpet was worn thin and dull from years of beachgoers tramping in seawater and sand. Arcade machines hummed and flashed under sallow fluorescent lighting. Behind the prize counter, Pista strung up knock-off Coach and Gucci bags beside bloated stuffed animals and beer bong.

“Pista?” Angie called into the empty arcade. “Hello?” She knocked on the office door. “We need change.”

“Fine, fine. Come in.” Pista sat behind the desk. The office was small and hot, and he was impossibly large, not hard muscle but meat—undefined but solid, strong. His hulking size and blunt mannerisms suggested muscles hidden, roped in by his tanned flesh and couched in fat. “How much?”

“Two-fifty.”

“Christ,” he spat and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Tell her to go to the bank.”

“You were late. We had no time.”

“Right. We were taking care of some business.”

Angie hated Pista’s fake smile, his joyless manner of widening his lips and displaying his teeth.

“We need small bills. Maybe some twenties.”

He knelt below the desk and unlocked the safe. He pulled out a stack of bills, counted them slowly on the desk, saying the numbers aloud. “Two-fifty.” He held out his hand.

Angie handed him Ili’s folded hundred and two fifties. Most days making change, Pista trusted her implicitly—out of disregard, not confidence. He trusted her as though she were an extension of his wife with no schema of her own; those days he shuffled the bills into the safe without glancing down at them.

“Let’s see.” He counted once, twice. “Two hundred fifty?”

“You know,” Angie swallowed, “I didn’t even count. I must have misheard her. Or maybe Ili miscounted. She couldn’t get the opening funds to match up with the last night’s deposit—”

“Enough,” Pista said, standing. “Ili’s two hundred. Get going.” He pulled a few bills from his stack and handed Angie the rest.

“Okay.” Angie edged to the office door. “I’m, um, sorry. For the misunderstanding. I’ll be more careful next time.”

“You will,” Pista said. He folded up the remaining bills lengthwise and held them between his third and forefinger. “But this time will be our little secret, sweetheart, huh?”

“I don’t understand.”

He extended his arm so that the money poked her lightly between her breasts. “You need something, princess, next time you just ask me.” He smiled, grim lips and gritted teeth.

The edges of the worn bills tickled her chest. Angie, avoiding his gaze and careful not to touch his hand, took the fifty bucks and slid it into her pocket.

In Lucky Lady, Ili was already worrying at the day’s prospects for sales. “How is it over there? Many customers?”

Across the boards, the beach was clotted with umbrellas and beach towels, though the boardwalk was still bare.

“No, but it’s early. Give it some time.”

Angie arrived home late after an hour of stagnant beach traffic on Route 72 and hurried in the door. Her mother had called three times during her shift but left no messages; when Angie called back, she was directed to the answering machine. The last time this had happened, Angie had come home to find her mother stranded on her back on the kitchen tile and her walker upended beside her.

Today was the same; her mother Dot lay on the kitchen floor on her side with her head cushioned in the crook of her arm. The cordless phone, stored in the walker’s basket when not charging, lay dead on the floor. Their retriever Susie curled at Dot’s side and rested her head on her hip.

“Mom!” Angie tipped the walker upright and lightly pushed Susie away. Susie let out a plaintive yelp. “Why didn’t you leave me a message? Or call the store?”

“Oh, I knew you’d be back soon. I’m fine.”

Angie knelt in front of her mom and arranged Dot’s arms around her neck. “One, two, three.” Angie stood, and with much exertion, she brought her mother up with her. “To the left...”

Dot found her footing and shuffled as directed. Angie wrapped her left arm around her mother’s waist and circled the soft give of her belly. No matter how many times they’d done this, it still felt like a transgression, this proximity to her mother’s body, the intimacies of its loose, damp flesh and tang of sweat. Angie held her mother’s arm around her neck with her right hand, supporting her weight as best she could, and guided Dot to the seat in her rolling walker.

“Whew.” The effort of the maneuver showed on Dot’s flushed face. She breathed loudly through her mouth.

“How about something to drink?” Angie grabbed bottled water from the fridge and unscrewed the top before handing it over. “Did you try calling Greg?”

“No, I’m sure he’s busy. I didn’t want to bother anybody.”

“Right.” Since Angie’s brother began his freshman year at Rutgers in the fall, he’d been useless—erratic visits, rare to help, slow to answer his phone. He’d already rented an apartment in New Brunswick with classmates for his sophomore year, and he’d moved in straight from the dorm last month.

He had been fifteen, and Angie seventeen, when the doctors gave Dot their diagnosis. Multiple Sclerosis. Greg had been the strong one, the muscle in their operation. He made travel possible, carrying their mother to the van when she couldn’t make it in the walker and hitching up her scooter in the back when she wanted to visit the

mall or the park. When Dot fell, Greg got her up again, and this happened often in the summers as the heat puffed up her legs and traded sensation in her limbs for tingles and numbness. When the stairs became too daunting, Greg set up a new bed in the living room along with the familiar bedside table and dresser their parents had once shared in their bedroom upstairs.

Angie had taken up the cooking, the cleaning, and the laundry even when her mom protested she'd handle it herself. During the bad episodes when Dot's legs swelled and she wept in quiet frustration from her dizzy spells and trembling hands, Angie helped her mom bathe and made her face up with Dior cosmetics lifted from the Sephora at the Hamilton Mall. Together, Greg and Angie made it work, as they had when their father died of pancreatic cancer five years before their mother's diagnosis. Angie took classes in fashion design at Monmouth University after graduation and commuted from home so that her brother would have the chance to live in a dorm when his turn came. Angie hadn't heard from her brother since his move nearly five weeks ago.

"How was work?" Dot asked.

"Fine. Ili's fine, today at least. Pista's a jerk."

"I wish you wouldn't get so wrapped up in all of that."

"I'm not wrapped up. It's a job, Mom. A summer job." Angie opened the fridge.

"Chicken? Pasta? I don't even feel like making a sandwich."

"And I wish you'd consider taking the summer off from work after all. Maybe summer classes."

"It's too late for that, Mom. I told you, registration is over."

“Well, maybe if I call and tell them why you missed it, that you’ve been helping me out. There must be some way to sign up—a late fee? I’ll pay it.”

“No.” Angie shoved the refrigerator door shut. “I want to work. I want the money. Let’s order a pizza.”

Dot gestured at the corner cabinet drawer. “You’ll have to check. I don’t know if we can this week.”

Angie opened the drawer and pulled out the slim white envelope where her mother had rationed out their monthly budget since she’d been forced to resign from her job as a dental hygienist a year after her diagnosis. Angie angled her body to block her movements as she pulled Pista’s cash from her pocket, keeping one twenty-dollar bill and sliding the rest inside. She shut the drawer with more raw, nervous energy than she’d intended.

“Don’t slam the drawers. You know we’re trying to keep the cabinets in good shape.”

“Sorry.” Angie waved the twenty. “There’s plenty of cash. I’m picking up dinner.”

In her car, Angie dialed her brother’s number. “Greg,” she spat into his voice mailbox. Angie slid the car into reverse and edged out of the driveway. “What the hell. You know Mom’s worse in the summer. Get your ass over here sometime.”

II.

The first time Angie stole from Ili, it was a pair of earrings last summer, two months after Angie was hired. The earrings were redlined on the clearance rack for \$16.99. That

morning, Ili left for the stockroom to sob out the fresh memory of Pista's rough words and rougher hands. Angie could hear her gasps and wails over the light jazz playing from the speakers, and she turned up the CD player's volume to allow her some privacy. This wasn't the first time Ili came in wearing long-sleeved sweaters and scarves in the humid August heat and left Angie on the sales floor alone.

Angie didn't know why, exactly, she took the earrings. She'd been stealing from the CVS for years, just small stuff they'd hardly miss. Chapstick, gum, nail polish. Used to be, energy whizzed from her heart to her fingertips every time, but lately she'd felt numb when she pocketed yet another trifle. Blank curiosity ruled her and kept her at it. It was inevitable she'd be found out soon: there'd she'd be, caught in the wink of a hidden camera's lens; the sudden, dour weight of a drugstore manager's grip would fall on her shoulder; she'd acquiesce with shaking hands to his demands to empty her pockets or her handbag. Each time she was certain it was coming, but she was never caught. She grew more practiced, more assured; she moved on to bigger game—fistfuls of lacy underthings at Victoria's Secret, perfume bottles, designer sunglasses. Angie grew angry with the salespeople, their oblivious incompetence. She took more.

Angie wasn't angry with Ili, exactly; she was angry with Pista, his hulking presence each morning in the shop, his unkind smile and leering eyes. She was angered by how unpredictable Pista made Ili, Ili who some days swanned into the store with a sated, dazed expression on her flushed face and practiced *jetés* and *pirouettes* between garment trees, humming grandly, and other days skulked through the door as shivery and timorous as an animal that's been struck. It was Pista Angie was thinking of as she

unhooked the shiny baubles from their little cardboard square. She pocketed the earrings, ripped up their tag, and threw the cardboard pieces in the trash.

But maybe Angie was mad, just a little, at Ili, this twig of a woman so slender and breakable. This woman so hopeful even as she pulled her sleeves over the bruises purpling her thin wrists and counted cash in her little store which wasn't hers at all.

III.

Outside the shop, the grey sky hung limp and low above the dunes. In the dim, Angie could just make out the ocean's restless movements in the storm. It had rained all morning in violent sheaves, and Ili had to pull the glass door shut to shelter the garments from rain and to steady the chandelier from gusts of wind. Bad weather days made Ili grumpy; all she could do was brood on the money lost.

"It may as well be winter," Ili said, looking out the glass storefront. "Not a customer in sight. We may as well be closed."

"What do you do while the store is closed in the winter? You don't work all year?" Angie asked.

"I make shopping trips all over, for inspiration and to buy fashions for next year. I count inventory. I sit a lot. Watch television."

"What about Pista? The arcade closes too. How do you live?"

"He has other businesses, other projects." Ili shook her head. "He invests."

"Ili, I want to work for you after you close up in September." Angie approached Ili and grabbed her hand. "I could really use the money, and there must be something

you do that I can help with. I can go with you to buy clothes, I'll draw up business reports, whatever Pista wants done."

"You focus on school, or else I have to answer to your mother."

"Ili," Angie sighed. "I'm not going back, okay? I'm done with school. It's over."

"Over? What do you mean?"

"I messed up. My mom was having a relapse, and I let stuff slide, missed classes. I had this paper due and I," Angie felt her mouth arc into an odd smile, surprised at how strange it felt to be saying it aloud. "I plagiarized it."

"You what?"

"Plagiarize. It means to steal the paper."

"You stole?" Ili threw Angie's hand away from her as though it were something dirty.

"Words, Ili. I stole words, that's all, words." Angie insides kinked up inside her like a garden hose at the lie, and her explanation came out quicker, louder than she intended. "My professor could tell it wasn't my paper. I told her what was wrong, that my mom was sick. She didn't turn me in. I would have been expelled, and she felt sorry for me. But she failed me. It screwed up my GPA, I lost my scholarship, and now I can't afford to go back. I'll work all year, doing whatever, as long as I can save."

Starting her confession, Angie was unsure why she'd share this with Ili after guarding this shame for months from her mother and from her friends, but it became clear as Ili's shoulders caved and Ili backed away from her. Angie wanted Ili's forgiveness. If

Ili could absolve her of the plagiarism, she thought, it would be as though everything else, everything that Ili didn't know about, were forgiven too.

“Angie, you have to tell your mom. It's no good to lie. She'll find out.”

“She won't. Not yet. Not until I figure something out.”

“I can't help you, Angie.” Ili stepped away from the storefront and wrapped her arms around herself, shivering at the wind against the glass.

“Because you're mad that I cheated at school? Or because you have no work for me at all in the fall?”

“Because I won't be here for long.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I'm trying to get away, Angie.” Ili shook her head. “I have no family here, no friends. All I have is Pista. You must think I'm so dumb, coming here.” Ili wilted onto the chaise lounge.

“Ili, no.”

“I know what you must think. He wasn't like this in Budapest. I would never come here if I knew—” Ili ran her fingertips across the lounge's velvet. “We were supposed to go to New York. I would try out for New York City Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, you know? Many opportunities. New Jersey is temporary, he promised.” She shook her head. “I believed him.”

“Where will you go?”

“New York, maybe, after all.”

“To dance?”

Ili shook her head. “Oh, Angie. I’m too old. And I am out of practice.” She smiled. “Too late for me and ballet. But I will find something, somewhere, somewhere far away. Maybe another store. I can call it Super Lucky Lady.” Ili let out a grim laugh.

“You have savings? I thought Pista controlled the store’s money.”

Ili pulled Angie close beside her on the lounge. She leaned her forehead to Angie’s and lowered her voice to a rapid whisper. “Very little. But I am going to make more after the shop closes and he’s busy with his other things. I am going online. I’ll sell it.” She gestured to the merchandise around them. “I will sell it all and buy other things to sell if I have to.”

“And you’ll be gone before he realizes the store is empty.”

Ili nodded. “That’s my plan.”

“Let me help you.”

“How will you do that?”

“I’ll help you set up a store on eBay. We use my mom’s address so it will never get traced back to you. I have friends who like to shop, and I know what they like to buy. I can refer them to the store. I’ll set up ads for your store on Facebook.” Angie straightened up on the lounge.

“Angie, if Pista finds out you helped me—”

“He won’t. I promise. I promise I can help you do this.”

Ili leaned back, considering. “And you’ll be careful? Pista will never know?”

“He’ll never know.”

Ili grasped Angie by the shoulders and pulled her into an embrace. “Thank you.”

For two more days, the rain tumbled. Ili chattered on with a smile, despite the lack of customers. She took off her shoes to dance and taught Angie how to *pas de chat*. They didn't speak yet about their plans for the fall, but a warmth grew between them in their weighted silence on the subject. The third day, sunlight angled wide across the sand and the waves were gentle and warm like bathwater. After Angie pointed to the lifeguard's sign boasting a water temperature of 76 degrees, Ili told her to take the day off. "It's so beautiful. Go tan. Go swim in the ocean. Go be young." Before Angie left, Ili sent her next door with a list of supplies she wanted Pista to buy.

Angie found Pista in the arcade's office. "Here's a shopping list." She placed the looseleaf paper on the desk and turned. "Ili needs it all."

"Hold it," Pista said. He slid his chair back from the desk. "There's something I've been meaning to show you." He clicked around with his computer mouse and turned the monitor to face Angie. "Ili's been noticing some light stock shortages. Mostly small items. Scarves. Jewelry. The easy stuff to lift. Small stuff, but it adds up. I got a hidden camera."

Angie swallowed. "Great."

"We've been using it for a while. I just had some time to go over the video. The strangest thing." Pista clicked the *play* symbol. The video was cued up. There was tiny, grainy, black-and-white Angie in an empty shop keying open the cash register and slipping bills from the till. Pista paused the tape. "Angela. Didn't I say, sweetheart? You need something, you tell me."

"Does..." Angie closed her eyes for a moment. Her sense of gravity swerved, and she leaned against the wall. "Does the camera record sound?"

“Does it look like I need sound, huh?” Pista stood and walked around the desk. He leaned in close to her. “I haven’t looked through it all yet, but something tells me I got more to see.”

“I’m sorry.” Angie cleared her throat. “I’ll pay you. I’ll pay it back.”

“Pay me how?” He took a step closer. “If you’re taking money, you need it. I know you wouldn’t take anything you didn’t need.”

“Just, please, don’t tell Ili.”

“Sweetheart.” Pista took her trembling hand in his hot, damp palm. “I bet we can work this out.”

Angie snatched her hand away.

Angie tried Ili’s cell phone once, just days after. She dialed from her car, halfway around the block from her house. She hadn’t told her mother about being fired yet, just as she hadn’t told about school. She’d been spending her days idly driving and loitering in a Starbucks until it seemed reasonable that she could be returning home from a shift.

“Ili, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I still want to help you—”

“Don’t call again, Angie.” Ili cut the call.

It was a month before Angie gathered the courage to return. Just before 10 p.m., closing time, she sat on a bench south of the arcade and waited. The boardwalk was frenzied, kinetic with people laughing and children running. Signs for shops and restaurants glowed neon and gold. Further south, on the pier, the Ferris wheel traced lazy circles against the sky. The sea winds brought Angie the familiar salt of the water mixed with the yeast of funnel cake and foamy beer. Ili escorted the last customer out and shut

the door. Ili's new salesgirl, a girl Angie didn't recognize, folded tops and straightened racks and vacuumed the day's trails of sand. Finally, the lights shuttered in Lucky Lady and in the arcade next door. Ili and Pista each locked up. Pista's hand weighted Ili's shoulder as he directed her down the boards.

V.

The following summer, Angie walks by Leo's and Lucky Lady, this time in daylight. Unsure yet if she wants to be seen, she props the largest, darkest sunglasses she owns—the largest ones she's paid for—onto the bridge of her nose. The nurses at Hamilton Hospital have set her mother up with lunch and made her comfortable, and her mother has asked Angie—begged her—to get out of the hospital and see some sunlight for the first time since Dot fell and fractured her ankle three days ago. Midday, the boardwalk's crowd is jumbled and hectic and familiar in its cacophony of swears and laughter and in its scent of mixed sweat and sunscreen—beach season at its most frenetic. Someone not expecting her is unlikely to sift her out from the din. She draws closer to the storefront, joining the two dress forms in their *BLTs*. Inside, despite Angie's anxious whispered chant of *please don't please don't still be here* stands Ili, but frailer than Angie remembers; she's slope-shouldered and her face is swallowed by the many folds of her scarf. Her cheeks are hollow and delicate as shells. Angie removes her sunglasses and raises them; the gesture is a wave or perhaps a capitulation. When Ili's eyes greet hers, Angie's own raw hope gathers inside her chest. She calls out Ili's name once, twice, and again, though Ili has turned away.

HOUSE OF MIRRORS

Two school buses sat on a narrow gravel driveway just inside the entrance of Camp Mason for Girls. It hurt Megan to look at the buses; the sun glinted harsh and angry off the metal as she shaded her eyes. The first bus was full, or nearly. She could just make out the faces of her fellow campers through windows dirtied with dust. The second bus was empty; once all the girls were accounted for, both buses would trace a lazy half-moon around Lake Liberty to Camp Mason for Boys and pick up their male counterparts. Today was both a Friday, the day of Camp Mason's weekly "Friday Fly-Away" field trips, and July fourth. The buses would take their charges, ages twelve to fifteen, to a beach day at Seaside Park ending with a fireworks display on the sand.

On the first bus, the head counselor Erin stood in the aisle and performed roll call. After each name came a whooping reply. On the first day of camp three weeks ago, each girl had been given the task of picking a unique answer to roll call, and the challenge was to be original. Plain old *Here*, Erin said, was unacceptable. Some of these replies were *Hola!* and *Whazzup* and a shrilly pitched *Ow-ow!*, but on that first day, seated on a wooden bench in the Mason mess hall surrounded by girls she didn't know, the only thing Megan could think of was "present."

After a moment of silence, the giggling began. The laughter was hushed behind hands clasped to mouths but quickly rose, or so it seemed to Megan, to a crescendo. Erin, standing on a bench, raised her whistle to her lips and blew, a call for silence. The room quieted, but Rebecca was called next and she answered, "gift!" It took a moment

for the campers to absorb the insult, but the room quickly devolved once more into laughter. The cabins were organized alphabetically by last name, and so at least five or six times a day, every time the girls broke into groups, Megan would be forced to hear her own call of *present* answered with *gift!* and tittering rising up from those around her.

The bus door would stay open until the very last moment, a futile attempt to keep the interior cool in the haze of summer heat. The bus driver, Steve, had a round red face that constantly held a glittering sheen of sweat. Megan watched him reach into his pocket and pull out a yellowed handkerchief. He began to mop up the top of his head, which was bald and shiny in the center and had a ring of hair around it like a horseshoe. Sweat was already soaking through his t-shirt in damp patches, circling around his collar and under his pits. The nicer girls at Camp Mason called him Sweaty Stevie from a reasonable distance; the cruel ones said it to his face.

The three-seater behind the driver's seat was empty, as always—girls who were forced to sit there pinched their noses and exclaimed, “Ew, B.O.!” while gesturing towards Sweaty Stevie. Megan took her seat just in time to hear Erin call her name. “Present,” she muttered. Next, Rebecca called out “gift!” The joke had grown tired, but Rebecca's friends still laughed each time. Megan ducked down, put her backpack on her lap, and turned her attention to the window rather than the yard of empty space beside her.

When the last camper was accounted for, Sweaty Stevie gunned the ignition and brought the bus to life like a great, sputtering beast. Megan's thighs were already sticking to the brown faux leather of the seat. By the time the buses reached Seaside, there would be dark crescents of sweat soaking through the arms of her blue tank top.

She supposed she could take the top off in favor of her swim suit, but just the thought of displaying her boring pink one-piece again in the presence of the girls who filled out their bikinis brought a prickling heat to the back of her neck. Even some of the young girls, at just twelve, were wearing two-pieces and filling them out better than Megan, who would be fifteen in September.

With some effort, Megan pinched in the slots on the bus window and yanked it down to allow in a narrow current of hot, blustery air, and held her elbows out at an awkward angle from her torso, like chicken wings, to let the wind into her armpits.

Her mother had caught her in this same position earlier in the summer in the car and called it the “sweaty chicken pose” before suggesting they look for a stronger antiperspirant on their next visit to CVS. To Megan’s chagrin, she had been made to carry a Secret Prescription Strength Invisible Solid to the clerk, a boy she recognized as one of brothers in the corner house on her block, now a junior at Wilson High, where she’d begin ninth grade in the fall. Megan placed her purchase on the counter, then seeing how the lone deodorant looked on the red laminate, tossed a pack of M&Ms next to it.

“You’re starting at Wilson in the fall, right?” He had floppy brown bangs that fell just far enough over his forehead so that he had a constant manner of shaking his head to free his eyes, a tic that Megan found attractive.

Megan nodded and averted her eyes. She handed him a five-dollar bill but he hadn’t totaled her out yet.

“You’re in a hurry. That’s five-oh-seven, please.”

“He was a cutie,” Megan’s mother noted. “Why didn’t you talk to him?”

Megan shrugged. They were barely at the automatic door, and she was certain the cashier could hear every word. She pointed at her mother's bag. "What'd you get?"

Her mother raised her eyebrows and smiled. "Supplies. Dr. Barry and I are doing *dinner and movie* later."

Megan's mother had begun seeing her orthodontist six months after the divorce. Dr. Whitman, who had fit Megan for a nightguard to remedy her overbite and tightened her chains twice a month, now insisted she call him Dr. Barry. Snooping around in her mother's room, Megan had discovered when her mother started keeping condoms in the little heart-shaped box on her night table again for the first time since her father moved out to the Society Hill Apartments.

There was no actual hill by her father's apartment complex, Megan had discovered, and no flowers or grass either. It was just a condo development where he shared a pool with strangers and the windows overlooked numbered parking spots. Megan spent every other weekend on the pullout couch there; she was grateful for this schedule because it allowed her to miss half of her mother and Dr. Barry's date nights, during which she was supposed to keep the TV in her room on with the volume up. It was an embarrassing setup for all three of them, Megan thought, but she seemed to be the only one who noticed.

When Dr. Barry was at the house for dinner, he liked forcing Megan to smile for him so he could bend his head down to look at her teeth.

"Still wearing that retainer every night?" he'd muse, his breath hot on her face. "Beautiful. I do good work, if I say so myself." Dr. Barry's laugh was loud, guttural and

surprising; he was a squat man with short limbs. “With a smile like that, you must be beating the boys off her with a stick, huh, Connie?”

Megan’s mother would force a laugh.

*

This was Megan’s first time at sleep-away camp, and she could not have predicted that the cliques and pettiness of the girls at middle school would be magnified tenfold in the absence of boys. Megan kept her unhappiness from her mother in her weekly phone calls. Her mother called her cell phone at five p.m. every Sunday, the agreed-upon time for catching up, and talked about the movies she’d seen with Dr. Barry and a celebrity cooking show they both liked to watch.

The first night in Cabin 12, the girls played Truth or Dare. Rebecca was dared to run a lap around the cabin in nothing but her sneakers, and she did, screaming in laughter all the way so that girls from other cabins peeked through their windows to see the commotion. Two of the girls were dared to kiss, and they brought their lips together in a quick peck and then jumped apart as if they had been burnt, which sent the other girls into a riot of laughter.

“Megan, Truth or Dare?” Rebecca asked.

Megan was unprepared. Afraid of being made to run naked or endure some other, similar humiliation, she chose Truth.

“How far have you gotten? You know, with a guy.” Rebecca said.

Megan shrugged.

“What?” Rebecca cried. “Not even a kiss? And how old are you, fourteen? We have to have a chat.” She brushed her blonde curls away from her forehead and put on a

mock-serious face. “Sometimes, when two people love each other very, very much...” she began, but was overtaken by laughter.

“So, Rebecca, what about you?” asked another girl, Nicole. “How far?”

Rebecca raised her eyebrows and made a vulgar gesture. Megan was disgusted at the mime, but the rest of the girls unwound into giddy laughter.

*

Megan found the beach was unbearably hot and crowded. She’d applied sunscreen fastidiously on the bus; with her red hair and pale freckled skin, she burnt easily.

Megan’s mother, who’d experienced a melanoma scare a few years ago, would be upset if she came home from camp with even a noticeable tan.

Megan was supposed to spend the trip with her cabin group, but Rebecca and the other girls hurried off. Erin staked small flags about a hundred yards apart on the sand; it was okay for the campers to put down their towels in this area. In front of her, girls were walking together, arms clasped, and the boys were ricocheting between groups, shoving one girl before setting off to bounce into another. There were couples forming; the coed field trips had sprung a few summer romances.

The sand scalded the soles of Megan’s bare feet, and she stopped and bent to slide her rubber flip flops back on. Hampered by her sandals, she trudged on, the soles of her shoes sending puffs of sand into the air and onto the back of her calves with each awkward step.

Yards away, Rebecca and the cabin mates lounged in their bikinis. Behind them lay a small square of sand just large enough for a single towel. Megan scanned the beach for another empty spot. The girls were lying in a row, eyes closed, with their bikini

straps slid down off their shoulders. Despite Megan's attempt not to draw attention to herself, her flip-flop sent a spray of sand onto Rebecca's shoulder.

"Hey, you said you were going to play nice today, Toby," Rebecca said in flirtatious mock-anger, then lowered her sunglasses and opened her eyes. "Oh. It's you." She put her sunglasses back on. "I hope you didn't come here to sit with us, Present. I'm afraid there's no more room. Maybe you should sit on the bus." The other girls lifted themselves onto their elbows to get a better look as they laughed.

By the time Megan spread out her towel, her cabin-mates were sunning themselves silently. For once, Megan was grateful that they had been able to forget about her so quickly. In a few hours before the camp was supposed to assemble at Funtown Pier on the boardwalk for carnival rides. Megan contemplated going into the water—but suppose with no one to watch her things, Rebecca went through her backpack and took something as a prank? She put her earbuds in to drown out the mass of families, children, and her fellow campers. She closed her eyes.

Megan woke with the scorching heat of the sun baked deep into her skin. Opening her eyes and sitting up on her elbows, she instantly felt the pain like a rug burn all over her body. Looking down, her legs were flushed pink all the way down to her toes. She stood uneasily and pressed a finger into the redness of her arm. She pulled her finger away and it left a white dot in its wake that slowly flushed again. Megan felt a wave of nausea overtake her in a wallop, and she plopped back down onto her towel. Tears sprang to her eyes from the pain. And she'd been so good about using sunscreen so far. When her mother saw her at the end of the next week, it would all be for nothing.

Megan looked at her watch and saw she was thirty minutes late for the camp meeting at the pier. Rebecca and the other girls had abandoned their spot on the sand; a family with two small children had lain towels down in their place. She stuffed her belongings into her backpack and made for the boardwalk. The pier was a good distance down the boards, and she braced herself against the beating sun as she marched and ignored the catcalls from boys working the games: “Three dollars to play! The first toss is free!” She noticed others staring at her, wincing at her sunburn. She marched on. At the pier, there wasn’t a familiar face in the holiday throng. All the rides had long, winding lines, so she forfeited the bumper cars and Ferris wheel for the Hall of Mirrors, eager to get a moment out of the sun.

Megan entered the hall and gasped. She knew she would be red, yet nothing could have prepared her for the shade of her skin reflected a hundred times in front of her in the Hall’s entrance, each reflection growing smaller and smaller until in the distance she could only make out a red dot on the glass. She wanted to duck out of the room, but there were people already behind her, and so she had no choice but to pace through the attraction, faced with her own painful image manipulated and multiplied.

In the last room of the Hall, the first of three mirrors reflected Megan stout and rotund, and as she made her way closer to the image she watched herself become wider than she was tall. The second blew her head up to wild proportions until her body was shorter than her forehead. In the third, she saw her already lanky, curve-less form stretched taller and thinner, until she was only a vertical red line in the center of the wavy, greasy sheet. Unnerved, Megan hurried from the Hall of Mirrors back onto the pier, blinking in the sudden sunlight.

“Oh my God,” she heard a familiar voice cry. “She looks like a lobster!”

Megan couldn't tell which of the girls from camp it was, and not wanting to know, she ducked her head and ran, fighting her way through the crowd to the closest bathroom. Inside, she leaned against the wall with her eyes shut tight and enjoyed the cool of the tiles against her skin.

“Are you sick?”

Megan opened her eyes. A tall, slender blonde woman stood in front of her.

“I'm okay, just burnt.” Megan averted her eyes. The woman wasn't wearing anything revealing—a flowing skirt and a light sweater with long sleeves—in this heat!—but Megan was still unnerved by the ease and grace of her posture and limbs. These were the kind of girls—women—that made Megan feel comparatively blundering and self-conscious.

“I can tell,” the woman said. She had an accent that Megan couldn't place, something musical. Eastern European, Megan guessed. “Where are your parents, your family?”

“I'm here with my camp.”

“We should get you to your camp people, then,” the woman said and brushed her long bangs off of her forehead. “You look terrible.”

“No. Camp is the worst. I hate everyone.”

“That's too bad.” She walked to the sink and ran water over a handful of paper towels. The woman placed the cool towels on Megan's arms and shoulders.

“Thanks,” Megan said, and she asked the woman's name.

“My name is Ili.”

“I’m Megan.”

“Megan, you are very, very burnt.” The woman ran more towels under the faucet.

“I’m going to stick these on your legs, okay?”

Megan nodded. The towels were wet enough to cling to her skin, but she had to stay very still to keep them from falling.

“Does that feel better?”

“It does.”

The woman rummaged through her purse and pulled out a miniature vial of Advil. “Here,” she said, and she tipped out two pills. “This will help with the pain. Should I find you a bottle of water?”

“No,” Megan said, suddenly both embarrassed and grateful to have this stranger mothering her. She was thirsty, but she didn’t want Ili to leave.

Ili stayed with Megan in the crowded bathroom while other women and girls pushed past them to get to the stalls. Ili checked the temperature of the damp towels on Megan’s arm and legs and replaced them when they absorbed the heat from her skin. Eventually, when Ili told her she had to get back to work, Megan was nearly overcome with frustration and disappointment in losing this friend, her first and only friend of the summer.

“You can come visit me in my store if you need anything,” Ili told her outside the bathroom. “It’s right down the boards there. There’s a big chandelier in the doorway.” Ili gestured south on the boardwalk. “You see it?”

Megan nodded, sad to see Ili depart. She spent the rest of her day under the pier—it was the only spot on the beach where she could hide from the sun without having

to pay to eat something. The sand under the pier was refreshing, much preferable to the sun-baked sand outside. When it finally grew dark, she pulled herself away from under the pier.

Megan headed for the spot that Erin had dictated earlier; the group would watch the fireworks together and then return to the buses. Looking for the pizzeria that was to be the landmark, Megan realized she was one pier too far south; she could either fight through the crowd on the boardwalk to get to the other side of the pier or cross under it. Thinking the second option easier, she cut straight through and in the darkness stumbled over what she realized was a body.

“What the hell?” a male voice cried out. “Watch it, will you?”

“Sorry.” Megan tried to find her voice. “I didn’t see...”

“Is that Present?” the voice said.

As Megan’s eyes adjusted in the darkness, she recognized Toby, Rebecca’s boyfriend.

“Megan,” she said. “My name is Megan.”

“Sorry.” He patted the sand beside him. “Sit down, Megan.”

“Won’t Rebecca mind?”

“She’s gone,” he said. “She ditched me. She’s full of crap, you know?”

Megan laughed. “Oh yeah.”

“She talks real big, but it’s all just a game.” He looked at Megan in the dark. “I bet you’re not like that.”

Megan stared back at him and considered. Here was an opening, a chance to define exactly what she was and wasn’t like. She could reject the entire summer, weeks

of being teased into what felt like perpetual shame and loneliness. She leaned forward and kissed him. It was a graceless kiss. She realized this without having anything to compare it to. Her lips mashed his. He tried to push her away but she pressed harder into him. His mouth began to respond then, and the movements of his body gathered in intensity. He pushed her onto her back. The sand was cool and felt nice against her tender skin, but everywhere he touched hurt her. Megan looked up at the undersides of the boards and wondered how it would feel to be up there instead— walking through the glow of flashing neon and picking at funnel cake or tossing bean bags for a prize.

After Toby hitched his pants and scuttled out from under the pier, Megan took a slow walk onto the boardwalk. She was thirsty, and Ili's Advil had worn off under Toby's rough handling of her sunburnt limbs. She thought longingly of Ili's lilting accent, how Ili had soothed her nerves and skin. Megan imagined telling Ili about what she'd just done, how quick and painful it had been, and how she felt not sad exactly, but lonely and odd, like she'd been unleashed from her body and stuffed not quite all the way back in.

Megan walked up the boards until she found Ili's store. The lights were on, but it looked to be closed for the night, like several of the other shops she'd passed. Through the glass, she saw Ili in the back of the store. She raised a hand to rap on the window, but she noticed Ili wasn't alone. A large man was saying something—no, shouting—and stepping closer to Ili. He grasped her slender shoulders and shook. Ili's head bobbed on her long neck. Megan felt sick. She banged on the glass.

“Hey,” she yelled. “Stop that.”

The man turned to face her. He stalked to the front of the store. “Get out of here,” he said. “Mind your business.”

“Leave her alone,” Megan yelled. She spoke without knowing what she was doing; there seemed to be a new person in her body, a stranger guiding her though movements and speech she didn’t realize she was capable of. She pulled out her cell phone and waved it. “Leave her alone or I’ll call for help.”

“Get out of here,” the man repeated and banged on the glass between them with both of his palms.

Megan jumped a step back, but she held up the phone. “Nine,” she shouted, jabbing the button. She raised the phone’s face so he could see her dial. “One.”

The man made for the store’s front door and struggled with the lock.

Ili approached the window. “Go,” she called and gestured towards the pier. “Just go.” Ili pressed a hand against the window. “Please,” she begged. “You’ll make this worse.”

Looking at Ili’s face, Megan felt her heart clutch in her chest. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m so sorry.”

She dropped her phone into her bag and ran down the boards, breathing heavily with the exertion until she realized that the man hadn’t followed her. Megan made her way to the parking lot. The bus door was open. Sweaty Stevie emitted loud, wet-sounding snores in the driver’s seat. Megan climbed the steps and headed to the very last row. For the first time since her mother dropped her off at camp, she called home when it wasn’t the scheduled time. Megan’s hands shook as she dialed. She felt nauseated, though this time she was sure it wasn’t the sunburn sickening her, but the memory of the

large man's hands on Ili, Ili who had been so kind, and how he fought with the locked door, as though he'd really bust through and come for her. The phone rang six, seven times before a man's voice answered.

"Dr. Barry?"

"Megan. You probably want to speak with your mom, huh? Hold on one second."

There was a muffled sound like a palm on a receiver before her mother spoke.

"Megan?"

"Why is Barry answering our phone?"

"He was closest, honey. Don't be ridiculous. Is everything okay?"

"Today has been so terrible, Mom. I have sunburn real bad."

Her mother sucked in a breath. "I told you to use sunscreen. Just put some aloe on it, take a couple Advil and you'll be fine."

"I'm not happy. I don't want to be at camp. I don't like my cabin-mates, I don't like anybody. One person has been nice to me, and I just got her into a lot of trouble." Fat tears bubbled out of Megan's eyelids and ran down her cheeks.

"There's no need to get so worked up. One more week and you'll be home. Just finish it out. It will be fine, I promise."

"I want to come home now."

"Look, honey. Now's not so good. Barry and I were just—Barry, stop that! You are bad."

"Mom?"

"Megan, why don't we talk about this tomorrow, okay?"

“Fine.” Megan hung up and pressed her forehead against the window, trying to breathe evenly through the worry troubling her stomach.

The fireworks began over the pier. Megan watched through the dusty glass as the first trails of sparks zipped up into the sky and blossomed wide. She thought of the people crowding the beach, the camp girls, Toby, strangers, all of them enjoying themselves. She imagined couples hidden under the worn wooden planks of the pier; they were cool shadows sliding against each other in the comfort of the dark. There were others, friends, huddled together on islands of blankets and towels upon the soft fine sand, the bare skin of their arms touching as they reached up and traced the fireworks’ trajectory with their fingertips. Megan closed her eyes and saw herself as a house of mirrors trick, growing taller and taller, thinner and thinner, until at last she disappeared.

PAS DE DEUX

Just before Ili left for work, she was interrupted by the phone's shrill ring. She was running late, a new, unusual habit she'd picked up in her recent solitude and overabundance of leisure time. She stood for a moment, glanced at the clock on the microwave and counted the rings out to ten. It was a full week now since she last spoke with her husband. She sighed and answered, hoping it wouldn't be him, but of course it was.

"Took you long enough."

"I was in the shower. Where have you been? I left you voice messages," Ili said.

"Lots of messages, Pista."

"And I call the house during the day and you don't answer the phone."

"I've been out. Grocery shopping, taking walks. I'm cooped up, Pista. I need air."

"Why don't you use the answering machine I got you?" Pista snorted across the line. "I got the damn thing so I could stay in touch with you."

"I can't figure out how to work it." Ili glanced at the answering machine that sat, still in its box, on the kitchen table. He'd brought it with him three weeks ago on his last visit. He wanted to keep tabs on her, she thought. She was always expected to answer his calls, and now the calls only came through this landline. Six weeks ago, a hurricane had flooded the first floor of their Jersey barrier island home as well as their twin businesses on the boardwalk. When Pista moved Ili into an apartment on the Jersey

mainland, he'd cancelled her cell phone. *You're not working*, he said. *You don't need a mobile phone. You're not going anywhere.*

Instead, she was to stay in the new, rented apartment alone while Pista traveled for his other business ventures and tried to reassemble their ruined businesses and their house. Pista was staying on-and-off with a friend who lived further outland and closer to Seaside Park, their sodden, sand-wrecked town. He called every so often to grouse about flood insurance and FEMA and safety inspectors and *the goddamn sand still all over the goddamn streets.*

Ili listened to these complaints wordlessly. She was shuttered in a one-bedroom apartment in Plainsboro and had been losing tether on her own mind in the monotony of her days. The serial television dramas with their deliberate uniformity; the couple next door's arguments, too loud and uncomfortably familiar; an infant's plaintive, colicky wail curling through the thin walls. Two weeks ago she'd walked from the apartment building down the main drag of the town until she found a store she thought might take her in for part-time work. The secret of this new job, this independence, had to be protected from her husband.

"And why don't you answer your cell phone, huh?" Ili said.

"I'm busy. If I'm not on the phone on hold for hours waiting for some insurance guy to give me an answer on something, I'm charging the cell and waiting to hear from boardwalk business association. I've told you, we can't keep the line busy."

"Yes, yes." Ili looked at the clock. Ten minutes to ten o'clock. Danni was expecting her five minutes ago to help open up the store. It was a fifteen minute walk from the apartment building. "Pista, I've got to go. I have an appointment. A haircut. I

will call you later. Bye bye.” She hung up, grabbed her coat, and locked the door behind her before the phone could ring again.

When Ili entered the store, setting off the bell, Danni was shuffling bills behind the register.

“I thought you might have been a customer.” Danni didn’t look up. “Since we’re open for customers.”

“I’m sorry. My husband called. I haven’t spoken to him in quite a while.”

“Uh-huh.” Danni counted out the coins, dropping them back into their little wells with tinny pings. She slammed the cash drawer shut.

When Ili had come in to Arena Dancewear to ask for a job, she’d been shocked to learn that Danni was the manager. Danni was young, twenty-five, and surly. It turned out the store was a family business. Arena, the owner, was Danni’s mother, though Ili had yet to meet her. Danni conducted an interview on the spot and took her on for twenty hours a week.

Before Ili and Pista moved to New Jersey, Ili trained as a dancer in Budapest and worked as a member of the corps in the Hungarian National Ballet. Danni hired Ili largely because of her experience in pointe shoe fitting, which Danni claimed to find monotonous. Ili suspected Danni was self-conscious at her lack of skill in fitting shoes and wanted to pass the chore to someone else. Moments when Danni displayed her attitude or incompetence, Ili thought back to her days in the corps and had to laugh, though bitterly. Ili was happy for the distraction of a job and her meager earnings, but she wondered: What would she have done, had she known at age twenty-five, that rather

than work up to principal dancer or travel the world with a company, in ten years she'd be fitting American teenagers' pointe shoes for minimum wage?

Ili hung her coat in the stock room and grabbed a dust rag. She began wiping down the shelves of tiaras and fairy wands for the repetitive pleasure of the task and for an excuse to avoid looking at Danni's scowl. Strangely enough, the dance apparel wasn't the big seller here. The money came from the rhinestone tiaras and the fluffy, Technicolor tutus parents bought for their little daughters. This market was less dance, and more dress up. Ili took to neatening, and the hours spent peacefully enough until a young girl, fifteen or so, came in needing pointe shoes. The girl's mother trailed in after her, but the woman's attention was on her cell phone. She chattered away, inspecting her acrylic manicure, while Ili measured the girl's feet.

"I already know I'm a size 32 in Capezio," the girl said, wiggling in her chair. She chewed on her hunk of gum, Ili thought, as though it were alive and putting up a fight.

"You're young. Maybe your feet grew." Capezios were a terrible, American brand of shoe—their models were cheap in both price and make, and they were designed for casual students of ballet who wouldn't know any better. Ili fetched them from the stock room.

"What kind of toe pads?" Ili held up the little wicker tray with an assortment of pads arranged in pairs. She'd been shocked when Danni showed her how many varieties existed, and their ridiculous prices. Twenty-seven dollars for two pieces of foam. In Budapest, Ili had wrapped her big toe in masking tape and woven lamb's wool between her little toes to keep their alignment.

The girl picked the thickest gel pads and placed them over her toes. She shoved on the shoes and walked to the wall mirror. The toe boxes clomped against the floor with each step. With all this nonsense jammed into the shoes, how could any of these girls feel the floor? No wonder they all barreled around the shop with the grace of barnyard animals.

A small hardwood floor was set into the very back of the store for shoe sizing, and a mirror with a small barre nestled into this corner. The girl gripped the barre with both hands, giving it too much of her body weight. She stepped onto the tip of her right toes, and then her left, with a slight bend in her knees. A bad *elevé*, and a sign of weak form, too much pressure on the knee joint. But it was her heels that startled Ili, the way they rolled out from under her ankles.

“You’re sickled.” Ili knelt beside the girl. She grasped one satin heel then slid it into alignment with its ankle so that her foot formed a graceful arch. “See the difference? That line now, that’s called wing. You want to be winged, not sickled. This will be hard at first, until you strengthen your ankles. You need to practice.”

The girl fell down to demi-pointe. “What?” She pulled her foot away from Ili’s hands.

“Your ankles are weak. This is dangerous. You might injure yourself.” Ili stood.

The girl’s mother tilted her head away from her phone, finally. She loosened her scarf from around her neck. “Miss?” She met Ili’s eyes for the first time. “I’ve been paying for her lessons for years, okay? Just ring up the shoes.” She bent her head back to the cell phone and resumed her chatter with an exaggerated eye roll. Her daughter removed the shoes and shoved them, hard tips first, into Ili’s hands with a smirk.

Before they left the shop, the woman murmured something to Danni, and the daughter sent the bell into harsh clangs when she slammed the door behind her.

Ili's chest prickled with heat, but she found herself less angry than sad. She'd been taught to regard elder dancers with esteem, to be deferential to her teachers and shoe fitters and costume madams, all of whom were veteran ballerinas. *Please Miss* and *Thank you Ma'am* and quiet voices, always. Respect was given to all at her school, even to the young hired men who washed the mirrors at night. The students were instructed to stay out of their way, as there were many mirrors and much for the young men to do.

Now, of course, Ili could see this rule wasn't really designed to protect the young men's work ethic, and it was instead crafted to shield the girlish ballerinas from unsavory romantic entanglements. Ili may have been the only one to listen. Many evenings Ili had aimed her reflection around the work of the boys' sponges and buckets of soapy water as the sky darkened outside the studio windows. She moved with practiced silence, trying to be invisible to these young men, though she often stamped down an odd, lonely impulse to grab one by the hand and fashion him into a *pas de deux* partner, just to see how he'd react to her movements, if he could follow along.

"She says you insulted her daughter." Danni crossed her arms.

"That girl is going to break her ankle someday."

"Let her teacher worry about that. Remember, just get the unhappy customer happy, and then get the happy customer out the door. She has a teacher for technique."

"That is bad teaching."

"That's none of our business, Ili."

Ili shook her head. During these lectures she was tempted to remind Danni that she herself was a shop owner, that she understood the importance of a well-kept register ledger and opening on time and, yes, making each sale. Ili wanted to remind her that the only reason she was here today, or ever, was that miles away her own store lay pocketed in the wrecked, splintery seam of the boardwalk with mold blooming along its walls and its fixtures orangy with rust.

Ili sighed. “You’d have her broken ankle on your conscience, then?”

“Did you put her in a pair of shoes that fit her?” Danni waited for Ili’s nod as an affirmation. “Great. Then you did your job.” She sighed. “It’s slow. We both don’t need to be here.”

Ili thought for a moment she was being sent home early as punishment, but Danni continued. “I’m clocking out early. Make sure you vacuum before you lock up.”

Danni was gone in minutes and with silence. Ili waited until Danni’s car joined the sluggish trail of traffic along the main road, and then she locked the door and tugged the gauzy pink curtains closed. In the back room, she pulled a pair of Freed pointe shoes in her old size and wrapped a bit of tissue paper around her toes. Freeds were expensive, favored by the professionals Ili used to know, and Arena didn’t keep many in stock. Ili had needed to search for them in the stock room. The pointe shoe boxes were kept in little cubby holes that spread across the wall and together looked like an immense wooden beehive. They were arranged by maker, then style, then size. Ili was careful to always put the Freeds back in their proper cubby.

Ili stood in front of the mirror in fifth position and watched herself rise onto *relevé*. The canvas insides hugged her feet. She began to move the best she could given

the small mirror and her narrow bit of hardwood floor. The hurt in her toes was comforting in its familiarity, though the shoes were harder than she was accustomed to and this offended her sense of balance. She remembered her own once-swift rotation of shoes and how she went about their meticulous destruction: stripping the leather shanks with razors; bending the arches around doors; whacking the boxes with a cloth-wrapped hammer until the hidden canvas and glue would finally give and become supple as bedroom slippers.

Ili closed her eyes and paused in the arc of an *arabesque* and waited for her now-fragile sense of balance to right itself. She imagined herself back in time on the wide wooden floor of a practice room, and then back further, sliding across the floor tile of a Budapest kitchen in time to the music of her mother mixing dumpling batter for the *csirke paprikas*. Ili opened her eyes and built one eight-count into another, hewing her impulsive choreography to her cramped space, and kept her eyes on her twin in the mirror until she began, finally, to recognize herself.

*

Pista's last visit, he'd picked Ili up and driven them to the island. The bridge from the mainland into Seaside Park was declared open and safe for transport again, but only home and business owners were allowed. On the drive down the shore, Pista had said with dogged hope that they'd haul off whatever was salvageable. *Something was sure to be salvageable*. His large frame hulked over the steering wheel and he chanted his plan into a mantra. Pista didn't look at Ili, but she recognized the familiar, frightening coil inside of him tightening.

The boardwalk, what remained of it, was perilous—all jagged and gashed wood, planks skewered into mountains of sand. Stanchions and a police cruiser’s ambulating light cordoned off the Sixth Street entrance to the boardwalk, where Ili and Pista were accustomed to entering the boards. Ili stood as close to the entrance as she could, taking in the ruins while Pista grumbled behind her that they had to get moving. The barrier island curfew was 3 p.m., at which time a bevy of policeman and township officials would round up the stragglers and hustle them back over the bridge before they lost daylight. It was too dangerous in the dark with the planks of splintered wood cropping up all over the beach and the remains of the twin wrecked piers crumbling into the ocean. Officials worried someone would sneak out and then fall, impaled on a scrap of boardwalk, or that an adventurous idiot would climb out to the pier and drop into the sea along with a hunk of the rotting planks.

Most of the pier rides had already fallen. The Zipper coaster had sunk gracefully, impossibly, from the edge of the pier to the sea floor in one piece and its skeleton towered from the waves into the grey December morning. The coaster glittered in the sunlight, and Ili shaded the sun with her hands to get a better look. The Ferris wheel stood on the base of the pier, a still-familiar circle sketched against the sky, but it was expected to topple soon, Ili had heard on the radio. If it didn’t fall soon, it would have to be dismantled before they let cleaning crews nearby to haul wood and sand. Ili imagined the pier’s fallen bumper cars, now ghostly and zooming around the ocean floor, tearing through tangles of seaweed and startling the fish.

“Let’s get moving,” Pista said. They had to act quickly, taking stock of the damage done to the arcade he owned, Lucky Leo’s, and Ili’s boutique next door, Lucky

Lady. The plan was to take as many pictures as they could for insurance before salvaging whatever possible into the U-Haul Pista had rented.

They trudged along the sand-covered boulevard than ran parallel to the boardwalk to the back door of the arcade. As they passed other store and restaurant owners standing in the doorways of their shops and raking away sand in the street, Ili waved and called hello, eager to find company in the shared dreary duties of the day, but Pista trudged forward, his head down, and Ili followed. Together they kicked and shuffled away the few feet of sand still blocking the entrance—all of Pista’s hopeful planning, Ili, thought, and he hadn’t thought to bring along a rake or broom—and Pista hauled the door open. A little river of dark water ran through the doorway and over their boots. The first thing Ili noted was the smell of the place. It was overripe, darkly fragrant, and somehow burnt. The scent was rimmed with brackish seawater and sewage she was sure she could taste.

She followed Pista with effort as the carpet sucked at the bottoms of her shoes. Inside, the sun through the front windows did little, but it was enough to light the destruction. The arcade had been closed up for winter before the storm and the machines were unplugged, so they’d avoided an electrical fire. Game machines had tipped over as though they were no more than oversized cereal boxes. Glass from many of their screens was shattered and glittered amongst the wet deposits of sand piled on the carpet. Ceiling tiles hung down, bowed low with their sodden weight, or fell in pieces, exposing the tangle of wires in the ceiling. The shelves of prizes had caved from the wall. Oversized stuffed animals lay strewn along the floor. Their furs were darkened and warped with water. Ili avoided their deformed faces and blank pebble eyes.

The cold fist of dread that had gripped the inside of Ili's chest during their drive—and during the past three weeks of uncertainty, to be truthful—tugged harder now. There was nothing in the arcade to be saved. Pista stalked through the wreckage, muttering. He bent and tried to lift a game machine from its side and grunted with the effort. The grunt became a roar.

“Pista, its useless. What are you doing.” Ili didn't have the energy to phrase this as a question. She knew by now that his muscles and emotions were sprung up tight. He'd have to get the energy out by burning it through the spend of his muscles and the effort of his vocal cords.

The machine was at a 45 degree angle when he couldn't bear the weight any longer. Pista stepped back and let the machine crash down to the ground, sending little pieces of monitor glass flying up like sparks. Ili jumped back, and then she took a few steps more. Pista dodged for a wrecked piece of shelving by his feet and considered its heft before rearing back and swinging it into the remainder of the machine's glass face. He threw the plank, stomped to the closest standing machine, and then heaved it to the ground.

With each thud or crash of impact, Ili felt a sick jolt in her chest. She knew to take these moments of lucky invisibility, to make the most of them, so she slid through the back door. Ili kept her eyes downward while she fumbled for her store keys and pretended neither she nor the other storeowners around her could hear the clamor rising from the arcade.

Ili didn't realize she was holding onto hope of her own until she opened the door to her shop. Right before the storm, she'd secretly come without Pista and packed as

many boxes of merchandise into her car as she could, her determination laced through with panic. What she couldn't fit boxed, she'd begun throwing in loose, stuffing dresses and tops under the car seats and between boxes. In the store, she'd stacked boxes on top of the display tables, but then there was the forced evacuation of the island and the police had shooed her and all of the other storeowners off the boardwalk.

The following night, after all homeowners were forced onto the mainland, Ili and Pista took a room in an Econo Lodge as far inland as they could drive, and she wept watching the news footage, the waves pummeling the boardwalk and its storefronts, the water rising and taking the roads. For weeks she'd imagined a stack of sweaters she'd left on the floor floating down the boulevard in sad, cable-knit lumps and the oversized birdcage where she hung the jewelry, still strung with its necklaces, drifting like a buoy out onto the sea.

The storefront window had broken, and scraps of dress fabric were caught in its jagged glass. Rounders and clothing trees lay toppled. The floor was a mess of wooden hangers and piles of sopping, moldering fabric scattered amongst a collection of trash. Ili's favorite visual feature of the shop, the rainbow-strung chandelier in the center of the room, had fallen with its ceiling tiles, leaving beads the size and color of hard candies strewn about the floor. The green walls that she'd painted herself were stained brown and warped to a water line as high as her waist. The boxes she stacked had weakened and broken apart with water, leaving cardboard mushed to piles of clothes.

At the register, Ili keyed a few buttons, half expecting to hear the familiar *whirr* and *ding* as the cash drawer popped open. She grabbed a wet trash bag from the cabinet under the register and stood in the center of her little store. Ili hoisted the birdcage

upright from the floor and cleared a place for it on a display table. She considered the rusty snarl of sterling silver and plastic gems inside and tried to sort out the tangled chains before yanking the whole mess out and dropping it into the trash bag. Next door, Pista kept on; the reverberations of his fury hummed through the wet walls. Her muscles slack with exhaustion, Ili sunk to the floor, sat right in the icy muck of the carpet, and cried.

*

A rapping came on the front window of Arena Dancewear. Ili turned, still on her toes, and her heartbeat clutched in her throat. Danni was back. Danni had returned and Ili closed up the store early to play make-believe and now where would Ili go to get away from her terrible tiny apartment that was so huge in its emptiness?

She ran to the window and peered through the translucent curtains. Not Danni. Just a man, tall, slender, and harried-looking in his winter coat. She opened the door.

“Are you closed?” He stepped into the store.

“No. No, we’re open. I just had to get something from the back. I don’t like leaving the door wide open.” Ili looked down at her feet, the pointe shoes. She cleared her throat. “What can I do for you?”

He handed her a piece of paper. “My daughter needs these. The size and color and everything is right there.”

Ili looked at the note, its loopy, feminine script. “Ah. Yes.” She hurried to the shelves and selected the item. “Ballet tights. Anything else?”

The man shook his head. “That should be it. If I forgot something, I’m sure I’ll hear about it.” At the register, he paused. “Actually, my daughter was in here last week.

She said there was a tutu she liked, but her mother wouldn't buy it. It was blue? With, uh, sparkles?"

"Hmm. Does your daughter have curly blonde hair—she's five years or so?"

When the man nodded, she said, "I remember her flouncing around the store in it. She's a beauty." She pulled the tutu from the shelf. "Her mother too. Your wife."

"Thank you, she is beautiful. They both are." He held up the tutu, considering it as though puzzled, then found the little price tag among the folds of fabric. "Yikes."

"I know. All for netting and elastic. Ridiculous." Ili waited for his decision.

"Her mother's gonna kill me." He pulled out his wallet and handed her a credit card.

"She'll get over it. But your daughter will always remember."

"It's that my wife and I—" He hesitated. "We're separated. She'll say I'm buying Sarah's love, trying to be the favorite. Christmas was like an arms race. We agreed no more gifts from either of us until her birthday."

"Are you? Trying to be the favorite?"

He laughed. "Of course."

Ili rang up his total and subtracted twenty percent from the tutu's price. She'd worry about explaining that to Danni tomorrow. She handed him the bag.

He asked, "What time do you close? I mean, if I did forget something?"

"We close at five on Sundays."

"Right. Well, if I missed something, I'll be back."

“You’ve got an hour, then.” The fathers in the store were usually uneasy or bored and several of them refused to stand in the store and instead waited in the parking lot for their daughters and wives. “Have a good night.”

The man nodded. “Actually, there’s something.”

“Yes?”

“I saw you before. Through the window. I know you weren’t in the back. You were dancing.”

“I’m sorry.” Ili took a step back, startled. “We were so slow, and I had to get rid of some energy. I hope I didn’t keep you waiting.”

“No, not at all,” he said. “I watched you.” He raised the hand holding the plastic bag. “Not in a creepy way. I mean, I just watched for a little while. It was nice.” He lowered his hand.

“Oh.” Ili said. “Well, thank you. I haven’t danced—really danced—in a long time. I don’t often get the chance.”

“You should.”

They were standing in front of the door, Ili unsure of how to respond but touched by the flattery. Her brief, stolen moments of dance often felt lonely among the store’s silly glittering tutus and rhinestone tiaras. She remembered her old ballet madam’s dictum that dancing privately was mere exercise, and that ballet became art only with the intention of an audience.

The man spoke first. “Will you dance later? After I leave?”

“Probably, yes.”

“Why don’t you do it now? I’d like to see some more.”

“All right.” Ili led him to the back corner. He stood beside the mirror. Ili turned her attention from him and focused instead on using her mirror, on checking her lines, but not looking at him felt odder than looking. It felt rude. He was her audience, after all, her first in a long time. She swung into a *pirouette* and chose to spot his face. With each turn, her eyes locked onto his until the rotation of her body pulled her away, then she snapped her gaze right back to him. She landed, bowed into a *reverance*. He clapped.

Ili rose and walked to him, hands outstretched, and pulled him by his coat sleeve to the tiny dance floor. She positioned his arms, raised the left arm tall over his head and the right long beside him. With one hand, she grasped his fingers as she turned in a slow circle beneath his arm. She granted herself the pretense that, rather than coaching this stranger’s awkward limbs in the shop’s cramped space, she was in a rehearsal room in Budapest—she was young, and hurricanes and destruction and Pista’s temper were not yet in her world.

“I don’t know what to do.” The man’s words roused Ili from her reverie.

“Don’t think so much,” Ili said. She placed his hand on her waist. “Just follow.”

WIDOWS WALK

Ili strode along the sidewalk of the Boulevard in Ship Bottom, Long Beach Island and entered Miller's General. She noticed with dismay the crowd ahead of her in line for the counter. Her boss Mark had sent her on this weekly errand: fresh mozzarella and chicken breasts for today's dinner and deli ham for the weekend's sandwich lunches. Miller's had the one counter for both meats and cheeses and on Saturday mornings like today, dozens of customers coiled into a queue through the narrow aisles between shelved dry goods. Those waiting shifted their restless weight from foot to foot, feigning neighborly civility amongst their cramped bodies and jostled limbs.

Ili worked as a housekeeper and live-in caretaker for Mark's mother on weekdays, but she had Saturday evenings and Sundays off; Ili's last duties would be to snap up the few groceries, plate and refrigerate meals to last them until Monday, and then her time was her own. There was an A&P on the mainland, just over the bridge on Highway 72, but Mark preferred Miller's foods. It was more expensive, yes, and so inconvenient for Ili on these crowded Saturdays, but Mark was unconcerned with budgeting his grocery funds or Ili's time.

A wave of hushed disappointment gathered at the counter and swelled down the line. Some of those waiting shook their heads and shrugged their way free from the crowd before exiting. Ili couldn't view the source of this upset from her position next to the canned tomatoes, but as the line shortened and the counter came into view, the reason revealed itself to be as she expected. The young man behind the counter had struck

through “fresh mozzarella” on the chalkboard menu with a fat mark. In that thick chalk line, Ili read the subtext: *Don’t even think about it.* Or perhaps, *Get here earlier next week, you fools.* Miller’s ran out of this cheese, the borough’s favorite, most Saturdays before eleven a.m. The shop would close at two this afternoon and not reopen until Tuesday morning, and the good citizens of Ship Bottom, Mark included, would have to do without their chosen cheese for the entirety of the weekend.

Ili had intimated to Mark, on one occasion of sold out mozzarella, once their working relationship had become more familiar, that he might be too picky. He’d shooed her off to find a worthy substitute, calling after her, “I’m not picky, I’m *discerning.*” Once you know what’s good, he liked to remind her, you can’t un-know, and you’ll always know the difference.

As Ili approached the counter, she noticed a piece of notepad paper tacked up next to the menu. Closer now, she could read the crouching, Sharpied letters: “Residents of the following homes will NOT be served: 56 Ocean Terrace, 108 Ocean, 134 Ocean,” on and on, twelve addresses in all. Halfway down the list was Mark’s address. Three customers stood in line ahead of her, and Ili tried to make eye contact with the Miller’s boy working the counter, Joey, but he avoided her gaze until she was next in line.

“What is this?” Ili gestured to the note.

“Ili, I’m sorry,” Joey began. “My parents posted that. I can’t serve anyone who won’t let them build the dunes.”

The state had requested permission to build easements on all private shore property to prevent flooding in future storms. A hurricane last fall had devastated much of the Jersey coastline, Ili’s old town of Seaside Park included, though Ship Bottom had

largely escaped ruin—and had recovered easily from the little damage it had sustained. The town was divided on the dunes with a brash minority, including Mark, refusing to give the state permission to sully their backyards. On the bottom of the note, Ili noticed an addendum. *Dunes or bust... LITERALLY!*

“Joey, this is ridiculous.” Ili adjusted the bag on her shoulder. “I need four grilled chicken breasts and a half pound of ham.” She tried to nail an intersection between reprimand and friendly conversation. “Please,” she added.

Behind her, Ili could hear the impatience of the other customers mounting in restless murmurs and grumbles.

“You know it’s not for me,” she said. “It’s for Mark and his mother.”

“Tell Mark and Mrs. Khor I’m sorry,” Joey said and cast a quick glance to his father working the register at the front of the store. “My dad says I’m supposed to call him over if someone on the list won’t leave.”

Joey was seventeen with a rash of acne and patchy beard stubble blooming his cheeks, and he blushed each time Ili ordered the chicken breasts. This was his first stint as an authority figure, and he was uncommanding in the role. Ili felt sorry for him.

“I’ll go to the A&P,” she said. “You’re out of the cheese, anyway.”

“Come back later,” he said. “Once Mark signs the easement contract.”

Ili slipped through the crowd to the door. Joey’s father eyed her from behind the counter and she returned his gaze with a glare. She stalked to the Khor home, fuming at the interruption to her day, and took off for the mainland in the sedan Mark rented for her errands. He worked on the mainland, and when he was home he didn’t like her driving his Escalade—not that Ili, a timid driver, wanted the responsibility of maneuvering the

fantastically expensive hulk of steel and glass. In the A&P, she picked the balled mozzarella with the highest cost, partially to appease Mark's snobbery and partially for the twinge of glee she felt in charging it to his credit card. It would be a punishment of sorts for his discerning tastes extending her workday.

At home, Mark was seated at the kitchen table with a stack of medical magazines and his iPad fanned before him. "I was wondering where you were," he said, then noticed the lettering on the plastic grocery bags. "The A&P, really?" He sighed. "Miller's ran out of cheese again, huh? I specifically sent you early to prevent this."

His words, though chiding, were soft. He was distracted by the glow of his iPad screen and the reprimand was halfhearted, as though he'd already resigned himself to Ili's latest fault. Mark worked as a neurosurgeon with privileges at several hospitals on the mainland. Ili wondered if he spoke to his patients with the same casual, bored impatience: "*A stroke? Again? I specifically told you that another neurological event would have repercussions.*"

"They did run out of cheese, but there's something else." Ili turned to face the refrigerator and pretended to rearrange its contents. "We can't go back to Miller's. They've blacklisted us, and everyone else who won't build the dunes."

"What?"

"There's sign posted. About ten of us listed in all."

"Let's see how far Aaron Miller gets, turning down business." Mark snorted.

"Things will be back to normal in a week. You'll see."

Ili nodded. "I suppose." The meantime, she thought, would be unpleasant once the implications sunk in. No special mozzarella, no organic-farm fresh-responsibly

raised-free range chicken breasts. She was stunned by the specificity of Mark's preferences. That was what having money did to people, she supposed. When afforded too many options, they'd pick the most oddly and annoyingly precise.

Ili prepared lunch and set Mark's plate next to his magazines, and then ran upstairs to check on his mother. Before her errands, she'd helped Lucy shower and dress, and it was unusual that she not be downstairs by the afternoon.

"Lucy?" Ili knocked on her bedroom door. "Can I come in?" She peeked in to see the woman snoring on top of her bed covers. Ili covered her with a throw blanket and tiptoed out of the room.

"Your mom is napping," Ili said. "I'll put her lunch in the fridge."

Mark looked up from his table of magazines. "She's sleeping through the day more and more now."

This sounded like criticism to Ili. "She's old enough to have earned it, hmm?" Ili said. She didn't mention the truth behind Mark's words. He liked his mother to nap as little as possible during the day so she'd fall asleep easier and earlier. As the day ended, Lucy's fits often began—restless cries and murmurs, pleas for people whose identities Mark never explained. Mark hadn't mentioned the Alzheimer's in the ad in the back of the *Asbury Park Press* last month. *LIVE-IN CARETAKER WANTED for my 90+ y.o. mom. Companionship, light housekeep. No experience req. Plenty free time. R&B with ocean view incl.* The ad had seemed too perfect of an opportunity to be real.

"I just hope she sleeps easy tonight," he said. "You're good for the weekend, Ili. You can go." He always said this when dismissing her, as though he forgot that she lived

in two rooms above his garage. With no car of her own, she never really *went* anywhere. He offered her the sedan on the weekends, but Ili hated to take advantage.

“Thanks,” Ili said. “I hope she sleeps, too.” She meant it. Ili felt stitched up with guilt on Lucy’s bad weekend nights. Ili often spent her free evenings hunkered in her apartment, squinting into her netbook’s little screen and working on her eBay shop. Lucy’s cries bled through the house walls into Ili’s rooms and mingled eerily with the waves and the sea wind’s hollow rush against the house. Listening, Ili was reminded of widows’ walks and solitary women moaning, searching the dark waves and offering futile pleas for men who’d drowned or been wrecked at sea. She wondered on these nights if Mark sat with his mother until her mind calmed and sleep claimed her, just as Ili sat with her many weeknights, holding the old woman’s dry, cool hands between her own palms and whispering feeble consolations.

Ili still felt strange using Mark’s beach as her own, but, as he put it during her interview, this private swath of sand was included in her pay. He rarely ventured past the back porch—he was rarely home at all, in truth—and his mother could no longer balance walking on the sand, and so Ili slowly claimed the shoreline behind the house as her own space. She changed into her bathing suit and trailed through Mark’s house to the back door. Mark didn’t raise his eyes from the notes he was jotting in a ledger.

A few weeks ago, Ili would have been confused and stunned by his ignoring her, but now she was accustomed to it. He may have thought he was being polite—during her time off, they existed in separate planes in the same house. She felt like a specter— invisible and unable to move on. Mark encouraged her to use the house oven during the

weekends as her kitchenette didn't include one, but Ili had so far declined, making do with her single stovetop burner and a microwave. If Ili was to take up haunting the house on weekends, she thought, she ought to be a quiet, well-mannered ghost.

The last porch step led into the wooden, sand-strewn walkway to the beach. These handrails weren't worn smooth from years of use like the porch railings, and Ili had to remind herself to lighten her grip for fear of splinters. The wood here was new and had been replaced after the storm wreaked its minor havoc on the home—a busted walkway and some roof shingles that departed in the high winds.

The nearest neighbor lived north on the shore. They were a family rowdy with several kids and as many dogs. Ili often saw them tossing Frisbees and splashing in the waves too far off for conversation. The children volleyed an outsized beach ball in the surf. Ili waved to the parents, and they waved back. They were quiet neighbors and never bothersome, though Ili noticed their address wasn't on the Miller's list, which meant soon crews would come digging and piling sand with rude machinery. The crews would come to the Khor's too, eventually, Ili thought. No matter how Mark and the other stubborn homeowners fought, there was talk that the state might claim eminent domain and construct their dunes anyway. If it came to that, Mark would lose his way without benefit of the consolatory fee that was promised to those who yielded their land and ocean view.

Ili lay on her towel, dozing in the sun. She worked hard for Mark and his mother five and a half days a week, and she still couldn't tan and nap without feeling guilt itch at her chest. Even when she'd run the boutique on the boardwalk several towns south, she never lazed about on the beach she viewed daily from her windows. That was before the

storm had brought her store to sodden ruin and splintered the boardwalk into toothpicks, and before she'd left her husband and stolen from their apartment while Pista spent one of his many nights out. He was often gone to "fix up the store," he claimed, though Ili never questioned his welcome absences. And now. She felt like a spoiled cat napping through its day in a sunbeam. If Pista were looking for her, he'd never dream of finding her snoozing on a beach so private it may as well belong to her.

Later, Ili used the outdoor shower next to the porch to rinse the sand and ocean from her skin, which felt hot and tender from the sun. Funny how the sun could wear you down, she thought. She looked forward to a real, long shower upstairs and a night in solitude spent working on her eBay shop. She'd sold through a dent of the merchandise, which she'd packed with her surreptitiously, from her old store. The eBay profits plus her small income from Mark made her feel steady, like she might be building a permanent escape away from the Jersey coast, somewhere Pista would never come looking.

She wrapped herself in her towel and prepared to slink her way through the house. She jumped at the appearance of a young man standing over the kitchen table. He was eating the sandwich she'd prepared for Lucy. A pair of suitcases lay at his feet.

"Good sandwich," he said around a wad of bread. "I'm Bryan."

The young man wiped his hand on his jeans and presented it to Ili. She accepted the handshake out of blind habit and wondered at his identity. It finally came to her through her sun-soaked haze: Mark's son. Mark rarely mentioned his child, and Ili realized she'd been imagining Bryan as the small boy in the picture tucked into the frame of Lucy's dresser mirror, despite the photograph's bleached tint and curled corners.

“Right,” she said. “Bryan. I’m Ili. I take care of some things around the house.”

“Great.” Bryan dropped his plate into the sink. “I’m famished. It’s a long drive from Boston. What’s for dinner?”

“There’s chicken in the fridge.” Ili paused. “Your dad usually handles the leftovers for dinners on Saturdays.”

Bryan opened the fridge and stared at its contents. He furrowed his brow as though confused. Mark entered and Ili was grateful. He would handle this.

“Ili, you’ve met Bryan,” Mark said.

“Dad, there’s hardly anything in here. I just drove seven hours.”

Mark cleared his throat. “I’m sure we’ll figure something out.”

Ili began backing out of the room. Bryan shut the refrigerator with a huff and turned to shrug at his father.

“Ili, do you think you could figure out something for dinner?” Mark’s eyes were apologetic. “Just tonight, until Bryan gets settled. I know it’s your free night. I’ll give you Monday’s dinner off instead.”

Ili was shocked silent. Mark didn’t meet her gaze and instead darted his eyes across the room. His discomfort was obvious to her, and she thought it would be to his son as well. She waited for Bryan’s refusal and insistence that he’d be fine. It didn’t come. “Let me get changed,” she said.

Bryan was twenty-one years old but still adolescent, she thought, both in his behaviors and his needs. During dinner he’d explained his unexpected appearance. His internship in Boston fell through, and he had a friend at the *Beachcomber Gazette* who could get him an internship here in Ship Bottom.

“It’s gonna be great,” he’d explained. “I’ll actually get to do real work, not just run for coffee and jockey against other interns for attention.”

Ili was suspicious at Bryan’s easy acceptance of his lost internship, no matter how menial, at the *Boston Herald* and his willingness to work for such a small publication instead. He must be desperate, she thought, and he must have done something to muck up his chances at the *Herald*. The *Beachcomber* was more of a newsletter, really—it only came out once a week and it featured profiles on local businesses and artists. This was hardly the kind of internship that would gain him clout amongst his peers.

Ili inwardly yawned through Bryan’s self-interested dinnertime chatter—he hadn’t once asked his father about his life, or Ili about hers—and she gathered up the leftovers a bit too soon, though Mark didn’t object. Upstairs, she helped Lucy into her nightgown and turned on the night-light that Mark claimed would help calm her agitation. Released to her own her own bedroom at last, Ili rubbed aloe gel that she kept cooled in her fridge onto her skin, cringing as the icy tingles stung and soothed her sunburn. She didn’t wait for the gel to dry before climbing into bed. The sheets clung to her body as she turned over and over and listened to Lucy’s cries seep through the walls.

Early Sunday, Ili woke to a rapping on her door. Mark had never disturbed her in her apartment before, and Ili’s first, illogical thought was that the house was on fire. She covered herself with a robe and opened the door to Bryan’s anxious face.

“What is it? Your grandma?” Ili asked. She tried to angle her body behind the door. Her robe felt inadequate, suddenly, in its length.

“No, nothing like that,” Bryan said. “There’s something on the porch.”

“Something?” Ili blinked.

“You should just come see.”

Ili followed him down the apartment stairs. There was something in front of the door to the main house. Ili stepped closer and then jumped a few paces back.

“Oh,” she said. It was a pile of waste. Human? “Oh, no.”

“Who would do this?” Bryan asked. “Did my dad piss somebody off?”

“Well,” Ili thought of the sign at Miller’s, of the phone calls they’d received daily from neighbors begging, and then barking, that Mark should sign away his ocean view.

“He has.”

“You have to clean it up,” Bryan said.

“What?” Ili shook her head.

“This is your job, right?”

Ili left the porch. “Uh-uh. I have weekends off. That includes Sundays, and I already helped you out last night. No more. You’ll figure it out.” She made her way back up the steps to her apartment and tried not to look at Bryan below, though she was sure she felt him glaring. She wondered what Mark would do if Bryan complained about her, if she would be reprimanded. Before entering her apartment, she looked down. Bryan met her eyes. He’d been watching her exit and likely stewing in his resentment. It wasn’t until after she climbed back into bed she remembered her robe and its inadequate length, and was mortified at what she’d displayed as she stomped up the stairs.

In the weeks since the poo incident, as Ili had taken to calling it in her head, Bryan was pleasant enough, though he still displayed the casual boredom of a spoiled child who had

never been denied a thing he'd wanted. He was absent most mornings, and so Ili assumed the *Beachcomber* internship had worked out. He missed dinner often. His SUV squealed into the driveway late at night while Ili was trying to sleep or hunched over her laptop and adjusting prices on her inventory. One morning, she saw the vehicle had been in a wreck. The car was devastated, its hood accorded up to the windshield. The victim of his collision, luckily, was a tree.

Mark, who'd been oddly deferential to his son's demands all summer, was enraged. The car returned from the shop looking as good as ever, but it sat unused in the garage and Mark hid the keys. Bryan was not only disallowed from driving for the remainder of the summer, but from drinking. Mark asked for his driver's license, but Mark's mother intervened from Boston, saying the boy (the *boy*, Ili silently repeated—such coddling!) needed to feel trusted. Bryan was allowed to keep his license in his wallet under the condition he stay out of bars and liquor stores.

In the weeks since, Bryan became a daily presence in the house and was always underfoot. Ili had begun serving Lucy lunch on the porch, as Mark insisted upon more sunshine to help stave off Lucy's fits of confusion. Bryan would leave home early and race through his work at the *Beachcomber* to be home in time for lunch. Before the Millers caught wise to his address and identity, he made daily stops at their shop and picked up the precious cheese and other groceries so Ili wouldn't have to run to the A&P. While Ili served the mozzarella he'd provided, he lounged with his heels propped on the tabletop and his Ray Bans pushed onto his head of artfully messy hair. While Ili tried to sunbathe, Bryan donned his wetsuit and struggled to surf on limp, pathetic waves or he attempted yoga postures in his swim trunks just feet from Ili's towel. Ili feared that

without outside distractions, he'd continue to vie for her attention all summer; she wished his father would allow him his car again.

Late one night, a knock on her door disturbed Ili in her bedroom. She peered through the chain to see Bryan wobbling all over the landing.

"What are you doing?" Ili unchained the door.

"I'm drunk," he told her with wonder, as though he were discovering this just now. "Shh." He fell through her doorway and she set him upright.

"You shh." Ili sighed.

"You have a lot of clothes." Bryan gestured at the racks around her bedroom where Ili kept her eBay merchandise hanging and sorted by size and style. She toted him to her kitchenette's sink. "Your father will kill you. And me for hiding you here." Ili poured him water from the tap. "Drink."

"I know. That's why I can't go inside." Bryan took a long gulp.

"Oh, yes you can. In a bit."

Ili realized she was indulging him. She'd spent several glum hours with Lucy earlier tonight. Lucy had muttered and cried in the glow of her nightlight and rejected Ili's words of comfort. *Sam, Sam*. Ili didn't know who Sam was and Mark never shared. Lucy's husband, Ili thought, or perhaps an old flame. Mark had never mentioned a brother. *Sam will be here soon*, she'd said, and Lucy took consolation in this false promise and murmured out her gratitude. *Sam can't wait to see you too*, Ili assured her.

This was the first time Ili had offered a lie as a stay against Lucy's confusion. Her motivation was selfish, she knew; Ili was drained from the efforts of soothing Lucy's mood and was eager to retreat to her apartment. When Bryan knocked, she'd been lying

awake, struck numb with guilt. Now she told him, “Some water and some Advil, and you’re off,” but she was secretly lonely and greedy for a conversation partner with his wits about him, even if those wits were soaked in booze.

“My dad said you were a belly dancer in Europe. Is that true?” Loose-limbed with drink, he sprawled himself into the single chair she kept next to her breakfast table.

Bryan seemed overly large in Ili’s little apartment. The room felt crowded and suddenly much too small. Ili realized that Bryan was her first guest.

“Ballet, not belly,” she corrected. “In Budapest, yes. Before I came to America with my husband.”

“Bally. That’s what I said.” Bryan laughed, and Ili couldn’t help but laugh too. “Your ex-husband, you mean,” he corrected her.

When interviewing with Mark for the job, Ili had left out the details of her marriage. Through artful manipulation of the truth, Pista became her ex-husband as Ili explained how she found herself in need of a job. She thought Mark wouldn’t risk taking her into his home if he knew about a jilted husband that may be looking for her. Ili’s sudden exit; Pista’s quick temper; her desperation for the work; and most of all how perfect this job would be, a chance to hide away, safe inside someone else’s home towns away. All of this Ili kept to herself to better her chances.

Now though, perhaps as a reflex to atone for her earlier lies to Lucy, Ili was compelled to speak the truth. “We haven’t divorced. He doesn’t know where I am, and that’s all that matters.” She told him about her marriage and her store on the boardwalk of Seaside Park and how the hurricane had cost her everything she cared about yet gave

her the chance to run. Bryan, as drunk as he was, wouldn't remember much of this in the morning, she thought, and it was so rare and tempting to share her anxieties with another.

“This is between you and me, you understand? Your father doesn't know.”

Bryan nodded. “I'm going to help you,” he told her and tripped over his chair as he approached her for a hug.

“Don't help me. You help yourself,” she said. Ili allowed the embrace, a friendly hug, but she became worried at the insistence of his body against hers. His lips dipped for hers and she didn't pull away in time. He was so needy, and it had been so long, that Ili waited longer than she knew was right to end it. Finally, she turned her face so his next kiss caught the corner of her frown. She pressed him away. “Worry about school and that internship. Worry about not being so messy and drunk.”

“I'll find a way to help you. I'm not a kid, you know.”

“Bedtime,” Ili said. He was a child—a spoiled one, unaccustomed to being denied his impulses—and she'd been so eager for companionship, she'd let herself forget this.

Bryan flopped down onto her bed and stretched with a sigh.

“Uh uh.” Ili handed him a pillow and pointed to the floor. He didn't object, and she told herself his attention was harmless after all, a schoolboy's affections. She'd handled Pista and his precarious moods—what was the danger in a crush?

Ili woke the next morning to an empty bedroom. She was grateful to Bryan for not mentioning his visit, but she worried about what he remembered about her marriage—

and what he remembered of her spurning his advance. He was as attentive as ever but not bitter, and Ili tried to put it out of her mind.

It was Mark, though, who needed consolation over the following weeks. The pressure for all homeowners to sign over their backyards had grown. Only six others beside Mark were holding fast. *The Asbury Park Press* published the names, addresses, and phone numbers of all seven households, and they were getting crank calls all day and into the night. Ili would pick up the phone to raunchy curses and disquieting mouth-breathing. Someone took a baseball bat to the mailbox overnight and turned its stand to splinters. Their porch was egged and their tree limbs were laced with toilet paper. Mark was livid, but he fastened tighter to his ideals with each assault. He threatened to sue the newspaper for inciting this harassment and then the township or the state.

“Won’t you consider signing the papers?” Ili made the mistake of asking after weeks of these constant, anonymous agitations. She was weary from the relentless ringing of the phone and the torrent of ugliness directed at the house, at them.

“No,” he snapped. “It’s my home. It’s my view, my land. If other people want to destroy their backyards, that’s their business. They should tear up their own property and leave me out of it.”

“You can’t be left out of it. The easements only work if all the houses have them,” Ili said. “You’re being selfish. Without your dunes, the rest of them are useless. Another storm will come, and then? Flooding everywhere, all over.”

“I know how dunes work, Ili.” Mark glared.

“Not well enough, you don’t,” she said. “Should everyone else suffer for your choices?”

Mark pounded his open palm against the counter. "I didn't make them move here. If they're so afraid of floods, they should move inland."

"It's not that easy for people to get up and leave. Other towns lost everything, you know. Other people."

"That's very sad and not my problem," Mark gestured to the spread on the counter in front of her. "Will you please just fix dinner?"

Ili wanted to describe for him losing her home and belongings to the rising muck, retreating to an ugly motel on the mainland and watching on the television as her world drowned. She wanted to tell him about returning to the boardwalk to see it wrecked and cracked like a mound of twigs, about finding her store sodden and broken.

"Ship Bottom was lucky," she told him. "You. You are the luckiest of all with just a few boards to replace out back and a couple of lost shingles. You and your stupid cheese."

"What the hell does that have to do with anything?"

"Don't you realize how stupid you all sound? You have too much money, all of you. Too much money and too much time. Let them build the dunes. You have this beautiful view and you're never outside to look at it. Everything, you take for granted." Ili picked up a plate and set it back on the counter with a clank. She walked out of the kitchen.

"Where are you going?"

"For a walk." Ili gestured to their dinner-in-progress. "Fend for yourself, if you can. No wonder your son can't crack open an egg."

Mark had been spoiled by his luck and by his money, which she suspected were actually the same thing. There were bits of Bryan's makeup in Mark, she thought, his astonishment at being challenged or denied. Maybe they all were spoiled, the Khor men.

Ili stalked out of the house and down the boards. For the first time since taking the job, she sat in the sand in the middle of her workday, leaving Mark and Lucy to care for themselves. She glanced behind her, but Mark didn't follow. Turning back to face the ocean, Ili imagined Mark fumbling in the kitchen. Would he attempt to finish the dinner she'd begun?

Eventually, when she heard footsteps sifting the sand behind her, they belonged to Bryan. He sat beside her.

"I can crack an egg," he said. "I can crack an egg like a pro."

"When we go inside, I'd like to see that." Ili let out a halfhearted laugh. "So you heard me talking with your father."

"I heard you two fighting."

"That wasn't a fight. You don't know what fighting is," Ili replied, thinking of Pista's loud voice and rough hands.

"I do. I watched my parents get divorced," Bryan said, and Ili realized she'd never considered this, how Bryan had experienced his family's fracturing as just a boy.

"How old were you?"

"I was ten. They couldn't get over Samm."

"Who?" Ili sat up. Finally, she thought. Perhaps now she'd learn about this Sam, the one Lucy so often called after.

“My sister Samantha. I think they blamed each other.” Bryan sighed. “My dad was in his residency and he was always at work, never around. Samm was real little, just eight months. She had a fever and wouldn’t stop crying. They were giving her little doses of Baby Tylenol. My mom called Dad at work asking what to do. He said to bring Sam to the E.R. He was working in the same hospital, but he was so busy he didn’t even bother to walk over and meet us there.

“The E.R. doctor said to keep up with the Tylenol. Mom asked how much, and he sent the nurse for a chart, but it all got confused. The chart had the doses for Toddler Tylenol. The stuff for babies was stronger than for toddlers because the doses were much smaller. It’s harder to get babies to swallow.

“We went home and Mom gave her what they said, but it was too much. Samm wasn’t crying anymore. She wasn’t moving. Then her stomach got hard.”

Bryan swallowed before continuing. “Liver failure.” He shook his head. “My parents had a hell of a time figuring out which of them was more to blame.” Bryan drew his index finger in a circle through the sand and then brushed the mark away. “So, yeah, I know about fighting.”

“I didn’t know,” Ili said. “I’m sorry.”

“Dad left Boston to live here, where no one would know about any of it. He doesn’t even have any pictures of her. He left them all with Mom.”

Ili was quiet. She wondered if Bryan noticed the lack of pictures of himself in the house, if he knew that the only one was in his grandmother’s room.

Bryan gathered his backpack from beside him. “I have something to show you.” He pulled out a copy of the *Beachcomber Gazette*. “I told you I’d help.”

“What do you mean?” Ili asked.

“I know you need money so you can get out of here, so I advertised your eBay store.”

“You did what?” Ili’s stomach dove for the sand.

“Here,” Bryan shuffled through pages. “It’s not really an advertisement. It’s editorial branded content.” He smiled, proud to show off his internship lingo. “I wrote a profile on you. It says how cool you are and how you sell nice clothes. There’s a part about how your old store was lost in the hurricane. Even though it’s an online store, people in the area will want to buy from you once they hear your story, especially because of the storm.”

The profile took up half of the page. Ili squinted as she read in the dim light. She’d been so immersed in Bryan’s story, she hadn’t noticed the sky darkening over the sea as night approached. A black and white photo of Ili’s face was sparsely pixelated but recognizable. The profile gave the URL to the eBay shop and even had a picture of her old store on the boardwalk before it was taken by the storm. The article said she worked as a caretaker in a beachfront home in Ship Bottom: she was *dedicated to the elderly by day and a savvy entrepreneur by night*. The paper listed Mark’s house phone number *for more information*.

Ili set the paper down on the sand in front of her. “When did this paper come out?”

“Hot off the presses this morning.” He smiled.

“You need to stop it. You need to tell them to get rid of it.” She thought of Pista thumbing through the paper and coming across her newsprint face.

“It’s all over Ship Bottom already, and it’s headed to the other towns along the shoreline. Our distributor sends it off each Friday afternoon. You’ll see, this is going to be great. You’re going to make so much money. And that’s not all.” He pulled a thick manila envelope from his bag. “Take this.”

“What?” She peered inside to find a stack of bills. She shut the envelope and shoved it back as though it had burned her. “What is this?”

“I went to the bank and cashed out some savings bonds. I want you to use it.”

“I can’t take your money.”

“It’s not much, just something to get you started. And I thought you might feel better about taking it—” he paused. “If you take me with you.”

Ili stared at him until she determined he was serious. Her head felt hollow. Everything seemed to be caught in slow motion yet somehow she couldn’t keep track of the conversation’s growing list of catastrophes. “No, no, no,” she muttered and fell back onto the sand. She covered her face in her hands.

“Really, I’d be the one taking you,” he said. “You’ll need a big car so you can fit all of your merchandise. We can use mine. I know you’re a terrible driver. It’s okay, I’m happy to drive.”

“Bryan.” Ili sat up. “You need to know I don’t feel like you do, okay?” She nodded at him. “Tell me you understand.”

“Maybe you don’t feel it yet,” he said. “After some time on the road, together—”

“Do you know how old I am?” Ili asked.

“I don’t know, thirty?” He grabbed her hand. “I don’t care about that.”

“I’m thirty-six,” she said.

“I’ll be twenty-two in March.”

“Bryan.” She squeezed his hand and let it go. “I’m not the girl for you, okay?
And you are not the man for me.”

He shook his head. His face grew red and his jaw twitched, but he didn’t argue.

“Take your money and put it in the bank.” Ili stood and hiked through the sand to the house. She calculated the risk of Pista picking up this issue of a small, local newspaper—newsletter, really—before it was tossed out in favor of next week’s installment. The danger was slim, she told herself. He probably wasn’t even staying near the coast at all, she reasoned. She willed her heart to calm its frantic beat.

In the kitchen, the mess of the abandoned dinner had been cleared, though Mark was absent. With regret, Ili realized that she’d left Lucy alone at the end of the day when she was most vulnerable and distraught. Outside of Lucy’s room, she heard murmuring and whimpers.

She opened the bedroom door to see Mark seated in the chair beside Lucy’s bed and holding his mother’s hand. He patted her arm and offered reassurances. Ili raised her hand in an apologetic gesture, but Mark shook his head. For a moment Ili watched them as he comforted his mother; Mark’s stern expression was betrayed by his soft words and tone. For the first time, Ili considered how Mark’s work allowed him a rare, intimate understanding of the human brain—and how frustrated he must be, how feeble he must feel here, as helpless as anyone else facing the slow corrosion of his mother’s mind.

Downstairs, the phone rang. Ili eased the bedroom door shut and hustled down the stairs. She paused before answering, filled with wonder and dread for whatever fresh threat the telephone would deliver, and pressed the receiver to her ear.

BEACH HAVEN

I.

Angie met Jason at work. He visited her dress shop on a Saturday morning to pick up his wife's freshly-altered evening gown. After Angie fetched the dress, he placed his business card on the counter. DiDonato Construction, it said. Angie figured he was DiDonato.

“That's my work cell number,” he said, and he pointed to the phone hitched to his belt clip.

Smirking, Angie handed him the dress and watched him carry the garment past puffs of tulle and satin. He swaggered out of the shop as though the phone clip were a gun holster.

His wife's name was Tara. Angie had been the one to help her shop, pulling gown after gown until she finally decided on an A-line cocktail dress on redline. The dress complemented Tara's skin tone, Angie told her, but in truth the color and the heft of the fabric— a deep plum, satin dupioni—were a season dated and inappropriate for spring. Tara was jumpy through the fitting, and Angie recognized her behavior as that of a woman shopping in a store she couldn't afford. She spoke swiftly and too loudly, rushing the words as though she wanted to get the purchase over with, only to hole up in the dressing room after finally choosing a dress, clearly agonized over the purchase.

While Tara waited for Angie to ring up her sale, her quick, nervous fingers seemed to move on their own accord. Tara neatened up the stack of business cards next

to the register; her red chipped nails tapped a hollow rhythm on the glass counter. She lifted a plastic tiara from the display to eye level and pretended to give the rhinestoned contraption consideration: *My daughter would flip for this.*

Angie recited Tara's total without inflection—a demonstration of Angie's lack of interest and her lack of judgment. This was necessary for the cheap customers, especially the guilty moms Angie watched mentally converting prices into packages of diapers and toilet paper rolls and so many weeks' bills at the Stop N Shop. She pretended not to notice Tara's hands pause while she eyed the total nor the small sigh Tara gave as she swooped the pen across the dotted line.

The following week, Jason ambled to the counter. *Picking up for my wife*, he said. Months later, when Angie stared at the home pregnancy test and watched the little plus sign appear, it was Tara she thought of and not Jason—just as, when Jason lay beside her, scratching his stomach and loosing broad, post-coital yawns, Angie thought about his wife. She remembered Tara's hands, their agitated energy.

After the pregnancy test, Angie, wanting a look at what Jason had, parked outside his house. Jason, brash and talkative in all other ways, wouldn't let slip where his family lived; Angie had to sift through the electronic customer ledger for the address. The shop's outdated register had no search feature, and so she scrolled through until she saw his wife's name and contact information.

Angie chose a rainy day for the stakeout. Parked across the street and three houses down, she watched the windows of the split-level for shadows of movement and eyed the empty driveway. A half hour passed. Raindrops slunk down the windshield. A sedan, finally, pulled into the driveway. Tara tossed a jacket over her head and opened

the back door of the car. The girl, Jason's daughter, was energetic in her raincoat and bright green waders. The blonde braid down her back swung thick and heavy like rope. She hopped from puddle to puddle, sending rainwater smacking against her legs. Tara grasped the child's shoulders and steered her inside.

Minutes later, Tara appeared through the side door. She held a coffee mug and wore a nubby brown cardigan that hung open to her knees and swung wide with the wind. She pulled a single cigarette and a lighter from her sweater pocket. Tara smoked quickly, her face as blank as a smudge, and tipped ash into the mug. It occurred to Angie how much younger the other woman was, and yet she seemed so much wearier—Angie wondered how she'd ever envied this woman anything at all. Watching her, Angie was struck fresh with guilt and she understood what she'd already known; she wouldn't be telling Jason anything.

The doctors warned Angie—her eggs were old. At 38, the risks of her pregnancy included 1-in-100 chance of Down syndrome, numerous other chromosomal abnormalities, a twenty percent chance of losing the baby. During her prenatal visits, while the OBGYN recited the numbers and risks, Angie scratched her pen over the little notebook she brought to all of her appointments as though she were in high school again and could pass this test if she took enough notes.

In her eleventh week, Angie woke in the middle of the night and folded herself over in pain. As her mind cleared of sleep, she realized the hurt was coming from her abdomen and there was a warm dampness between her legs. She switched on her lamp and yanked her sweatpants down to see blood pooled against the pale flesh of her inner

thighs. Her hands shook around the telephone and she realized she had no one to call but a cab to the E.R. She folded towels onto the backseat of the cab.

Angie spent weeks after the miscarriage on her apartment's box-like balcony watching the cars congest Highway 1 down below. On the horizon, the smokestacks of Jersey City factories chugged grey clouds into the sky. Inspired, Angie took up smoking cigarettes. Angie handed her assistant, Emily, the responsibility of running the store and stopped answering Emily's nightly calls. A pile of ragged-sounding messages accumulated on the answering machine. Angie spent most of her time on the balcony, where she couldn't hear the phone.

The dress shop folded after suffering months of Angie's inattention, and Angie couldn't pretend surprise or even disappointment. Emily no longer spoke to her, and Angie felt there nothing rooting her in Jersey City. She moved.

Beach Haven. The touristy shore town's name said it all, she thought of the little borough on Long Beach Island. She was pleased with her home so close to the beach and how the houses on 14th street were crisp and clean-looking like laundry drying on the line. Past the houses, she could make out the sand dunes bowing in the wind.

Her first night in her new home, Angie took a walk on the beach at sunset, figuring it was what people living here were supposed to do. She remembered collecting what she imagined as bits of ocean treasure—shells, sea glass, fragments of smooth driftwood—on strolls along the shoreline during her childhood vacations with her mother, before the MS crippled her. At the end of their walks, her mother tossed the shells and other findings back into the sea, which drove Angie mad, but her mother reminded her, *Someone else will find it and appreciate it just as much as we did.*

Looking down, something caught Angie's eye in the waves foaming at her feet. It was a piece of white sea glass. She examined the texture, hard like other glass but smooth along the edges. She held the glass in her palm and began the walk home. That night, after placing her sea glass on a bare bookshelf in the living room, Angie ate her frozen dinner alone.

II.

The child drowned on a peak tourist day when the sand and water were hectic with crowds of people running and shouting and splashing. The sand was hot against the soles of Angie's feet and the sun beat down in an endless oppressive wave. Angie navigated to the water in zig-zags past sunbathers stranded on towels and families who erected miniature tent cities to shade their many kids and many toys. The water broke around her ankles in a cold shock of foam. Angie ventured out further, ignoring the goosebumps rising up on her skin. On her right, a young woman wore a flower print bikini Angie recognized from her store's merchandise—Roxy was the name of the overpriced, trendy brand. The girl was balanced on her companion's broad shoulders and she let out playful cries as he pitched her back and forth before sending her into the waves in a tumble of tanned limbs and sea spray.

Feeling suddenly aware of her own body and how stretch marks marred the flesh at her hips and thighs, Angie moved away from the young couple. She'd selected for herself a one-piece suit modest in cut but daring in color, she thought, bright red. The suit arrived in a shipment last month, and Angie balked at the price tag but decided to splurge. Five years of living a block away from this beach hadn't cured her unease with

being adrift in her body that was growing unfamiliar and softer with age. Angie made her way out of the water and back to her towel.

As she walked, a whistle cut through the air. She blinked her eyes in the sunlight and stepped back to make way for a lifeguard bounding for the shoreline, his feet kicking up sifts of sand. Angie stood with an open mouth as the lifeguard dove into the water. What was going on? And then she saw—the boy thrashing against waves in the distance.

A woman behind Angie was screaming her child's name, Jesse, Jesse, her voice ripe with panic. She turned around and around, shielding her eyes from the sun as she searched the sand and water. Finally, a boy of about five ran to the woman and threw his arms around her legs. "I'm right here, Mom."

The woman bent to clasp her son to her chest. Angie looked away. Similar exchanges were happening all around her as parents yelled for their children and made sure that the small figure flailing in the distance wasn't their own. The lifeguard was still yards away from the boy and sending a trail of splashes in his wake. The child's movement slowed until the pinprick of his body dipped from view. The ocean was empty of bathers now and a crowd gathered by the shoreline to watch the lifeguard dive. The faces of parents who located their kids were still taut with fear. They weeped with relief as they pulled their families away from the scene.

"What's going on?" A man joined Angie's side. He looked confused at the commotion. His wife stood several feet behind him and lowered her sunglasses to gaze into waves. She held a pair of daughters, twins, close to her though her arms were laden with beach bags. The girls wore matching swimsuits.

"Is someone hurt?" the man asked.

Through the crowd, Angie could barely make out lifeguard swimming back to shore and toting a small, limp body along with him. A sobbing woman pushed past Angie and the man. Angie caught a rapid glimpse of the woman's face next to hers; she seemed crazed, with her guttural noises and wild eyes and loose waves of dark hair swaying. Her frizzy curls felt scratchy and coarse against Angie's face. The woman thrust her way through the crowd at the shoreline. Sirens swelled in the distance and grew closer and melded with the woman's wails.

"Yes," Angie said.

The next day, Angie was shocked to hear on her store's radio that the beach would reopen the next morning. "It's way too soon," Angie called to Lisa, the shop's co-owner. Angie dropped the sales ledger report she'd just penciled in into a filing cabinet with a sigh.

Lisa appeared from the shop's back room carrying a bundle of shirts. "Well, it is tourist season. The beach has to open up sometime, and how are we going to sell any bathing suits if nobody's allowed to swim?"

"A child died yesterday. How can you be so glib?"

"Relax. I'm just trying to lighten the mood." Lisa dumped the shirts onto a display table in a heap and several shirts fell to the floor. "Start folding, will you?"

Angie bent to retrieve the fallen shirts. She folded them so the screen print was centered: *Long Beach Island—It's a Shore Thing*. The borough of Beach Haven had announced that a candlelight vigil in memory of the young boy would be held tonight prior to the reopening in the morning. "It's just not right," she said.

“Neither is not making any money all day,” Lisa added.

“You would be pragmatic about a kid dying,” Angie said. It pained her, but she knew Lisa was right. Business had been dismal, and she doubted they made enough to pay for the electricity they’d used to light the place all day.

Angie knew she and Lisa were an odd pairing for a business venture when they met. She didn’t have the funds to open a store on her own, and she’d moved to Beach Haven without a job or a prospect. Lisa had a friend who was willing to lease her retail space for half-rent, and she was the only successful contact Angie had made. And so, desperate for an opportunity, fearful of not finding a better possibility, and missing her old dress shop back home, Angie settled.

In the five years since they opened up The Sand Trap, the pair bickered daily. Even after they relocated from a closet-sized shack of a store to this larger space in a strip mall on Main Street, they fought over details like the pattern on the dressing room curtains and whether to display the jewelry on a stand by the ladies wear or on impulse fixtures next to the register. The extra space was needed not just to house the merchandise, but their tempers.

“A woman lost her child on that beach,” Angie said. “If you were that parent, you’d want some respect.”

“You know what I respect? Continuing to pay rent. It’s August already, and in a few weeks tourist season will be over.”

Angie’s face reddened. She picked up her pile of folded shirts and dropped them on the floor. She was only mildly embarrassed at her display of childlike spite.

“Whoops,” she said.

Lisa left The Sand Trap soon after Angie's little tantrum, and Angie was grateful for the solitude. She paced the aisles, straightening the sloppy stacks of garments Lisa had left her. A pile of necklaces lay on the floor. Angie bent to retrieve them. Studying the little rhinestone flip flop charms, she realized their chains were tangled into a knot. Angie thought about untangling them but instead hung the mess onto a little hook for Lisa to deal with in the morning. She locked up.

At home, Angie rocked in her wicker chair on the front porch. She took a large swig of her wine, finishing off the glass, and then she poured another. A small crowd began gathering on the street and traveled down the road to the beach. The vigil, she remembered. She rose, thinking she'd join them, but went inside and looked for a distraction.

Angie found herself in front of the bookcase in the living room. The first piece of sea glass was surrounded by shells and glass of all colors, jars and vases full of trinkets she'd collected on her nighttime walks. She installed a mirror on the back of the bookshelf so her collection multiplied and extended as far as she could see. She hurried out on the porch and trailed the group's walk to the beach at a distance.

The vigil was quiet and Angie ducked behind the dunes to avoid being seen. The others stood until their candles were spent and then filed back to the road. They nodded at Angie as they passed by, as though she were one of them.

At night, there were no children on the beach. Some nights, Angie would pass another loner dipping ankles into the surf, and she would smile and move on. Other times she'd pass a young couple moving together on a blanket by the dunes. She'd walk by them as swiftly and quietly as she could. Tonight, with the vigil over and the town

shocked quiet and still from the child's death, Angie had the beach to herself. She crouched in the sand near the tide's edge and cast her ankles out into the shallow surf. The cold water bit until her feet grew numb.

"Do you mind if I sit?"

Angie turned. Behind her was the boy's mother. Angie knew her by her hair. Even in the dark, she recognized the dense, wild curls.

The woman sat without waiting for Angie's answer. "Did you come here for the vigil?"

Angie nodded.

"Was it crowded?" she asked. "Did a lot of people come?"

"Yes," Angie said. "Lots." She felt strange staring at this woman's profile, the slope of her nose and shadowed hollow of her cheekbone. Angie looked away, out at the dark waves rolling closer, and then down at the sand dusting her lap. "I'm sorry. For your loss, for your family's loss."

"How many people?" The woman posed the question like a challenge. She turned her face to Angie's, and Angie felt compelled to look at her.

"How many?" Angie repeated. "Twelve or so. Fifteen." She stuttered. "I can't say, exactly."

"Did they say my son's name?"

"I don't think they did."

"You don't think?" the woman asked. "Don't you remember?"

"I was late," Angie explained. "I stood off, sort of, to the side."

The woman gave a hollow laugh. "What is my son's name?"

“Felipe,” Angie said. “I read it in the paper.”

“We called him Sol,” the woman said. “Everyone who loved him called him Sol.”

“Sol,” Angie repeated.

“Sun.” The woman wrapped her arms around her middle. “It means sun. My sunny boy. We’re not from here. This was our vacation. Our family is in Philadelphia. No one here would have known to call him Sol. You didn’t know him.”

“I didn’t,” Angie agreed.

“You light some candles, you have a minute of silence, you do your good deed so you go back to your homes and feel decent about forgetting. Does it make you all feel better?”

Angie paused. “For some it does, I think.”

“And you?”

“It might. A bit.”

“But you didn’t go home.”

A wave swelled high and soaked Angie to her calves. Something scratched at her ankle. Angie retrieved it—green sea glass bent into a gorgeous curve. It must have been a beer bottle once, she thought, before it was caught up in a rush of sea. She slipped the glass into her pocket and then pulled it back out.

“I collect these, you know?” Angie told the woman. “I have jars of them all over my house.”

“Why?”

“It makes me feel like I’m progressing. The more of this stuff I gather, the more I’ve done, or something.” Angie fingered the edges of the glass. “Take it back to Philadelphia.”

“No, please.”

“Here.” Angie placed the glass in the woman’s hand.

The woman looked down at the glass, considered. “I don’t want this.” She dropped it on the sand between them. “What would I do with it at home, sit and look at it and remember? Who needs it? I won’t be forgetting.” The woman stood.

“Please sit,” Angie said. “Stay and sit with me.”

The woman looked inland as though considering, and then she sat back down.

“How long are you staying in town?”

“My sister is coming for me tomorrow.”

“Where are you staying?”

“Sol and I were staying in the Surf City Motel. They were out of cots, so he had to share the bed with me, but he was generous about it.” The woman shook her head.

“All of his things are in that room, laying wherever he left them. His clothes, his little sneakers. I haven’t been able to pack them up. The motel is letting me stay for free, they said, for as long as I need. I don’t want to be there a minute more than I have to.”

“Stay at my house tonight.” Angie said. “I’ll go to the motel and gather up your things for you tomorrow.”

The woman didn’t answer for a long while. Angie turned to look at her.

“Okay.” The woman nodded.

Angie looked back into the distance, trying to find the smallest and furthest wave on the dusky horizon. She wound back her arm and hurled the sea glass back into the water far enough that she couldn't see the splash where it landed.

“Nice throw,” the woman said.

“Thanks.” Angie imagined she could pinpoint where the dark surf leveled and the ocean became the sky.

PART II: TANTRUMS

ROADS

Judy's boyfriend Dan lent her his cell phone for her trip. He demonstrated once again in front of the entrance of Newark International how to answer and dial out, thumbing the thick, obvious buttons stamped with green and red symbols.

They stood beside his car parked in the congested drop-off zone, and Judy was distracted from their farewells by other cars zooming in and out of traffic and drivers sounding their horns.

"You know my aunt Claire's house has a phone, right? I'm visiting the Ozarks, not the middle ages." She thrust the phone into his chest.

"I'd feel better to know you had it on you." Dan pressed the phone back into her hands. "Just take it."

"Are you sure your dad won't mind?"

The Nokia, an unwieldy brick of a thing, was an early college graduation gift from Dan's father, who anticipated Dan would need it once he was inevitably hired, somewhere, to be important and "on-the-go." To Judy, the phone felt like an extravagance.

"He doesn't know. I mean, he doesn't know anything yet about this." Dan palmed her belly through her sweater. "I still don't like you going alone."

"I'm fine. I just need the air, and the space." Judy stepped back, and she watched as Dan's brow furrowed in hurt. "To relax, that's all." She leaned in for a kiss.

“Love you.” Dan gave her stomach one last pat.

Judy bent for her suitcase at their feet. “Me too.”

*

At baggage claim at the Springfield airport, Claire wrapped her arms around Judy, exclaiming compliments into her ponytail and praising her clothes, her height, her hairstyle. “You’ve grown up on me, haven’t you?”

Claire’s husband Rich hung back, his hands shoved into his parka pockets. Summoned by his wife, he hugged Judy with one arm. His jacket smelled of dirt and cigarette smoke. Judy couldn’t remember the last time they’d been this close. There must have been a goodbye hug when Rich and Claire moved to Missouri from Philadelphia, though that was six years ago and Judy couldn’t recall.

Judy remembered Rich as quiet at family gatherings, but Claire insisted to her family that he suffered a debilitating, though gentle, case of shyness. As a child, Judy heard whispers of Rich’s alcoholic tendencies and of his drying-out, after three tries, at a luxury rehab facility in Florida. Despite all this, Rich had been a quiet, sober man for all of Judy’s recollection. She couldn’t imagine her uncle drunk or belligerent, but with her parents’ hushed words in her mind, Judy always regarded him with skittish curiosity.

“Glad you came to visit.” Rich’s smile was small, tentative. It endeared him to Judy, who hugged back with both arms.

“I’m glad too.” She was surprised at how much she meant it, at how the physical distance from home, from Dan, loosened the dread constricting her chest.

Rich carried Judy’s suitcase and Claire took her by the arm, chattering away. Judy felt a twinge of guilt. Claire was excited for her visit. When Judy had called to ask

if she could come stay for a week or so, Claire was ecstatic to show her their new home. Judy, though, had been fresh with panic at her pregnancy. She'd thought of the trip only as a way to escape Dan's well-intentioned doting and the sudden, impossible weight of their situation. Claire's feelings, her loneliness or excitement about this visit, hadn't entered Judy's mind.

For the drive home in Rich's Chevy, Claire crowded into the narrow center seat. Judy edged herself into the passenger door and tried to control the nausea that had been swerving in her gut all morning. Claire and Rich lived on four acres of wooded land on a mountain drive in a tiny, rural town called Cabool. The house was a one-story ranch with a roof that shrugged down on the left side. Everything—the squat house, the long dirt driveway, the bare trees—was brown and looked somehow smudged. “We're planning to fix up the shingles in the summer,” Claire said as Rich parked the truck. “Paint the siding, too.”

“I'll add it to my honey-do list,” Rich said and gave a long, exaggerated sigh.

Judy wondered if her face betrayed her surprise. She remembered their old townhome in Philadelphia with its green lawn, tidy front porch, and the pool with its chlorinated sparkle.

“You should see it in the spring when the garden sprouts. Claire's become quite the green thumb.” Rich hauled Judy's bags inside.

Inside the house, too, was brown—wood paneling and a downtrodden rug. Judy recognized some pieces from the old townhome, a secretary's desk, a curio cabinet, little porcelain figures of children with doe eyes that Claire had inherited from Judy's

grandmother. Claire and Rich had never been wealthy, but they'd seemed well off enough before the move west. They claimed their move to the ranch was financial—all that land for less than their townhome rent. Yet Judy's mother argued that Claire could have afforded to retire in their home in Philly if not for Rich's expensive drying-out. It wasn't fair, she claimed, that she lost her sister to Rich's strange, quiet needs. Rich retired, and then he and Claire were gone. Judy's mother, and so by extension Judy, couldn't help but take their relocation, their rejection of their suburban lives, as a snub.

“Tell us all about school, and work. Your mother tells me you keep so busy.”

Judy always felt pressured to feign excitement over all of this. “In a year, I'll graduate Rutgers. Until then, I'm at the hospital for my nursing training, and I'm just in the store to make some cash.”

She worked as a shift leader at Spencer's Gifts, and this second job allowed her a distraction from her days at the hospital where she was becoming inured to the frightening demonstrations of other human bodies' failings. Four days a week, Judy earned minimum wage ringing up overpriced junk—lava lamps, t-shirts stamped with coarse humor, lewd bachelorette gifts. After a morning at the hospital followed by a shift at the mall, she'd arrive home with her mind pleasantly blank and her hair smelling of an odd combination, something antiseptic and medicinal steeped with incense.

Claire remarked that Judy must be looking forward to quitting Spencer's after graduation, and Judy nodded, though she sometimes worried she preferred retail. Judy hadn't made great friends in Cardiac Care. She refrained from joining her peers' group lunches and their bland, eager attempts at gossip with their supervisor, a bubbly woman named Danelle. After each shift Judy so longed for the quiet solitude of her car that she

drove home with the radio off. In Judy's first performance review, Danelle described her bedside manner as "professional yet distant."

Judy could not explain to Danelle that she wasn't offended by her patients, but overwhelmed by the fragility of their bodies. Already familiar with her patients' blood and flesh, Judy couldn't bear to know their personalities, to attach their bodies' frail intimacies to faces and families. The first patient Judy lost was a sixty-year-old bus driver who'd suffered a heart attack on his evening route but rallied in the critical care wing. Days later, he was struck by a second, fatal attack in the unit. After the doctor called it, Danelle and the other, elder nurses offered sympathies—*The first time is a shock, even though we think we know what we're getting into*—and Judy nodded once before continuing her work. Six hours later, at shift's end, Judy stalked to the parking garage, pulled her car into a vacant corner, and sobbed into a single, dusty Kleenex until it was mush in her fist.

"This will be a nice break for you," Claire told Judy. "Let us show you around." She grasped Judy by the elbow. Judy's guest bedroom was snug with an over-pillowed twin daybed and a bookshelf stacked with Claire's worn paperbacks, Dean Koontz and Danielle Steele. The house was tidy and cozy, though small, but when they reached the backyard her uncle became animated.

Rich gestured to the woods beyond a clearing of grass. "As far out as you can see, and more, that's ours."

"Some days I never leave the porch, but your uncle's always out on the ATV, running around." Claire said. "I was never an outdoorsy gal." She pointed to a shack

Judy hadn't noticed. "That's the chicken coop. Your uncle's in charge of fetching eggs. I don't like to go inside. The pecking makes me nervous, and all those feathers."

Judy spent much of her first day stomping through the wooded yard after her uncle, who was eager to show off his land. He'd wanted to take her on the ATV, but she declined, claiming stiffness from sitting during her trip. She didn't believe her stomach could hold for the ride. Rich rejected her Nikes and loaned her a pair of his boots with socks stuffed in the toes. He was quiet as he led Judy along the narrow path, but she clomped along in her unwieldy footwear. Judy thought she should be attempting conversation, and yet he wasn't allowing her many openings. She wondered with annoyance if they were supposed to march in silence all afternoon.

"Nice land," was her only, pathetic attempt at speech. This yielded a single nod from Rich and then more silence.

Yards ahead, twin blurs of sable rustled leaves and skittered away. Rich signaled for Judy to halt. "See there?"

"What is it?"

"A doe and a fawn. They took off quick," Rich said with appreciation. "They sure know how to move."

Judy noticed his parka's camouflage pattern for the first time. "Do you hunt out here?" Another day, she wondered, without her tagging along, would he have kept his eye out for deer with a rifle in his hand?

Rich shook his head. “I tried. I wasn’t very good,” he said, and Judy was charmed by the affection he felt for the doe and its young, and by the sheepish sweep of his eyes to his feet at the admission.

After their walk, Judy collapsed onto her bed and devastated its artful pillow arrangement. She slid into sleep. When the cell phone rang, she woke confounded by the unfamiliar noise and unfamiliar bed. Dan’s cell phone, she realized, her mind fogged with sleep. She fumbled through her bag for the phone and jammed at the red button without contemplation. The room was fresh with silence. Along with relief came a stitch of guilt. She considered the time, only seven p.m.; she should join her aunt and uncle for dinner, she knew, but she couldn’t muster the energy to leave the room. She stuffed the phone under the stack of pillows and burrowed her face into the soft pile, willing sleep to return. When Claire peeked into the room, Judy closed her eyes and mimicked the rhythms of sleep.

The following night after dinner, Claire and Judy took off for a little bar in town, leaving Rich to his perch in front of the television—a huge screen flanked by two heavy speakers, Claire and Rich’s one extravagance.

“He doesn’t mind us going?” Judy asked as Claire backed the truck down the driveway. She wanted to ask, *He doesn’t mind us drinking?*

“Are you kidding? This is my Friday night excursion. He counts the minutes until I’m out of the house. I think it’s important for couples to have time alone.” Claire fell silent.

Implicit in this statement, Judy thought, was Claire's sanction of Judy's solo visit and an invitation for her to share about Dan. Claire hadn't yet pressed Judy to talk about him the way she had about school and work.

They passed a wide driveway to house that Judy could barely make out in the dark. "That's Russell's place." Claire gestured out the window. Russell seemed to be the closest neighbor. "He's the young buck in town, as your uncle likes to say."

Judy was unsure of the significance. "Oh?"

"He's always chopping wood and handing it out to the women in town, free of charge. He makes house calls, *apparently*."

"Has he ever given you wood?" Judy laughed.

"This old lady? Ha." Claire smiled. "Quite a good-looking young man, even if he does get around."

Town was ten minutes down the mountain drive and a right turn onto a two-lane highway. At first Judy was alarmed, as the town was just as bare as the mountain, but then the road wound through a scattering of buildings.

"See this?" Claire pointed at the red light in front of them. The car idled outside a building that held the post office and library. "This is our only traffic light in town." She laughed. "Can you believe that?" Claire shook her head as though, even after six years, she could not.

The bar was a long and squat building with a sallow OPEN sign propped up in the front window. Only three other cars were in the lot. "It's early still," Claire said. "I like to get a good seat."

The bar ran the length of the wall and strings of colored lights illuminated a handful of rickety tables. The bartender, a very tall and very slim woman, waved as they entered. She pulled two Miller Lite bottles from the ice chest, popped off the caps, and poured the beer into frosted glasses. She placed their drinks on the bar next to a pair of men, the only other patrons.

“Thanks, Mandy.” Claire took the beers. “Mandy knows I like a chilled glass,” she murmured to Judy. “It’s not usually done here, but I tip her well.” Claire nodded at the two men, and for a moment Judy feared they’d be sitting with them. “Let’s head to the back booth,” Claire said. “I like the privacy.”

Two hours later, Claire was six beers deep and sloshed. Judy had been sipping slowly at her now-tepid beer, worried that Claire would notice, but Claire hadn’t questioned her slow pace. With each refill from Mandy, Claire had become louder and more talkative. It was a relief for Judy to worry about nothing but sitting and listening and nodding at appropriate intervals.

“When we first moved here, I would drive in circles around town and time the full loop. I could make it in seven minutes if I didn’t get stuck too long at the light. I’d tally up how many minutes of waiting at the light, and how many cars would pass through the intersection while I waited. Sometimes it would be one car, or two. Lots of times it was none. I wondered what I was waiting for, anyway.

“So one day, I didn’t wait. Out from God-knows-where pulled this podunk town police officer in his podunk cruiser, lights and siren going. He nearly wet his pants, he was so excited to be writing a ticket. Like me running that stoplight was the most exciting thing that ever happened to him.”

Judy sniffed. “It probably it was.”

“He asked where I was headed in such a rush with this shit-eating grin. I burst into tears. I couldn’t think of a place to pretend to be going. Anywhere else, you get pulled over and you can lie. You’re on the way to the hospital because someone’s sick, or you’re late for work somewhere important. Here?” Claire raised her arms, drink in hand, and slopped beer on the floor. “Where could I possibly be headed? Nowhere. I burst out crying because I realized I wasn’t going anywhere ever again.”

Claire was crying now, too. Judy was grateful for the bar’s dim light and the privacy of their dusty corner. Taking stock of the bar, it was clear to Judy none of the other patrons had noticed Claire’s breakdown. Judy handed Claire a stack of beer-damp bar napkins.

“It seems like a nice town. Nice people, friendly.” Judy knew how lukewarm her protestations sounded. She’d never been much good at comforting—the words she knew she should say came out stilted. This reminded her of “patient empathy role playing” in Cardiac Care. Even with Danelle’s notes and the textbook’s “key phrases,” the right words always tasted false in her mouth.

“Oh, it’s a fine town if you never want to do anything again in your life.”

“Then why do you stay?”

“It’s good for Rich. We have land. We have chickens.” Claire half-moaned, half-laughed. “We have a whole lot of shit.” She rested her head on the table.

“Should we go in the ladies room and freshen you up?”

“Ha.” Claire laughed. “They haven’t cleaned that place in the last decade. I meant to tell you earlier—if you gotta go, hold it.”

“Did he give you a ticket? That officer?”

“No. I scared the crap out of him. He’d probably never seen a woman cry like that in public. At a funeral, maybe. I see him around town. He gives me a wide berth. He thinks I’m unstable.”

Last call came at 11 p.m., when Mandy struck a cowbell hanging from the shelf behind the bar. Claire was drunk out of her mind and Judy realized she’d be driving the truck home herself. She’d never handled a truck before. Claire handed her a fistful of bills and gestured that Judy should take care of the tab.

“How does she get herself home?” Judy asked Mandy at the bar. “Is she usually this drunk?”

“Nope. You’re a special occasion.”

“I don’t know how I’m going to get us back to her house.”

“I’ll have someone help you get her into the truck.” Mandy called over a young man sitting alone at the edge of the bar. “Russell, help Claire’s niece get her settled, will you?”

“Young buck,” Claire mumbled as Judy and Russell guided her into the parking lot. “Antlers and all.”

“What is she saying to me?” Russell leaned Claire against her truck while Judy fumbled in Claire’s handbag for the keys.

“Nothing. I don’t know.” She unlocked the door. “I can’t drive this thing.” Judy buckled her aunt into the cab. “I don’t even know where I’m going.”

Russell swung open the driver-side door and gestured that Judy should climb in. “Go slow. There’s only one highway in town. You’ll get there.” He paused, shook his

head. “I’ll lead you up the mountain. But I’m turning off in my driveway, and after that you’ll be fine to find your place on your own.”

Russell drove slowly for Judy’s benefit, his taillights winking just yards ahead of them up the mountain. Judy was wary with the brake and gas pedals on the strange, sharp incline, but the truck still lurched through the curves. Claire dozed, snoring gently, with her body curled against the passenger door.

*

Judy had meant to tell Dan she was pregnant three weeks ago during dinner in Winberries Pub, snug in their booth with its familiar scents of lager-polished wood and the kitchen’s pans of oil bubbling around something fattening and fried. Instead, she blurted it out on the drive there, surprised at her own frankness. Dan had needled her the whole ride about her limp mood and sullen face—*was it something at work? Did something happen with your mother? What was wrong, then? Your sister?*

With each question, Judy felt her chest heat another degree. She’d taken the home test yesterday evening and spent the 24 hours since assigning herself to the usual rhythms of her day—a shift in the mall, the commute from school back to her apartment, her daily phone call to Dan during her lunch break. She hadn’t set up the dinner at Winberries to break the news; they’d had this date planned already, and in the name of normalcy she’d kept the news to herself, deciding to share when they were scheduled to be together. Judy had always prided herself on her pragmatism.

When she pictured the scene, she’d imagined shaken nerves and trembling hands until finally the relief came of sharing this burden. Instead, in the car, Judy felt irritated, annoyed at Dan’s questions and his clueless, ineffectual concern. So when she barked,

“I’m pregnant, Dan,” she was relieved to hear only the dumb chatter of the radio. Headlights swept through the car and illuminated his still features. They drove on for a moment, neither speaking, Dan’s hands at ten-and-two. Dan shook his head, as though rousing himself from a stupor, pulled over to the gravel shoulder of Route 1, and flicked on the hazards.

His next movements seemed impossibly quick, shifting into park, grabbing her arm, and pulling her into an awkward embrace that sent her nosing into the musky armpit of his Flyers sweatshirt. “It will be okay. We’ll figure it out.” Dan palmed at her hair the way you’d pat a dog.

At Winberries, he made a show of requesting the nonsmoking section from the hostess and waitress Caroline, who’d bummed them both many cigarettes during their boozy, late nights at the pub. “We’ll both have Cokes,” he told her.

“You’re not the pregnant one. For god’s sake, have a beer.”

“I’m going to be here for you.” Dan took her hand and leaned over the table. “I want to do the right thing.”

Judy cleared her throat and retracted her hand. His earnestness embarrassed her. She stalled and took a long draw on her soda straw. “I don’t know what the right thing is. I mean, I don’t know that yet.”

“We’ll get through this.” He cleared his throat as though chagrined by the obviousness of their conversation. “Together, we’ll get through.”

Judy laughed, grateful to see Caroline weaving through tables in their direction with their meals. She wanted to shove him. She imagined relaying this conversation to

her sister later, or her friends, and their likely response—this is not something you *get through*.

*

The big day of Claire and Rich's week was Saturday, Wal-Mart day. Claire was bleary-eyed and puffy in the face, but she rose early for the occasion. Fearful of waking Rich the night before, Judy had tucked Claire into a makeshift bed on the couch with an Advil, a cold compress, and a glass of water. She was surprised at the well of tenderness for her aunt that rose in her chest during these ministrations, and she wished that Danelle could see her now. Perhaps she had a bedside manner after all. If Rich noticed Claire's hangover, he chose not to speak of it. The pair offered to bring Judy along for the drive, but Judy declined in favor of studying next to their living room's lit wood stove.

She watched their truck edge out of the driveway, and then grabbed her sweatshirt for the walk down the mountain road to the house below. The cool temperature cut through the hoodie and she wished she'd worn her more sensible coat. The mountain was pretty despite the bare-limbed trees, but the walk was longer, and steeper, than she'd imagined.

Russell was in his front yard tossing logs of chopped wood into the bed of his truck. A sign nailed to the tree near the foot of the driveway read *Firewood 5\$* in tall, lean lettering.

"I hear you deliver?" Judy called.

Russell looked up from his work. "Nope. This I drop off at the fuel station. The owner sells it and gives himself fifteen percent."

"What if I pay you extra?"

“That depends. How far’s your place, and how much are you buying?”

“Right up the road there.”

“Oh, right. You’re Claire’s niece.” Russell noted this without surprise or much interest.

“We met last night.” Could he have already forgotten her?

“Sure did.”

“Thanks for helping me get us home.” Judy paused and looked him over. “My aunt says you have a reputation as the town buck, that you make special deliveries. That’s what she was saying to you last night, if you were still wondering.”

Russell laughed. “That’s just talk.”

“What makes your firewood special?”

“What do you mean?”

“It must be special. You’re charging for wood, and all this town’s got are trees everywhere.” Judy raised her arms to gesture at the trees around them.

“I mostly drop off firewood to a couple elderly folks who can’t cut it themselves.”

“You charge them for delivery?”

“I don’t charge them at all,” he said.

“You’re not a very good businessman, are you?”

“I guess not. I write off the wood I give to the old folks. Tax breaks.”

“Really?” Judy asked.

“Nope. I tell you what.” He gestured toward the pile of wood and the axe. “Free of charge—anything you can chop and carry.”

“Myself?”

“Haven’t you ever cut wood before?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Self reliance.” He handed her the axe.

The handle was smoother than Judy imagined, the wood worn from use. It was startling in its heft, and she felt the right side of her body off-center with its weight as she hiked up to the stump.

Russell hefted a log upright on the stump. “Let’s see.”

“You aren’t going to show me? Or walk me through it?”

“I trust your instinct will kick in.”

Judy lifted the axe to her right shoulder and took a wide stance that made her feel like a ridiculous Paul Bunyon. She swung down, startled by her lack of control over the arc of the blade. It met the face of the log just a hair from its edge and stuck an inch in.

“Nice try. Now watch.” Russell yanked the axe from the wood. He swung the instrument with ease into the wood, and again. The log fell open. He sat up one of the halves. “And watch again.” The arc of his arm made the air sing. She thought he must be cold in only a t-shirt. Closer now, Judy could see the sweat darkening the fabric in the small of his back.

“Now you,” he said.

“That’s it? That’s your tutorial?”

He handed her the axe. Again Judy swung and again the blade stuck in the wood. She lifted the axe and the wood with it. Grasping the handle with one hand and the wood with another, she tried to yank the axe from the log, but it held fast. She wished she could hide her reddening face.

Russell freed the wood and placed it back on the stand. “You’re wobbling your arm on the way down. That’s from trying too hard. Accuracy is more important than power. You have to know where you’re headed.” He demonstrated again. The blade fell. “Learn where to hit first, and power will come later.”

Judy swung.

“You’re wasting energy bringing the axe up over your head. Smaller movements, stay in control.”

Judy tried to follow his directions, but no matter her adjustments, her efforts felt amateurish.

“Bend your legs. Get some nice, easy movement in there. The right hand slides down easy and guides the blade.” He put the smallest piece on the block. Judy swung and sliced the wood in two. “There,” he said.

“I’m getting better.”

“Well, you were pretty bad.”

Judy’s arms burned and there was an unfamiliar tightness in her shoulder. “I feel like I’m about to cut one of my toes off,” she said. “Or one of your fingers.”

“You chop off your toe, I’ll put it on ice and hope for the best,” Russell laughed. “You slice off my finger, I hope you don’t panic. You scared of blood?”

“I hate blood.”

“Then it’s probably good that you won’t be doing this for long.”

Judy handed him the axe. “I’m a nursing student.”

Russell shook his head. “You did a terrible job picking out a career.”

“I’m not the one trying to make a living selling off wood in a town full of trees.”

“Let’s see you swing. One more time.” He handed her the axe.

She hefted up the axe again, and the muscles of her shoulders and arms complained at the strain. She brought it back down. Her nausea was returning and twining its fingers into her gut. “I’ve had enough.”

“You’re almost there. Keep at it.”

“I changed my mind. I don’t want to.”

“Remember our arrangement. Cut and carry.”

“I don’t want any of your stupid wood. I don’t even know what I’m doing here.”

Judy was ashamed at the whine in her voice. Russell must have thought her a child.

“Take your axe.” She tossed it on the ground between them. Now that her little tantrum had begun, she couldn’t seem to quiet herself.

“Never, never throw an axe, sweetie.” Russell huffed and retrieved the instrument. “Cut your wood, then, or move on. I don’t mind it either way.”

She’d already embarrassed herself by acting like a brat, and it would only hurt her pride to admit this, to smooth things over with this hick she’d never see again. He must have known she didn’t come there for wood. Was she supposed to beg for his forgiveness?

Judy turned and stalked down the driveway. Sweating in her layers, she found the walk up the mountain more taxing than her journey down. She stumbled. These past few weeks her center of gravity had felt lower in her abdomen, heavy and foreign to her, although she thought she must have been imagining the change.

Once in the house, Judy rummaged for the cell phone in her suitcase. She dialed Dan’s number, but cut the call before the third ring. She sat in the living room and glared

at her open textbook without reading the words until her aunt and uncle returned. When Claire questioned her red eyes, Judy rubbed her hands over her face as though she could scrub the evidence of tears and complained about the wood stove. She just wasn't used to the smoke, was all.

By the end of the day, Dan's voicemail box for the cell phone was full—at least that's what Judy guessed from the new icon on the contraption's screen. Ignoring his calls wearied her. She silenced the phone's ringer and felt culpable each time the phone's glass face lit up in silence across the room. Judy buried the phone in the bottom of her suitcase and became wary of touching it, as though it were a bomb.

Sunday morning, Claire and Rich left for church without waking Judy. She woke to find Claire's note on the kitchen table. *Church til noon, be back soon. Bagels in fridge.* Judy swung open the refrigerator door and frowned to find the bagels were defrosted Lenders sitting in their own bagged condensation. She hadn't had a real breakfast in days. Claire and Rich didn't own a coffee maker and were content to spoon instant Folgers into their boiled water. Judy found herself lonely recalling the mornings she woke to coffee percolating in her kitchen and Dan attempting untidy omelets over the stovetop.

There was a knock at the door, and Judy peered between the curtains in the front window. It was Russell, nearly unrecognizable in a bulky coat and baseball cap. She unlatched the door and stammered a greeting. She wondered if she'd see him again, though she didn't expect it to be this quick. Last evening, Rich and Claire had treated her to a meal in town, and Judy had run over to the bar across the street while Rich paid the

dinner tab. She handed Mandy a wad of her traveling cash and then scrawled a note on a napkin: *Sorry. Beer's on me.* She folded the napkin in half.

“Can you give him the note? It’s a thank you,” she told Mandy. “For helping us get home.”

“I brought you some wood.” Russell turned to gesture at his truck in the driveway loaded with firewood. “After you ran off the other day, I thought for sure you’d be freezing up here.”

“Why aren’t you at church?” Judy asked. She added, “and thank you.”

Russell shrugged. He lifted the cap from his head with one hand and swept his hair back from his forehead with the other before replacing the hat. Judy’s insides jolted at the familiarity of the gesture. This was one of Dan’s tics; he brushed back his bangs and adjusted his baseball cap when he was nervous or preoccupied. He did this often and without realizing—it shocked him each time Judy alerted him mid-gesture. Lately though, she’d been watching for this move as a gauge of Dan’s unease. Despite Dan’s calm exterior, his hat betrayed his secret and constant agitation.

“Where should I put the firewood?” Russell asked.

Judy led him to the overflowing pile of wood Frank kept in the backyard.

“Not hurting for firewood, are you?” Russell asked.

“I guess not. I’m sorry you came out of your way.”

Russell gestured vaguely to the driveway and his truck. “It’s en-route.” He turned, looking out at the chicken coop and at the trees ringing the clearing. “Your aunt and uncle have a nice space here.”

“There’s instant coffee, if you want. And bagels.” It was reckless, she knew, inviting in this stranger, and something she’d normally never do. She felt a sense of relief in behaving uncharacteristically while in this small town, where others could only guess at how she’d ordinarily behave.

She led him through the house and Russell took note of each room silently. He seemed impressed by the size of the television, but he didn’t remark on it. She indicated the closed door to the master bedroom as the last of her tour.

“Where do you sleep?” he asked. “The couch?”

Judy opened the door to her guest room. She flinched with embarrassment as he sat on her bed amongst the tangled sheets and the pillows that hadn’t been tossed to the floor. She should have been making the bed all week, she realized. A thoughtful guest would have done so. She hadn’t bothered with the closet or dresser, and across the room, her suitcase was open on the floor and heaped with her discarded garments. The wrinkled mound was topped off, to her horror, with an old, yellowing bra. Russell put a hand on the wrought iron of the daybed frame, considering it. Judy stood across the room, uneasy at the room’s lack of seating options. She took a seat on the other side of the bed.

She and Dan hadn’t slept together since the news of the baby. He gave frequent kisses and spoiled her with lingering and virtuous backrubs. Dan’s palms on her stomach were attentive but methodical. Appraising. “Is my tummy still flat?” Judy would ask, looking down at his tan hand pressed against the pale skin of her belly, and he’d nod, serious. She imagined him penciling his findings into a chart, conferring with other fathers-to-be as though they were a crew of scientists: *The project is proceeding as*

planned. “Are my breasts getting bigger?” she asked the night before she left for Cabool, and Dan extracted himself from their chaste tangle on the bed, took a step back, and squinted before indicating no, but would she like something to drink while he was up? And off he went, unbidden, to fetch her a hot chocolate. Judy was overcome by frustration. She couldn’t bear his doting—and was mercifully escaping it on a plane the next day—but she yearned for him nonetheless. It couldn’t be normal, she thought, for all of this to feel so confused.

Russell slunk closer across the bed. Judy imagined her aunt and uncle coming home and finding, to their shock and confusion, Russell’s truck in the driveway and Russell in the guest bedroom. For a moment, Judy hoped it would happen, and then she wouldn’t have to decide upon her next move. She didn’t decide quickly enough. Russell’s lips met hers.

Judy leaned in to the kiss. This wasn’t as she expected; she felt as though she were performing a dance and couldn’t remember the steps, fumbling until muscle memory took over. Russell took her hands and placed them on his waist. This was a correction, and Judy’s body yielded, remembering. His body was better than Dan’s, trim in the waist where Dan had softened with Yuengling and late night burgers. She thought this not unkindly—it was an observation, but not a judgment, though she couldn’t help but note the difference between the two. What was she doing, she wondered, if she wasn’t comparing? Now she felt like the scientist scribbling reports. Russell swept away a cluster of pillows with one arm and guided her onto the narrow mattress. Her limbs were obedient, though she couldn’t halt the chatter of her mind.

After, Judy led Russell to the front door with the formality of a dinner party hostess handing the coats back at the end of the night. She walked with him to his truck and struggled to match his wide strides. She was kicking him out, and yet somehow it wounded her to see him swing open the truck door so readily. Judy stepped forward for a goodbye kiss, but with a firm and gentle grip, Russell halted her embrace. His face was kind, though; the gesture was a boundary and not a snub. Russell displayed skill in pulling off the Band-Aid quickly, as Judy's mother would say. In the unit, Danelle called this "compassionate realism." Judy envied him this talent.

In the following days, Dan gave up on the cell phone. He got ahold of Rich and Claire's phone number, likely from Judy's mother, and took to trying the house line. Judy shook her head each time Claire answered the phone, and Claire lied that Judy was out for a walk, or riding the ATV, or feeding the chickens. Claire noted the dates and times of each call on her "While you were out" message pad as though Judy weren't standing in the room. *Nov 12, 12:45—Dan asks Judy call him back. Nov 12, 4:50—Dan misses Judy and hopes she is doing okay. Nov 13, 1:45—Will Judy please give Dan a call ASAP?*

Rich had asked Judy several times to come for a ride around the mountain back roads in the truck, and she'd declined, thinking of how her stomach had roiled during each bumpy ride in the truck so far. But after Dan's most recent call, she said to her uncle, "So how about that drive?"

Her uncle gazed out the kitchen window and frowned. "It's getting late, and I'm afraid we won't have much time to show you around the mountain before the sun goes

down. The fuel is getting low, too, and I hate to go all the way to town to gas up first.

We'll lose the light then for sure."

"Just a quick trip, then. I'd like to see the view during a sunset."

He looked out the window again. "Sure." If he were puzzled, he didn't let it slow them down. "It's beautiful out there. I'd love for you to enjoy it before you leave. You can tell your parents about our view." He paused, looked at her jeans and cardigan.

"You better put on some layers, though."

Judy threw on her thickest sweatpants, and as an afterthought, slipped the Nokia inside her pocket. It would serve as a physical reminder of Dan, a talisman of her guilt. Perhaps by the drive's end she'd feel compelled to call him. Inside the truck, Rich tossed a heavy flannel blanket over her legs.

"It's getting cold out there, and the heat in the cab has been screwy." Though he'd been quiet for the past few days, once they were easing over the narrow gravel roads he didn't stop talking, naming who owned what land and marveling at the little they supposedly paid for it. "No houses out here, just animals." He pointed to herds of sheep and fields of cows. "We're losing light. Time to loop around and head back."

He took the swells and sharp curves of the hills with confidence, and Judy complimented him on the smooth ride, despite the bumpiness of the gravel roads. "It's a good little truck," he remarked, and then he paused. "I've been so busy talking that I've lost track of our route." He slowed to stop at the intersection of two narrow dirt roads. "Did we come by this intersection on the way out? Do you remember which way we came?"

Each dirt and gravel road along the drive had been identical to Judy, and the rows of trees and patches of field were the same. “I don’t know.” She tried not to let her exasperation show—wasn’t this his job, to know where they were headed? “The left?”

“I trust you,” he said, but after minutes of silence on the on the winding road, he said, “This sure doesn’t feel familiar.”

Judy shook her head. Trees were trees. How familiar could they be? She was annoyed at their routing mishap, but not concerned. They were on the land behind the mountain’s highway road—weren’t they bound to loop around and find the highway eventually?

“Better turn around.” He navigated a tight three-point turn and the truck lurched back in the direction of the troublesome intersection. He was sweating at the temples, and Judy realized he felt actual danger in having their lost way. She wondered if she should be worried.

“Do you have a map or something?” she asked.

“I’ve got a county map. It’s in the kitchen drawer.” Rich cleared his throat and tried to laugh, though the result was weak. They continued on in silence for several moments. “You don’t seem too interested in talking to your boyfriend.” He paused. “Though I’m sure you’d rather talk to Claire about all of that, not me.”

“It’s fine,” Judy said, and was surprised that it was true. “I need some time away.”

“Does he treat you all right?”

“He does. He wants to be a good person and do the right thing, or the expected thing. I just don’t know if I want to also. I don’t know if he’s the right one to do the

expected thing with. Do you know what I mean?" She was aware of how nonsensical she sounded. She glanced at her uncle and expected laughter, or puzzlement.

"Maybe," he said. "Keep talking."

"The reason I'm not answering his calls is I'm pregnant. Please don't tell Claire." Judy spoke in a rush. "She'll call Mom. I haven't told anyone yet but Dan. And now you."

Her uncle slowed the truck to a stop and hopped from the cab. Judy was struck dumb as she watched him open her door. "I'm glad you came to visit us," he said. He tucked the flannel tighter around her lap with surprising gentleness, then removed his coat and placed it over her chest. "You should stay here as long as you need."

"Thanks," Judy said, fingering the collar draped over her neck. Rich nodded, actually tipping the brim of his hat to her, and Judy smiled. "You're becoming a real cowboy out here."

He shrugged and gently closed her door.

"Won't you be cold?"

Back in the cab, he shook his head. "Let's get us home."

*

Years later, they will all make light of Judy's excursion out west. Any moment of indecision, no matter how small—especially when it is small—and someone in the family, Judy's parents or her sister, will bring it up. Chinese takeout or pizza? Rent a movie or head out to the Regal 12? *Don't know what you want? Why not head to Missouri*, they'll say. *Mull it over*. This is a joke they can afford, for the family will be rich in love and luck in just a few short months, first with Dan resting his palm on the

swell of Judy's belly and later with a toddler on colt-legs staggering across the room. A daughter, healthy and alarmingly excitable and sending out laughter like sparks. *Mull it over*. Judy will glance at Dan, now her husband, the corner of his mouth sloped into what she will willfully mistake—until, of course, she can't—for a reluctant smile.

But before that, Judy must sit in the cab of the truck, she and her uncle quieted by the growing dark. The Ozarks curve expectantly into the distance. Judy avoids looking at the dusty dashboard, its faded lights, the gas gauge's needle ticking closer to the orange E. She avoids her uncle's face and the worried hunch of his shoulders. Reds and oranges ribbon the sky until the colors bleed and darken, blotting out the hills. The truck's headlights hurl the tree limbs into shadows. Waiting at home, Judy will learn, Claire bypassed worried long ago and is now incensed, her anger laced through with panic: *All I could think was this, over and over: what am I going to tell your mother?*

Under the blanket, Judy curls her hand around the cell phone and gives it a squeeze. She could confess to having the phone and call Claire now to puzzle out their location on the county map, but she's greedy for these extra moments. Once they return she'll have to call Dan, and it will be soon. She trusts Rich's steady hands on the wheel and the way the truck holds to every curve. Judy thinks of how Russell cleaved the log in two with the swing of his arms, how he pressed her body away from his without meanness and without hesitation. She wonders if she too can find that balance between doing what is kind and what is right.

Three dings sound from the truck, the low-gas warning. Rich glances at her and the truck slows for a moment before resuming its rumble along the road. They reach the intersection again and pause. Judy finds guilty relief and comfort in the engine's

reverberations; in Rich's hands gripping the wheel; in the understanding that he will be the one to find their path back home.

TANTRUMS

I. JUDY

Judy hadn't so much agreed to attend her sister's dinner party tonight as she had become resigned to its inevitability. Michelle had likely extended the offer in hopes of fulfilling some vague requirement of sisterly distraction from Judy's divorce, which had been finalized just last month, and the lonely fact of Dan's current vacation with their daughter Sarah. Judy considered this vacation the hardest blow since the separation began just over a year ago: her child co-opted for a whole week by Dan and Tina, his new *friend* who was, it seemed, young enough to be a child herself. They were enjoying the kind of vacation—a family vacation, Disney World no less— that, now, Judy could not envision affording for years. *Let's get you out of the house*, Michelle phoned earlier in the afternoon. *You don't need a sitter for once.*

Judy had been hesitant, and for good reason: she was long-studied in, and thus wary of, her sister's talents at cajoling others to her way; she suspected the invitation was crafted from courtesy, or worse yet, pity; Judy had a habit of drinking swiftly to shed social tensions, and she was sure to feel social tensions amongst Michelle's friends, all strangers to her. But her home was eerie in the quiet of Sarah's absence, and the fridge was vacant but for flaccid lettuce and something suspicious growing on a hunk of cheese. And so she went, and even before the salad was served, she'd grown wine-warm in her cheeks and chest. She hadn't yet eased into the conversation's rhythms and so hung

back, reticent in the seat beside her sister who doled out the wine to all and cheerfully topped off glasses.

“Judy’s drinking us under the table,” Michelle laughed and her many silver bracelets clinked as she angled the bottle down over her sister’s glass for the third time.

“Michelle, please.” Judy held her hand up. “No more.”

“Judy, darling. It’s a Cab.” Michelle shook her bangs out of her eyes. She worked at a salon where the stylists were skinny and wore black every day and snipped at each others’ hair when they got bored. Yesterday one of the other stylists sheared Michelle’s hair into what she explained to Judy as an *inverted bob*. The front of her hair swooped down to her chin and was longer than the back, which was buzzed from the nape of her neck. This new haircut had what Michelle called a *point of view*, but Judy thought it made her look like a character from a bad science fiction movie.

“And?” Judy wondered where her sister got off calling her *darling* in that tone, as though Michelle were not only the older but suddenly, somehow, the wiser sister. As though Michelle were not the one who’d run up thousands of dollars of credit card debt, paid off by their father just last year, on things like Lululemon yoga pants—ninety-eight dollars a pair, Judy had checked online—and spa seaweed wraps. She next wondered where Michelle got off carting that bottle around with its expensive, soft-looking white label *Chateau Montelena*, featured front and center in the manner of Vanna White revealing the letter E.

“And reds are good for you, you know.” Michelle had recently begun taking Cardio Barre dance classes to complement her Pilates routine. She often offered Judy unsolicited advice on diet and exercise.

“Good for you in moderation, I’m sure.” Judy eyed Michelle’s wine glasses, which were the size of cereal bowls. “Won’t this set you back at least a week at the gym?”

Across the table, Michelle’s boyfriend Allen didn’t seem to notice Judy’s tone or her smirk. “Oh, Michelle will work it off. No question.”

Judy didn’t know these guests. Not Sue, the bartender at Michelle’s new haunt the Triumph Brewing Company; Kyle, a server there; Karen, the social worker she’d met in Small World Coffee (although Michelle had mistakenly introduced her this evening as a therapist before Karen corrected her—it was just like Michelle to muddle important details of other people’s lives); Allen, the latest boyfriend. Judy didn’t socialize with her sister often, but it seemed as though each time she did Michelle introduced her to a new group of new friends. Michelle’s friends were like flocks of sheep, grazing then moving on. Judy’s own friends were settled, stationary married couples, couples like she and Dan used to be. But then, who knows. Perhaps Michelle was the one who did the grazing and the moving.

Judy would run into these forgotten friends sometimes palming produce at the Pennington Market or in line at Princeton Record Exchange; then she’d be forced into small talk which skirted the subject of Michelle for fear that there were raw feelings from when her sister dropped them, as she inevitably did. Most of Michelle’s friends worked front-of-house food service and Judy had begun to dread running into them at Alchemist and Barrister’s or Winberrie’s Pub—so much so that she’d coerce Dan to drive three towns over for dinner on date nights. Of course, the closest Judy had gotten to a restaurant in months now was the Wendy’s drive-thru. She found herself there weekly,

wearily from her shift in the Princeton ICU, half guilty and half relieved to pull back onto the highway and nudge the car in the direction of home with dinner salty and warm in the passenger seat. She'd pick at the fries as she drove one-handed, returning home with dinner near-gone and the steering wheel shiny with grease.

Michelle placed the bottle onto the table with a heavy clink and turned to Allen, brushing her hand across his cheek. "Work hard to play hard, right? Oh well. It's my hobby."

The table was a sheet of glass propped up on wrought iron legs, and it reflected the glint of silverware and flames from the tea lights at each place setting. Under the table, Michelle hooked her foot around Allen's calf and slid it up and down, slowly rumpling his pant leg—how just like Michelle to have no qualms about pawing at her boyfriend with others in the room. Michelle's shoes were black—she'd taken to wearing all black lately even when not at work—and made of leather strips and ties which laced up her calves. The heels were steep, glinting spikes of silver. Judy was sure they were expensive, but that didn't prevent them from looking like a cross between medieval torture instruments and S&M gear.

Michelle had met Allen at the gym, Judy remembered. Or was that the last one? Judy long ago abandoned hope of keeping track. Michelle had been a serial monogamist since puberty, falling then falling again, each time harder than before. Each relationship, she claimed, was tinged with more certainty and finality than the last. *Love is great. I have enough experience, I should know*, Michelle began her toast at Judy and Dan's wedding reception five years ago, and the crowd tittered, knowing. The problem with

love at first sight, Judy thought, was that if you believe in it, you have an excuse to never stop looking.

“Judy, I saw the picture of your daughter on Michelle’s fridge. She’s lovely.”

Karen said. “How old is she, again?”

“Sarah will be five in August.” Judy sighed. “And she is lovely, thank you,” she added, hoping it didn’t sound like such an afterthought.

“I don’t miss the days of hiring sitters.” Karen shook her head before taking a long swig of her wine. “My son is twelve now, thank goodness.”

“In just a couple of years, he can be your designated driver,” Michelle said.

Everyone laughed but Judy.

“It must be nice to have a week off from it all. Let her father take care of her for once, huh?” Karen raised her glass as if in toast, but no one responded. Through the glass, Judy saw Kyle nudge Karen’s knee with his own, a warning, and Judy could have laughed at the unintentional clumsiness of the gesture but for her own sudden misgivings. What, then, had Michelle told them all?

“I didn’t realize you were so well informed.” Judy aimed for levity, but cringed at her own voice with its accusatory tone and sudden, unexpected volume.

Michelle stood. “Are we all ready for soup.” From the way she began gathering salad plates, it wasn’t a question. “I have a surprise treat, Judy.”

For a moment, there was only the clinking of stoneware as Michelle stacked plates. Her heels clacked on the dining room tile and into the kitchen. Judy recognized the curt quality of her sister’s motions, and the motivation behind them, from their teenage years. This was Michelle’s attempt to shame her into silence, as she had

whenever Judy embarrassed her in front of her school friends by speaking too much, or too strangely. That was years ago, and now Judy was bold with wine and indignity.

“I suppose Michelle’s given you all the details then,” Judy said.

“Men,” Sue leaned forward to commiserate, “are bastards.” She nodded her head towards Judy as if this was a novel sentiment and she and Judy were somehow bonded together in sisterhood through its utterance. She then addressed Allen and Kyle. “No offense.”

“I can’t believe he’s brought her to Disney World now, after the divorce,” Judy said. “I asked him if we could go on a real vacation years ago, and we never had the money, he claimed.”

“I went through a divorce myself—” Sue began.

“Sarah just loves everything Disney, too, and those damn princesses,” Judy said. Having worked herself up, it was suddenly difficult to stop speaking.

Sarah had taken to *Sleeping Beauty* since the break-up. This was a recent development and, Judy knew, all Dan’s doing. It was also the reason this vacation would cement Dan—and Tina with him—in Sarah’s mind as the fun parent, while Judy would be remembered later for only the responsible, un-fun parts of child-rearing like discipline and early bedtimes. Vegetable-eating. Rule-following. Eventually, homework-doing. Judy would have the exhaustion of parenting, and Dan would have the play.

Judy tried to get Sarah into *Pocahontas* or *Mulan*, anything in which the main female character does something besides fall asleep and get woken up once the trouble is settled, but nothing else would stick. Dan was crazy with buying Sarah gifts, and the

Sleeping Beauty's face was everywhere: Sarah's nightgown, her coloring books, the plastic tiara she insisted upon wearing each day. And there were the temper tantrums. Judy was shocked, scared even, by her daughter during these fits—Sarah's face scarlet and slick with tears; snot roping over her mouth and chin; the tiara's teeth tangled in blond snarls; tiny fists beating at the walls and floor and even at Judy's legs and stomach with a disconcerting fury while she wailed. *Princesses don't take baths! Princesses don't eat peas!*

Judy imagined her daughter was posing for a picture in front of the Disney castle right now. There they were, Dan and Tina, furthering this princess pathology, dark and malignant, through her child despite all of Judy's best attempts to curb it. *Princesses stay up as late as they want at Daddy's house!* Judy often contemplated introducing her daughter to *Cinderella* and the evil, ugly stepmother. She fantasized how she'd strike back: *Some princesses don't have mothers and are held as indentured servants because their fathers marry vapid whores.*

"I'm sure she's having a lovely time. She could use the fun after such a tough year," Karen said.

The slow, careful way the woman's mouth formed the words, betraying her caution, pricked at something in Judy's chest. "Well, sure. So could I."

II. MICHELLE

Michelle stood over the stove, peering down at the pot chicken or noodle soup, her mother's recipe. She hoped Judy would appreciate how she prepared this, her favorite comfort food from childhood, just for her, even though she hadn't noticed the Cabernet

Sauvignon as the brand they stole from their parents the first and only time they got drunk together as teenagers and talked—a real, true conversation. *Heart-to-hearting*, Judy called it with a laugh at the time. Months later, Michelle was living at home two full years after graduating from high school, contemplating dropping out of massage school and starting up at a temp agency, and Judy began nursing school at Rutgers—a school less than forty miles from their home, but it may as well have been four hundred miles for as much as Michelle saw her younger sister after that.

That giggly, wine-drunk night held up in Michelle’s memory as the defining moment of their relationship, or what Michelle thought their relationship could become once they were both in college and shed the identities all teenagers craft as self-defense. Judy wasn’t as hard or brusque or contentedly lonesome as she pretended, Michelle could tell, just like she herself wasn’t so breezy. It had been easy, at that age—at all of Michelle’s ages, in fact—to position herself opposite her sister. There was something uncomplicated and free of responsibility about this, creating and inhabiting the negative of someone else’s persona. But they were moving past all that, Michelle could see.

Soaked in wine that night years ago, she’d thought Judy felt the same, but the next day she retreated, aloof, back into her old distance. It eased, somewhat, as they’d aged, and Michelle hoped to lighten her sister’s mood some tonight. Since the divorce, Michelle had done her best to be a source of comfort to Sarah, who was easily distracted by a weekday matinee or a trip to the salon for a real manicure complete with rhinestone nail art.

Judy had been tougher, of course, but Michelle remained confident. She knew herself to be good at distraction—that was the benefit to maintaining an appearance of

frivolity. People trusted her for a good time because she always seemed to float above the messes of the lives around her; people relied upon her apparent buoyancy in a way which conjured it into actual being; little they knew of the gratitude Michelle felt for the daily unexpected, the happenstance manner in which most of her own life fell together. Whatever distractions Michelle could muster were offerings, reparations for her own material blessings, which were borne of an unlikely mixture of others' benevolence and luck. Michelle had been granted more favors than her sister, she knew, but she'd always intimated it was the universe's—and their parent's—way of evening the score between the pair. Michelle's favors were needed just for her to get by, while it had always been clear that Judy would take care of herself.

Michelle loaded up a tray with chicken noodle until it was pleasantly heavy with lapping bowls of soup and returned to the dining room. She was pleased to see her sister taking part in the conversation, gesturing with her hands and giving emphatic nods in Sue's direction, until she saw that everyone else's expressions ranged from disinterest to discomfort.

“If anyone of us could use a vacation, it's me, not Dan. And certainly not Tina. I don't see how it's appropriate for her to be there at all. I'm raising my child five days a week, and now I'm going to have to answer questions about why Daddy and Tina share a bed, why Daddy and Tina went on vacation and not Mommy. It's not—”

“Soup's on!” Michelle slid on her unpleasantness smile—big and full of teeth and lipstick. “I for one cannot wait to taste. Will you help me, darling?” She handed the tray to Allen, who stood with her, and began placing the bowls on all the place settings, saving Judy's for last. “And here's your surprise, Sis.”

Judy looked down at her bowl, at her, then at her bowl again. “Oh.”

“Chicken noodle. Mom’s recipe. I found some of her recipe cards in the attic recently, and I’ve been waiting to break this one out.”

“Well. Great, then.”

“I thought so.” Michelle stood behind Judy’s chair, waiting for her sister to respond. Everyone else’s eyes were on her, so she returned to her own seat after a beat, trying not to look rebuffed. “Let’s dig in.”

There was a pleasant silence as her friends took swigs of wine and sips of soup, and from the content looks on their faces, Michelle thought the evening was turning out pretty well after all.

“Michelle, this is simply amazing,” Karen said. “Almost as good as your soup last time. The lobster bisque?”

“Oh, Allen’s recipe. That was fine, but tonight is special. This was inspired by Judy, actually. It’s one of her old favorites.”

“How thoughtful to choose something more Judy’s taste,” Allen said, “since she doesn’t often join us.” Michelle smiled, surprised by the fondness that rose in her chest at his words. She reached for his hand and gripped it. He pulled her hand to him and placed a kiss on top of her fingers, and the rest of the table *ahhed*. Michelle sat, content, until she heard her sister snort beside her.

“If you’ll excuse me, I need to use the restroom.” The feet of Judy’s chair screeched against the floor tiles and she stood heavily, leaning on the tabletop for support and smudging up the surface. She grabbed her wine, and it sloshed in its glass. Her

spoon sat untouched on the table. Overhead, Judy's feet fell in hollow thumps on the stairs.

Michelle stood, brandishing a nearly empty bottle of wine. "Let me uncork another. Excuse me." She took Judy's bowl with her into the kitchen and dumped its contents into the sink.

III. JUDY

Upstairs, Judy took her time. She sat on the toilet lid drinking her wine. The marble of the sink countertop was smooth and black and wet-looking. Each time Judy walked into this house, she still expected it to be her childhood home. After their mother's death two years ago, their father moved to an apartment and granted Michelle the house. Judy had been already married and settled then, of course, but that didn't quell her anger at the injustice. *Please understand, Judy*, their father had begged. Michelle was twenty-six then and still bouncing from apartment to apartment and from roommate to roommate with a restless, kinetic energy Judy agreed was worrisome aloud but privately found indulgent. There was never anything *wrong* with any of those apartments, exactly, Michelle admitted. But she wouldn't settle for anything less than magic, and so on she went.

Judy remembered helping her mother paint the kitchen butter yellow when she was twelve and shaving her legs for the first time in this bathroom—how charming the bathroom had been then under her mother's care. The walls were blue and white with a seashell border and next to the sink was a vase of sand dollars and seashells they'd collected during summer vacations to Seaside Park. Where there had once been a claw-

footed tub, next to her now was a glass-enclosed shower with dual showerheads and a marble bench. One of Michelle's boyfriends had paid for the updates to the bathroom—that was two boyfriends ago, at least. *Come and see what Tom's dreamed up*, Michelle had said after the renovation, dragging Judy into the new bathroom by the arm and giggling. She'd gestured at the bench, reddening in the cheeks and neck. *Not my idea, but I'm not complaining. Can you imagine?* Judy could not.

Everything now in this house was sleek and soulless, metal and glass and sterile shine. She was sure if she called out loud enough her words would echo as they buffeted against the glass and chrome down to Michelle and her guests downstairs.

There was a knock.

"Just a moment."

"Are you doing your business or hiding?" Michelle called through the door.

"Business."

"Bullshit." Michelle opened the door. "I asked you here to have fun tonight, you know."

"Fun," Judy laughed. "Right." She was hot all over, but from the wine or the gathering anger, she didn't know. "Flaunt your new boyfriend in my face, your new friends. Tell them all my business and change your menu to better suit your pity invite."

"I didn't invite you out of pity, Judy. This party is *for* you."

"I don't know these people."

"I introduced you. People meet other people at dinner parties, Judy, and they make conversation. I haven't asked anything unfair of you. It's not like I have a huge list of your personal friends I can call up and have over."

“You don’t know these people, either. You said Karen was a therapist.”

“So?” Michelle asked.

“So? She’s a social worker. It’s totally different.”

“I know this is a time of big change in your life Judy, but—”

“But what?” Judy barked. “What do you know about the change in my life? You let people in and out of your life like it’s nothing, and you go in and out of other people’s lives, too. In three months you won’t remember these people’s last names. What could you possibly know about what I’m going through?”

“Is this about me coming and going, or is it Dan?”

“Don’t talk to me about Dan, Michelle.”

“Why not? You’ve got no problem talking about him. And about Tina. And Disney World. Completely unaware of how rude you’re being to my guests and making yourself look like a crazy person. And drinking like a goddamn lush.”

“Only because you keep filling my glass, which is the size of a fish tank, by the way. You have no right. Your longest relationship was two years? You deserve a fucking medal. Let me get some relationship advice from you.”

“It’s not relationship advice, Judy. Your relationship is over. I wish I gave you the advice five years ago not to get married to that dick just because you were knocked up.”

“It was not *just because*.” It felt good to yell, Judy thought. So maybe the people downstairs could hear, but when was the last time she felt as though anyone did hear her? Sarah got to yell and yell and cry and beat her fists and Judy had to be calm and stoic and

never, never yell back. “Some people want a real relationship, Michelle. Some people aren’t afraid to make commitment to another person.”

“Don’t get condescending. So you made a commitment, and look where it got you. I wouldn’t brag.”

“It got me here, with you serving special soup like I’m not good enough to appreciate whatever your friends eat while you cart around fancy wine to prove how expensive your tastes are. All of this, by the way, in this house that Dad paid off, with all this room for the family you don’t have. Two empty bedrooms while I’m looking for an apartment I can afford to raise Sarah in. Must be nice to have everything taken care of, Michelle. You’ve never had to care about anything.”

Judy was glad then to see Michelle’s mouth open but make no sound. Good. Since Dan moved out, she couldn’t remember the last argument she won. She glanced in the mirror and was displeased at her reflection, the heat pinking her face and chest, her hair sweaty and matted. She grabbed a fistful of tissues and began mopping herself up.

“That’s not what is going on here at all, Judy.” Michelle spoke softly. “Mom’s recipe, the wine...I thought you would appreciate it. I never intended tonight to go this way.”

Judy laughed. “Is this an apology?” The wine had made her bolder than she could remember in ages and she was filled with sick glee at the surprise her sister must feel at faltering for once, for once not being delivered what she’d been expecting.

“It’s me telling you to leave this house.”

Judy laughed. “You can’t tell me to leave. This house is no more yours than mine.”

“Let’s ask Dad about that.”

“You ask Dad. While you’re at it, ask him what Mom would have said about putting your sex bench in her shower.”

Michelle cast her eyes to the floor and stepped aside, clearing the path to the doorway. Judy took her first staggering steps but thought her balance was improving as she gained momentum. She did lean on the banister as she descended the stairs, but then, who didn’t, even perfectly sober? She grabbed her handbag and took a breath, which she imagined as a calm, sobering force energizing her body, her body tired with the damp weight of drunkenness. But it was already tired; it had been tired for a full year with Sarah’s tantrums and Tina’s youth and the startling weight of Dan’s absence.

The double doors into the silent dining room angled open and wide. She directed her gaze forward as she walked past, imagining that if she didn’t look into the faces of Michelle’s guests, they wouldn’t see her or the desperate drunkenness and rage which steered her. Yet she looked—she had to—and found the dining room empty, the glass table smudged but bare. She could hear, beyond the dining room, water running through the faucet, the light splashes and clanks of dishwashing, and the low murmurs of conspiratorial conversation.

They had taken it upon themselves clean up the night—to aid their friend Michelle and spare her sister Judy from further embarrassments. *You’re all guests in my mother’s house*, she wanted to call out to them, but instead came to her the sad reminder of the impermanence of Michelle’s attentions. There was a wistful melancholy to the scene she imagined in the kitchen: they busied their hands with chores while analyzing the drama they’d stumbled into with whispers of excitement and anticipation, believing

tonight's scene was the beginning of a bond to Michelle and to each other. Unknowing that soon they too would be replaced.

Then, motion in her periphery. Someone—Allen?—dashed towards her and called out for her to wait. Flushed through with sudden, unbearable empathy for these strangers, for him, she couldn't. Leaving the house, she let the screen door slap as hard as it wanted.

The mouth of the driveway was steeper than Judy remembered and she bottomed out with a scrape. In the dark, a pair of headlights passed in a blurry ache. She gripped the wheel with both hands and watched the speedometer, tried to keep the little needle ticking right at the 25 where it belonged. Then in the rearview—her sister running after her through pools of light from the streetlamps in those laced-up spikes. In the mirror her sister's body grew not just smaller, but frailer somehow, a figure easily eclipsed; for a moment, Judy considered staying on the path she'd made for herself, confident she'd get to where she aimed to go.

Michelle dipped from view. Judy slammed on the brakes and craned her head behind her. There she was, her little sister, holding her ankle, crumpled and pathetic in a streetlight's fluorescent halo. And Judy, before she was aware of doing so, leapt from the car and launched into a clumsy, stumbling run to her sister.

GOING DARK

Michelle was marathoning *Law and Order: SVU* on Netflix in bed when the doorbell rang. It was near 3 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon and her mind felt heavy and muddled still with last night's drinking. She pulled a pillow over her head but the bell sounded through once more, then again. *Fine*. She negotiated a clumsy, stumbling path through the week's compilation of messes—thrown towels, abandoned clothing, vacant containers of Thai takeout with grease leeching through the cardboard—down the stairs and to the door. Empty bottles and cans clanked as she sent them skittering across the hardwood with her bare feet. Opening the door, she squinted into the October sun. The figure on her porch was backlit for a moment, a petite form with a duffel bag swinging from its shoulder.

“Aunt Michelle.” The form spoke and dropped the duffel to embrace her.

“Sarah?” Michelle had to remind her arms to move, to hug the girl. She pulled back, held her niece at arm's distance. Everything around Michelle seemed blurry and too loud, and she tried to make sense of it all through the hazy cocoon of her hangover.

“I know. Surprise, huh?”

“Aren't you supposed to be at school?” Sarah was in her second year at The College of New Jersey, a good forty minutes from Michelle's home in Princeton.

“Fall break. The dorms close.”

“Your mother?”

“Doesn’t know I’m here. Please? I’ll help out at the salon—give shampoos, sweep hair, whatever. Just please don’t tell.”

Michelle stared. “Lie to your mom?”

“Not lie. Just *not tell*. I can’t be with her for a whole week. You know how she is. I have nowhere else to go.”

“You can’t go to your father’s?”

“He’d call her.”

Michelle stepped aside, leaving the doorway clear. Sarah followed her inside, lugging her bag and dropping it with a thump on the hardwood.

“Excuse the, uh, mess.” Michelle raised a hand in a vague gesture around the living room.

“Big party last night?” Sarah kicked a beer can and laughed. “Of course.”

“Something like that.”

“I hope I get to see one of your parties before I leave.”

“Make yourself at home.” Michelle rubbed at her eyes. “I’m just gonna head upstairs for a bit. Shower.”

“And wake up your guy? What’s his name?”

“Why do you think there’s a guy?”

“The pjs. Nice shirt.”

Michelle glanced down. The blue button down was the last of Peter’s things left in the house. She’d neglected to return it with the rest, and he’d either forgotten about it or decided to concede the dress shirt and give her this one small victory out of pity.

Peter’s exit was a month ago last Wednesday, and Michelle had slept in it nightly since.

“There’s no guy,” Michelle sighed. “Listen, you can stay and I won’t tell your mother. But I’m beat.”

“No problem. You rest up, and I’ll clean.”

“Yeah?”

Sarah nodded. Michelle struggled against the repeated pounding in her head and took to the stairs. She glanced down once to see Sarah turning in a circle, surveying the clutter. Its mess bore the marks of weeks of neglect and not those of a night of partying.

It was dark when Michelle woke, showered, and descended the stairs. The air was pungent with artificial lemon and surfaces were bare and shiny that she hadn’t seen uncluttered and unfiltered of dust for nearly a month.

“Aunt Michelle! You’re up. I brewed coffee.” Sarah pointed to the Coffeemate.

“Great.” Michelle poured herself a cup. The countertop reflected her face as she peered down. Now that she’d had some sleep and the mercy of a hot shower, she remembered how she should act, how to behave when free from resounding headaches.

“How’s school?”

“Oh. It’s fine.”

“How long is this break?”

“A few days or so. The usual thing. You know.”

Michelle didn’t know, but she let it go.

“I promise I won’t be in the way. You won’t even know I’m here.” Sarah paused, looked down into her coffee mug. “Unless you want to.”

Michelle felt herself begin to return from the depths of her hangover. “Of course I want to. I’m thrilled you’re here. But I am worried that you don’t feel you can go home.”

“Don’t be. What time do we go to work tomorrow?”

“Not tomorrow. Closed on Mondays.”

“Tuesday then?”

“You’re eager to work.” Michelle stalled. There were no appointments for Tuesday, or for most of the week. She hadn’t had a customer in six days.

“I’m just so proud to be there. It’s your place, you know?”

“Yeah.” Michelle nodded. “Tuesday it is. Nine sharp.”

Tuesday morning, Michelle’s hands quivered around the steering wheel as she drove to the salon. She wondered how she’d pull this off. Sarah was a chatty and breezy presence in the passenger seat—much as she had been the past two days. Late the night before, though, there had been something wrong—Sarah talking on her cell phone, her voice carrying through the walls, her words increasing in volume and growing sharper in tone until Michelle could no longer pretend to ignore them. In the hall, Michelle braced her ear against the door, straining. *I told you I’ll handle it. I didn’t want any of this with you in the first place.*

Judy, perhaps? Had Sarah’s mother discovered her whereabouts? But then: *Rob, I need you to leave me alone.* Rob. A boyfriend? Then through the door came the gaspy hiccoughs of tears, and Michelle fought the urge to barge in through the door, tell this Rob to go screw himself, and gather Sarah into her arms. But to do that would betray her

breach of Sarah's privacy, and so Michelle backed down the hall into her own bedroom and tamped down her curiosity.

The next morning, Michelle had braced herself for a sullen, weepy teenager she would have to comfort with ice cream and chick flicks. She was guilty and relieved to be free of hoaxing a day of work at the salon. She imagined saying, *Let's stay home today. I'll cancel my appointments.* Instead, Sarah was effervescent; her chatter bubbled along with the Coffeemate when Michelle made it down the stairs at 7:30. Michelle strained to keep up with her banter. She hadn't seen 7:30 in weeks.

Now in the car, Sarah asked, "What time is the first appointment?" She beamed. "It's been a while since I gave a shampoo, but I'm up for it." She held up her hands and flexed her fingers, miming a good scrub.

"Not until eleven." They stopped for a red light and Michelle trained her gaze on Sarah. "You'll probably be bored. It's a light day, and you'd be better off studying."

"I want to be useful. You are putting me up, and I don't want to be a mooch."

"You're family. It's no trouble. Tell me more about school. Any boyfriends?"

Michelle was sickened to hear herself directing conversation where she thought it would upset Sarah, a child for goodness sake.

"No. Nothing serious, anyway. I've had enough of guys."

Michelle nodded. "Good. You're too young to get too serious. No drama, right?"

"That's exactly how I feel."

Michelle sighed. "Perfect."

*

Michelle opened Jean Michele Salon four years ago. It was named for herself and for her father, John, who had given her the cash to get the salon going in the first place, and then supplements to keep it running since. The spelling, she thought, was sophisticated, European-seeming. The name would flow off the tongues of her target clients, Princeton ladies-who-lunched and spent upwards of hundreds of dollars a month on their appearance. The salon was designed with just one sink and chair, but it wasn't a small space. Michelle wanted her customers to feel doted on, spoiled—*look at all this room in the salon, all this room for you*. If she had one customer scheduled for one p.m., she considered herself booked for the afternoon.

Months in, she was losing clients. Michelle added a manicure table and pedicure chair for customers who wanted the WalMart of salon experiences—to get everything done in one place that had a bit of everything but specialized in nothing. To check out the competition, Michelle went on recon missions, bringing girlfriends along for the giggly, silly fun of it all. They donned big sunglasses and trench coats, stalked into the inferior hair and nail salons, and took mental notes on the atmosphere, the cleanliness, the demeanor of the staff. After each visit, they torched the places on Yelp.

It stung Michelle to add the row of styling chairs in Jean Michele. It was her father who made the decision, along with other, future business choices. Bring on other stylists to man the chairs so Jean Michele could schedule several appointments a day. Hire an accountant to sort out the finances. Michelle balked—this was her business, after all—but retreated when her father threatened to pull his support from the salon. He'd invested, and heavily so. She would do what it took to keep the place running.

Sleepless nights in bed, she ran sick fantasies of failure over in her mind, how it would all proceed: Her father disappointed and his money squandered. Judy's cold judgment in appraising her sister's latest failing. Michelle's early credit card debt had been settled by their father; their parents' house was gifted to her despite her disinterest in filling it with a family; now this. Shame curled in Michelle's chest.

She hired two girls to work as needed, but rarely called them in—there weren't enough clients. She rented out chairs for cheap, though the stylists eventually moved on. *Creepy*, she'd heard the youngest stylist say. *My customers think it's weird that the place is always so dead.*

The accountant was grim and presented a spreadsheet on his laptop with dates and numbers highlighted in red. He had a timeline of expectation if business continued as usual. In six months, she'd be unable to afford operating the salon. *The business will go dark* were his exact words, and she laughed at his grave tone, the dramatic phrasing. On a lark, she dyed her hair so dark that it looked purple in certain light. *Going dark in style*, she said to her reflection and winked. That was six weeks ago, and she hadn't told her father, or anyone. Lingered in the back of her mind was a terrible, damning truth. *Maybe I should never have tried to run a business myself.*

When Sarah was fifteen, Michelle began paying her cash to help out at Jean Michele. Judy called to check up on her daughter often, worried by Sarah's behavior. *Judy, she's fine*, Michelle would assure her. Whatever it was, it was just a phase—the sarcasm in Sarah's voice bending to cruelty when she spoke to her mother; the cigarettes in her underwear drawer; the scent of beer or weed ghosting her breath or hair or clothes; the boyfriend in the rumbling, bumper-stickered jalopy who left Judy's anger and worry

to brew in the wake of ill-sounding tire screeches and plumes of exhaust. Never mind that Michelle herself was childless and had nothing to offer but platitudes. Still she told her sister, *it will all be fine*.

Sarah did seem fine at work, always. She was prompt, spoke politely to customers, and didn't complain about sweeping hair and tossing out trash. Michelle never saw the troubled girl Judy spoke of, and she assumed Judy was overreacting. After the last customer left, Michelle would pull a bottle of wine from under the bathroom sink and tip it over a pair of waxy cups from the water cooler. She never said, *Don't tell your mom* aloud, and so it didn't feel like as much of a betrayal of Judy as it should have. But they'd worked hard. They deserved it.

Michelle had watched Sarah often as a child, sometimes at home and sometimes at work. After Judy's husband left she needed sitters, and Michelle did what she could. There was a photo of the pair, taken by another stylist, on one of these days. The framed print was the first thing Michelle found a place for in Jean Michele. In it, Michelle sits in her stylist's chair with a smock draped over her shoulders. Sarah, aged six, poses on a stool behind the chair, brandishing a pair of scissors in one hand and a comb in the other.

Moments after the picture was snapped, Sarah, in her mime of styling, snipped off a hunk of Michelle's hair close to her ear. Sarah's tears came fast and loud, and she bent to retrieve the dark locks. She held them up to Michelle's head as though she could repair the strands. Michelle snatched up the scissors and cut off a chunk of her hair by the other ear. *See?* She said. *Now it's even*. Sarah was startled first to silence and then to laughter. Later, one of the other stylists cut Michelle's hair into a short bob, making the best of the mess she could.

At 11:30, Michelle picked up the phone on the reception desk and spoke into the dial tone.

“Rosemary, it’s Michelle. It’s 11:30 on October the seventeenth. Your appointment was scheduled for thirty minutes ago. Why don’t we reschedule?” She turned to Sarah. “Rosemary has a wash and set every Tuesday, but sometimes she forgets. She’s pushing eighty now. Senile. Sad, really.”

Sarah sat with one leg bent under her in the first of the styling chairs. She steered herself in slow half-circles with the other foot. The row of empty chairs beside her multiplied in the mirrored walls. “Should you call her family, in case she’s sick?”

“She lives with her daughter, who takes wonderful care of her. I’m sure she’s fine.” Michelle wondered at the ease and speed of her deceptions. “Listen, my next appointment isn’t until three. What do you say I reschedule? Let’s have a little fun.”

Sarah smiled and rifled through her wallet. Michelle bent to see what Sarah was so proud of. A Pennsylvania driver’s license. Kristen Leigh Maines from Happy Valley had Sarah’s blond hair and blue eyes. She was also twenty-two.

Hours later, Sarah flipped through Michelle’s closet, tossing dresses onto the bed and making exclamations of approval at her aunt’s sense of style. Michelle had trimmed Sarah’s hair, honeyed her highlights, and waxed her brows. Michelle was happier than she had been in weeks. She felt freshly useful around Sarah—and youthful. Each time her niece grabbed one of her dresses as a possibility to wear out to the bar tonight, Michelle’s pride buoyed higher. The pile grew on the bed—the dresses mostly black, tight, and short.

Michelle kept silent the worry that her own dresses wouldn't fit her. Michelle hadn't been to the gym since Peter left and had taken to wearing yoga pants and blouson tops to work. Her nights were spent on the couch alone. Wine dwindled in bottles on the coffee table. Nightly in front of the television, she plowed through containers of takeout with near-maniacal determination (*At least I can finish something*, she'd think).

At the club, she realized she needn't have worried. Katmandu was dark and crowded. Fake palm trees were strung with lights. A disco ball shot lasers in a kinetic pattern across the floor, illuminating the revelers in flashes of red and blue and orange. Smoke from a fog machine turned the lights hazy. The music itself was dense and heavy-bassed; Michelle felt it thundering inside her chest. It was a college crowd. She was the oldest woman there, easily, but she took comfort that many of the girls were relying only on their youth to pull off their attire and that the darkness of the club was generous to their dresses stretched over plump curves and to their severe, artlessly made-up faces. These girls wouldn't have much going for them in daylight. Eventually, they too would witness in an unavoidable succession of mirrors as their flesh loosened and the curvature of their bodies grew unfamiliar and strange.

Sarah and Michelle leaned on the bar and took turns pointing out women with stomachs pooching into their ruched spandex and then at the men desperate enough to ply these women with alcohol. "Would you rather sleep with him," they asked each other, "or him?" They gestured to the greasiest, most hair-gelled of the crowd.

Michelle let Sarah order, and they'd been gulping down icy, Technicolored beverages topped off with hunks of fruit and mini-umbrellas. Michelle didn't know what

was in the drink or how many she'd had. The night's events were blurring together in the familiar manner that made her feel significant.

When a young man approached and asked Sarah's permission to dance with her *sister*, Michelle laughed until Sarah insisted. He was full of shit, Michelle knew, but it was still fun: moving to the music with the hard, familiar comfort of male arms and chest against her. She hadn't been touched since Peter, and his memory was moving farther away the faster she drank. She became aware of the young man's—boy's—mouth on her neck and his hands on her sides sliding down to her ass, but Sarah was there to rescue her, a hand reaching towards her through the tangle of bodies and smoke. Michelle latched on to Sarah's hand and let herself be pulled away.

"I'm so glad you're my *sister*," Michelle shouted in Sarah's ear over the music.

"You're not my sister, you're my *friend*," Sarah shouted back, and for a moment Michelle believed her. Then Sarah's drink fell from her hand and shattered on the floor. Ice and bits of glass pooled in the liquid around her feet. She stepped on a slice of pineapple and went sliding onto the ground.

"Careful." Michelle bent down to help Sarah stand, but the wide weight of a hand pressed into her shoulder. The bouncer.

"Ladies," he said. "Up." He lifted Sarah to her feet. "And out."

"Out? You've got to be kidding," Michelle said. "You can't do that."

But there was his hand on her back, guiding them both to the door.

"Jerk," Sarah cried. "Asshole."

"Shh." Michelle hooked her arm around Sarah's middle. "It's fine. It's time for bed." Outside, she piled Sarah into the first cab she saw.

Michelle woke the next morning to a relentless pounding in her temples and an aching in her teeth, of all places. *That's what I get*, she thought, *for drinking something with a goddamn umbrella in it*. She would have burrowed back into her covers, but she could hear retching from down the hall. Michelle made her way to the bathroom with an uneasy gait. Sarah was hanging over the toilet, her hair flung loose about her shoulders.

“Your hair looks great,” Michelle said. “Someone has an awesome stylist.”

“Ha. Ha.” Sarah spoke into the toilet bowl.

“I’m just joking.” Michelle pulled Sarah’s hair into a loose ponytail. Sarah started to vomit again, and Michelle rubbed her back until she was done. “Want anything? Water? Ice?”

Sarah spit into the toilet. “Can you get me a change of clothes? I’ve been sweating rum into these all night and I feel disgusting.”

“Sure thing.”

In the guest room, Michelle opened up the closet and drawers, trying to find something comfy. Finally, she unzipped the duffel bag and began to shuffle through its contents: bras, jeans, magazines. And then, tucked into the side: a thin, soft, papery stack inside of a plastic bag. Ones, fives, tens. A few twenties. The stack of ones was still bound in the little paper sleeve from the bank. Michelle brought the bag close to her face, fought her vision to clear until she could make out the words. And sure enough, stamped on the bag’s front: *Cash Deposit, Jean Michele Salon*. It was a pitifully small cache, hardly worth stealing, but her register may as well have sprouted cobwebs in the past few months, for the lack of customers she’d seen.

She carried the bag into the bathroom with shaking hands and tossed it at Sarah's feet. "Explain this."

Sarah sat up and turned. When she saw the bag, she dropped her head into her hands, elbows propped on the toilet seat.

"You're stealing from me? Stealing from my business?"

"I was going to return it all." Sarah turned to face Michelle. "I just needed some time."

"You came here to rob me?"

"No. I came to ask for money. To borrow. I wanted to pay you back."

"But you stole instead?"

"I looked in the appointment book in the salon. The house is a mess. I couldn't bring myself to ask you. And the register key's in the same spot it always was."

"What do you need the money for? School?" Michelle asked.

"No."

"Then what?"

"You wouldn't understand." Sarah pulled her legs to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. She dropped her head to her knees.

"What's so bad you can't talk about it? Drugs? It can't be that bad—you left the coins. Aren't my quarters good enough for you?" Michelle couldn't help but laugh.

Sarah shook her head. She grabbed a tissue and blew her nose.

"If you don't tell me, I can't help you." Michelle sighed, wishing she'd gotten herself some aspirin before she started all this. "It's not really fall break, is it? And I bet you haven't been to class for a while." The question came to her. "Is this about Rob?"

“How do you know about Rob?”

“That’s not important. You’re dating him?”

“I never dated him. He’s a jerk.” Sarah set her gaze through the doorway into the hall. “I’m taking care of it.”

Michelle slid down next to her on the floor. “Does your mother know?” She reached for Sarah’s hand, but Sarah snatched her hand away.

“She’d never understand.”

“She may understand better than you think,” Michelle said.

“You can’t tell her.” Sarah became animated, sitting up straight with her eyes focused on Michelle’s. “If you tell her, I’ll tell about the salon having no money and no customers and you wasting all of Grandpa’s money.”

“Sarah.”

“I know what she says about me already. About the boys and drinking. The parties. She’ll think I’ve earned it, that I’ve finally got what’s coming to me. It won’t matter that this time was different. It won’t matter what I wanted.”

“Your mother just wants to help you,” Michelle said. “I want to help you.”

“Do you know what she says about you? That you’ve never had to work for anything because Grandpa gave you this house. That you can’t commit to anything to save your life. That the salon would fall apart once you got bored and Grandpa has been throwing away all the money he spends on you. All you do is waste everyone else’s money and time. And she was right. She won’t be right about me, though.”

Michelle tried to stamp down the hurt and anger that rose at Sarah’s words. “She may be right about me. But you’re young. You have plenty of time ahead of you to

prove her wrong. How lucky for you.” Michelle stood. “When you’re done throwing up, you can pack. I’ll let your mother know to expect you.”

Sarah dropped her head to her knees. “I thought you were my friend.”

Downstairs, Michelle paced with the phone in her hand, convincing herself. She jabbed Judy’s number into the keypad, but hung up on the first ring. Upstairs, she gathered a fresh set of towels and placed them on the bathroom counter. She fetched the cash bag from the floor.

“You’ll want to clean up when you’re done,” she told Sarah. “You can stay here and I won’t tell your Mom about this, but we’re not pals. And you won’t say anything to my dad or your mom about the salon.”

Sarah nodded. “Okay.”

For two days, Sarah hid, hunkered in the guest bedroom. Michelle’s nerves were still raw from Sarah’s words—Judy’s words—and she chose to not to seek out her niece. Sarah would emerge when she was ready. Michelle neither heard nor saw her, with the exception of the water running in the bathroom and creaks in the floorboards when Sarah rummaged in the kitchen for food. Without Sarah’s tidying, Michelle’s familiar mess began to take shape in the house once more.

Michelle’s accountant called twice and left somber requests on the answering machine for her to set up an appointment. She hadn’t been in touch with the accountant, and so her father must have requested the appointment. Michelle’s dad had wanted to attend the earlier meeting as well, but Michelle brushed him off. The accountant’s third

message came as Michelle was rifling through the fridge for something, anything that seemed useful as a hangover cure. “Michelle, it’s Carl again.”

Michelle reached for a carton of fried rice that she hadn’t been able to finish the night before.

The accountant continued. “In the absence of your input for scheduling a meeting, John has booked the three of us tomorrow at ten a.m. to discuss the salon’s progress. Please bring this month’s budget with you. And keep in mind our rescheduling fee.” He sounded bored, as though he realized he was wasting his time.

Michelle swore, shaking her head in the open refrigerator. Her father had scheduled this appointment for her—the humiliation. She turned to glance at the clock. What could she do in twenty-two hours, she wondered. Michelle placed the takeout carton back in the fridge and pulled out a bottle of white wine. She poured herself a generous glass and grabbed the manila folder she used to hold copies of receipts.

She opened the folder and shook it so the slips fell to the table, and she was discouraged to see how few receipts there were. She ordered them by date in a neat stack and totaled up the numbers and jotted that total onto a Post-it. Michelle looked at the total, found it lacking, and added a zero following the last digit, and then another, imagining breezing into tomorrow’s meeting to tell Carl and her father that everything was fine, swell, dandy. Perfect. She crumpled up the Post-it.

Michelle reordered the receipts by total, and then she reordered them by size. She shuffled them like cards. She poured herself another, more generous, glass and opened up her laptop to the bookkeeping software her father had bought her. She stared at the graphs and pie charts on the screen, the downward slopes and the numbers highlighted in

red. Her head humming with the wine, she grabbed the Post-its and began tiling over the screen in neat, yellow squares until the numbers and graphs were gone.

“What’s going on?” Sarah stood behind Michelle. “It’s been pretty quiet.”

Michelle turned. “I have a meeting with Dad and an accountant tomorrow.” She shook her head. “I’m screwed.” Michelle stood and grabbed a wine glass from the cabinet, poured Sarah a glass, and sat back in her chair.

“Does this mean you’re not mad at me anymore?” Sarah asked, looking into the liquid.

Michelle laughed. “Sure. Everyone else is gonna hate me. I have to take my friends where I can get them.” She clinked Sarah’s glass with hers. “Cheers to my fallen business, and to your mother being right.”

“What will happen to the salon?”

“Oh, Dad will sell it, I guess. Or cut his losses. I haven’t paid rent in months. They’ll want me out as fast as possible.”

“Let’s start packing up now, then,” Sarah said. “Let’s go. I’ll help.”

They hadn’t planned well—without boxes, they collected tubes of dye and fistfuls of combs and scissors into trash bags and stuffed the bags into the trunk. Sarah gathered up the smocks into a bundle and tossed them in the backseat. Michelle wound the hair dryers together with their long cords. They fell with a clatter into a bag. Some of the equipment would not survive the careless packing. It didn’t matter; Michelle wouldn’t have use for most of it again. She’d brought along a few bottles of wine, and they took turns swigging from the bottles’ mouths.

Soon, the wine had them silly, cheerful, as though they'd forgotten the meaning behind their clean-up. Michelle tried to juggle hairbrushes and they both laughed as the brushes clattered to the floor. Michelle wrapped the framed photo of her and Sarah and placed it on the floor of the backseat, where she thought it would be safe for the ride home. They sat on the floor and finished off the wine. Michelle was reminded of the salon's early days, how Sarah helped after school and it seemed that the salon, everything in her life, brimmed full with hope.

"I forgot why we were doing this until just now," Michelle said. She sprawled onto the cool tile and placed her arms over her face. "Dammit." The floor was spinning.

"Are you sure there's no way this place can be saved?" Sarah asked. She lit a cigarette and stood outside of the doorway, ashing onto the salon's steps.

"Ha." Michelle propped herself up. "This place would be worth more burnt to the ground than it is right now." She laughed—it was a joke, she thought—but realized the joke was true and began to cry hot, fat tears. Humiliated, she wiped at her face with the back of her hands.

"Don't cry," Sarah said. She stubbed out the cigarette in the doorjamb and dropped it onto the stoop. Once, Michelle would have scolded her for littering in front of her business, though there was no point now, she supposed.

Sarah scooted next to her aunt. "If that's true, then why don't we burn it down?" She laughed.

"Yes, let's burn it," Michelle agreed. She shuddered, not sure if she was laughing at the absurdity of Sarah's proposal or still crying at the horror of it all. She rested her

head on Sarah's shoulder. "If we burn it, maybe the goddamn place will stop spinning in circles."

Michelle felt the last tether she held on her pride, her self-possession, slip. Her body spasmed with her sobs. Sarah helped her into the car. The car lurched along with Sarah's clumsy manipulations on the wheel and gas pedal. Michelle closed her eyes against the cool of her window and imagined she was being taken care of by someone she could rely on, instead of by this girl equally erratic and in need of care, this girl who was still a child herself. At home, Michelle let Sarah fold her into bed.

The next morning, Michelle shuffled her receipts back into the manila envelope, her "books," as Carl had requested. She sat in the car without keying the ignition, noticing Sarah's haphazard park job. Sarah had left her lighter in the cupholder—Michelle remembered now how Sarah careened the car through the roads last night with one hand on the wheel and the other clutching a cigarette. The sun cut painfully through Michelle's sunglasses. Squinting, she turned and looked at the bags of hair dye and scissors crowding her backseat. She drove quickly, keeping an eye on the dashboard's clock. Her meeting was in fifteen minutes. She thought of her father sitting in Carl's office, the pair of them waiting, disappointed, but not surprised. It felt important to her that she get to the salon and do this before the meeting was supposed to start.

Michelle pulled into the back parking lot and opened the door with shaking hands. She lugged in bags from her car, guessing at which ones held the most dye, and heaved them into a pile in the center of the floor. She opened a few tubes of haircolor and held them in both fists, squirting dye over the bags and over the tile and into a trail to the back

door. She coughed and turned her head against the ammonia fumes. In the doorway, Michelle held an empty hair color box to Sarah's lighter until the flame took. She dropped the lit cardboard swath to the ground. It surprised her when the little flame took to the dye and lit into a firey thread. She'd failed so much, so often, that she near-expected her little flame to die, too. She leapt into a run for her car, not looking behind her, not wanting to see the scope of the newest disaster she'd sparked.