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The Eye of the Elephant

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The Eye of the Elephant

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In
Film, Theatre, & Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

Lindsay Allen

B.F.A. New York University, 2006

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IT was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

The First approached the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
"God bless me!—but the Elephant
Is very like a wall!"

The Second, feeling of the tusk,
Cried: "Ho!—what have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me 't is mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear!"

The Third approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
Is very like a snake!"

The Fourth reached out his eager hand,
And felt about the knee.
"What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain," quoth he;
"'T is clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a tree!"

The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: "E'en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a fan!"

The Sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
Is very like a rope!"

John Godfrey Saxe
"The Blind Men and The Elephant" (A Hindoo Tale), 1873

BELIEF

The Hollywood sign burns bright in the glare of the early evening sun. There's been a wreck up ahead. Three people have died including a child, but Helen and Richard don't know that. They sit in traffic discussing how late they will be. Helen wonders if her mother will comment on this fact in front of the guests or wait until they are alone, perhaps in the kitchen transferring Helen's devilled eggs from the plastic container to a crystal platter. "Is everything all right?" her mother will ask, in that serious, searching way, as if the act of her asking will solve any problem. Is everything all right? Helen wonders.

Richard wonders how to tell Helen the news. He can't concentrate on the road when Tommy—Or is it Robby? That's the problem with twins—keeps digging his little, five-year-old heels into the back of Richard's seat. The subpoena came that morning. Richard had been a foreign correspondent, and they'd lived for a few years in Eastern Europe, but he still can't quite figure out why he's the one who has to appear at a hearing before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Who else is on the list? Who put him on the list?

Richard watches Helen pluck at her already perfect, almost shellacked head of curls. She still looks like a movie star. He wonders if he should mention the subpoena now, while they're stuck like this, before they get to the party. In the rearview mirror, he can see Robby and Tommy pulling at their ties, trying to untie them.

Helen shuts her eyes, searching for a place without traffic, without children whistling and kicking and bouncing, without her husband sighing, without her mother's voice careening

through her head. She cranks down the window, but stagnant air pollutes the car, and she rolls it up again.

“What’s the party for again?” Richard asks, trying to ease into a more difficult conversation.

“Oh, who knows with her. All I know is that Gloria Swanson will be there. She’s a communist, you know, and Mother’s not pleased about it.”

Well, now would be the time, but Richard can’t. He’s not ready for a fight.

“And there’s this woman,” Helen continues. “I can’t remember her name. From India. She’s going to give some sort of spiritual lesson.”

“Your mother sure knows how to pick ‘em. It’s like a traveling circus over there.”

At last Richard’s teasing her again, Helen thinks. That’s something. The past few months after the children have gone to bed, he withers in his leather chair, looks away, acts tired, watches the news, gives short answers, and speaks in a hushed, defeated voice. He has turned meek on her, and she doesn’t like it.

Cars fly past. Richard merges, and they’re moving again now.

“No wonder you turned out the way you did,” he says.

“Oh, you stop it.” She hits him lightly, playfully on the elbow. He ducks to avoid her, and the car veers into the other lane. Another driver honks at them. She covers her mouth, holding back laughter.

“Damn it, Helen,” Richard says, now frustrated with her carelessness.

Helen hears Robby whisper “damn it,” as if tasting the words on his tongue.

“Robby said a bad word,” Tommy calls out.

“Would whoever’s back there QUIT kicking my seat?” Richard yells, louder than he thinks he should have. With one hand he grips the steering wheel and with the other he reaches back to grab hold of an ankle, but the boys squirm away. Helen crosses her arms. He’s sure she’ll pout for the rest of the night.

Helen turns away from her husband, the bore, to face her children. She crosses her eyes at them, making a silly face, careful not to let Richard see. He shouldn’t raise his voice like that if he hates how she always takes their side. She shouldn’t take their side, but it’s always him or them. What else is there? Neither? She faces front, and the brilliant white Hollywood sign beams at her once more.

Helen’s mother smiles, and her upturned lashes match her upturned lips. “Does anyone need anything?” she calls. Helen’s father stands in front of the spitting-fish fountain, smoking his cigar, talking with another doctor. Other important people who know Helen’s mother either directly or indirectly from all of her charity work stand near the Hawaiian-themed buffet table.

Gloria Swanson’s near the pool. She wave her hands in the air to explain something to a balding producer. Even peering through the glass doors, Helen can see that she and Gloria Swanson have chosen the same emerald cocktail dress for the occasion. She should have worn the black one.

Helen plants the boys in the den in front of the television. They don’t look up when she walks away. How long would it take them to notice if she slipped outside right now, slid into the driver’s seat, and sped off? To where? Somewhere far.

Everyone dances around politics and the news. Whittaker Chambers has just testified that Alger Hiss is a communist, and the question of the hour, after a few martinis, that is, seems to be, “Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party of the United States?” Everyone laughs nervous laughs.

Helen fixes herself a gimlet, Richard a gin fizz. She joins the party, hands Richard his drink, and makes the rounds. She smiles, laughing with the rest, though she hasn't heard the joke. Helen watches Richard look down into his cocktail, studying the ice cubes and the lemon garnish, before he swallows the drink in one, ravenous gulp. Out with it, she thinks, sailing toward him to discover the source of his strange mood, but her mother blocks her path.

“I can't believe you're wearing the same dress as that woman!” Helen's mother says in her audible whisper and rolls her eyes toward Gloria Swanson.

“I noticed.”

“How awful. You'd better go up and find something else.”

“I will.”

Helen looks for Richard, but he's disappeared. Perhaps, she thinks, he's hiding out in one of the many bedrooms, which her mother and father, mostly her mother, offer up to a cycle of houseguests. Their mansion perpetually teems with people.

Helen escapes up the grand staircase. Instead of her husband or something else to wear, she finds a woman reclining on the chaise lounge in the hall. The woman's sari intrigues Helen. Folds of diaphanous, violet silk swoop over and across the woman's shoulder, and only when the woman turns to the side can Helen see a glimpse of her pale waist. The yoga lady. Her features are plain: wide nose, head too square, eyebrows too faint and far apart, but when she smiles, her dark eyes sparkle, eclipsing the rest. The yoga lady gazes at the Japanese prints in

the hall. “Oh those, those were Frank Lloyd Wright’s from his time in Japan,” Helen’s mother loves to tell people, flicking her wrist as if she found them at a garage sale. “My Chicago dealer. I adore anything from the Orient.” But Helen doesn’t want to sound like her mother.

“I’ve been waiting to meet you,” the woman says, taking Helen’s hand. “Call me Ananda.”

So this is Gloria Swanson, Ananda thinks, feeling the cold fingers of the film star. Poor circulation. When the movie star first arrived at the party, the butler scurried past Ananda, almost knocking her over. “Good evening, Miss Swanson,” he said, holding out his arms to catch her fur stole. From across the room, Ananda caught a glimpse of her red lips and her jade dress before a crowd of admirers whisked her away. Her aura had felt tired and dull to Ananda, but now in person, up close, it’s a different sort of tired, more restless and agitated. Ananda is almost the same age as Gloria Swanson, but the actress has remarkably youthful skin. Only in the flecks of gold in her eyes can Ananda see weariness. Or is it a longing?

As a teenager in Russia, Ananda attended only live theater, and they didn’t go to the cinema much in Bombay or Shanghai, so she has never seen a single one of the star’s films. She’s seen the magazines though and read all about her love affairs and divorces, including the latest just months ago. Ananda knows when she’s needed. “It appears you’re in a difficult place,” she begins.

Helen nods, but she’s not sure what the yoga lady means. What has her mother told this stranger? Can this mystic read something on her face? Can she read her mind?

“I know how it is,” Ananda continues, “but you must be strong.” She has lost as many loves as Gloria Swanson. More.

Helen listens as the woman launches into a meandering story. Before she moved to Hollywood, Ananda tells her, she lived in China with her husband, the Czech diplomat. She taught yoga in the bedroom of Madame Chiang Kai-shek before the revolutions became increasingly violent. Her husband returned to Europe, but Ananda stayed on, until it was no longer safe to do so. All the other Russians had gone home. In her hand, Ananda explains, she held two tickets: one for America, the other for India. She consulted the sky and smelled the salt in the air. “Whichever boat arrived first, I knew I must take it,” she says. The ship sailed in, and America it was.

This is not the first or the last time she flees because of political strife.

“How far I have come, a little girl from Russia,” Ananda says. “Now I’m living with the American stars.” Her face becomes grave, and her eyes steady. “Sometimes I think the world imagined is the only one worth living in,” she says.

Helen nods again, but she doesn’t know if she agrees or not because she’s not sure what Ananda means. She’s never had a conversation quite like this one, especially not at one of her mother’s events, not at a Tupperware party or holiday gift exchange at Richard’s work or the July 4th barbeque for that matter. Through the open window she hears laughter, the clinking glasses, the piano, the effortless entertaining. Helen wishes she could return to the party before night envelops them. The sun sets, painting the stairs in shadow. They sit for a moment in the darkness as Ananda talks.

Helen pictures Richard at dinner last night. He loosened his necktie, leaned on the counter, smelled the lasagna she prepared, and shouted, “Think fast,” as he tossed the cloth napkins to Robby. Everything’s fine, she tells herself. But where is he? She must find him.

“I prepare now, for the yoga talk,” Ananda says, rising.

“Of course.”

Helen, flustered from her encounter with Ananda, forgets to change her dress. She checks on the boys. She looks for Richard but doesn't find him.

Richard sits outside near the pool, in the dark, away from the rest of the guests, smoking and worrying, listening to the filtration system. He takes off his shoes and socks and dips his feet in the water, which feels cool and clean. He broods and stares at the back of the pink stucco house, viewing the lights, the costumes, and the glamour from a distance. What to do about his “un-American”-ness?

In the parlor, Ananda plays a film of her guru, her spiritual teacher in India. Through the window, Helen can see the men smoking outside on the terrace. They gather around Gloria Swanson, who immediately wrapped a silver shawl over her shoulders as soon as she saw Helen. Only a hint of emerald shows. The men avoid the yoga lecture, and Helen wonders if she should have done the same. She will have to ask her mother where she found her latest exotic import, a white yoga lady.

The lights go dim. The film crackles through the projector, and on the screen Krisnamacharya, a thin, young, bare-chested Indian man with white markings painted across his forehead, undulates his abdomen. In the background, the sun shines and tall grasses dance in the breeze. He kneels, opens his mouth, sticks out his tongue and bulges out his eyes in the lion pose, simhasana. Extending his feet overhead, he balances on his shoulders, before he folds his legs into lotus. He moves like an animal.

“I asked this master to teach me yoga,” Ananda says, “many, many times, and every time, he said no. Do you know why?”

The women sitting next to Helen shake their heads. Helen’s heard about this esoteric, foreign practice, how it adds years to your life and reduces wrinkles.

“Because I am a woman. ‘Yoga is for men,’ he told me. And do you know what I said?” Again the room falls silent. Ananda will have them soon. If she can only suspend the quiet long enough to allow them to experience the vast depths of the universe and delve into the light within, she can teach them as she has been taught. Not a single one of them knows how to breathe. “Teach me. I am ready.” Laughter and applause. “And I did not stop saying it until he taught me all the wondrous mysteries of this ancient art. And now, if you are ready, I will teach you. Close your eyes and take a deep breath.”

A few of the guests giggle, but most close their eyes obediently.

“Om. Shanti. Shanti. Shanti-ih,” she sings. “Repeat after me.”

A curious husband pokes his head through the door, but Ananda keeps her voice quiet and firm as she directs each breath. As she speaks, she feels the light within her rise, fill her with warmth, expand, and radiate from her fingers, toes, lips, and skull. She caresses each and every person in the room with beams of light.

Helen’s mind jumps around as Ananda talks about a whitish-pink light pulsing or vibrating or rippling through the central channel, the sushumna, sort of like a spinal cord, but not. Helen’s pleased to have something interesting to talk about on Thursday with the girls from the tennis club. Ingrid will slap Helen’s leg, laughing out loud if Helen demonstrates the breathing. Ingrid will say, as she always does, “Aren’t you a riot? You are just a riot!” Later in

life, when she's working long shifts as a nurse in the maternity ward, Helen takes great satisfaction in knowing that she can always make the girls laugh.

Ananda floats past Gloria Swanson, touching her lightly on the arm, sending her strength and clarity. She does not yet know that she has mistaken Helen for a movie star.

In the kitchen, away from the other guests, Helen finds she's alone again with Ananda and steadies herself, leaning back against the counter. She has had too much to drink as she always does at her mother's parties. She will make tea and sober up.

"Did you enjoy living in India?" Helen asks the mysterious yoga lady, who Helen thinks of as more than human, as almost angelic, as so good and pure she's incapable of hurting or being hurt.

Ananda nods vigorously, perched on her chair, and when Helen plunks the kettle down on the stove and turns to face her, Ananda's faraway expression is wistful, and Helen is disappointed to realize, as they sit at the kitchen table, the Formica under their elbows, that in fact Ananda experiences pain.

"Why did you move to India?" Helen asks.

"India," Ananda says. Something comes to her. She will make the movie star her mission. She will guide her spiritually and someday, since she can tell already that they are kindred spirits, they will travel to India together to meet her guru. "India had been in my head and heart for a long time before I ever went," she says. She explains how she'd been dreaming of the heat, the curry, the colors, the camels, and begging children. "I'd been craving life...Life!" she tells Helen. She wanted to feel something, as if she hadn't already traveled

from Berlin to Budapest, from Versailles to Florence and done radical deeds: she had a lover in the White Army—unheard of in those days; she performed with Yushny’s Royal Theater & that whole gang; she escaped the Bolshevik Revolution in the middle of the night with trunks of furs and gold; she survived selling this and that to get her from here to there.

The kettle screams, and Ananda watches Gloria Swanson jump to retrieve it and pour the scalding water into teacups then dunk the tea bags. The Earl Gray bleeds the water a dull brown. Gloria Swanson slices lemons and brings sugar, cream, and spoons to the table. Ananda holds her cup in her hands, absorbing the warmth through the porcelain as she watches Gloria Swanson nip at her tea. Ananda wonders what the secret must be. How can she possibly keep her skin so pure?

“Then what happened?” Helen asks.

But Ananda doesn’t tell the whole story. When she first arrived in India, she was alone and thirty. Her name was Irene. For the time and the place, she was old, sure she would never marry, and so she devoted herself with reckless abandon to art and the divine. How she batted her eyelashes and flicked her wrists when she danced outside the Theosophical Society in Bombay. She transformed herself into a goddess, even when she didn’t feel like it.

To those watching, picking their teeth with their fingernails, waiting for work, anything, something, she thought she must have looked like a miraculous, glowing, heavenly lotus, blooming in the blazing sun and thick soup of the humid afternoon. She became a sensation. When she slipped into the shade of a lonely tree to rest and drink black tea, her fans called out for more dancing, more entertainment, and spiritual ecstatic undulations. *What is she doing? Why does she dance like that? In public?* They surrounded her, wanting to touch her foreign, white skin. The film producer pored over her every afternoon until she accepted his invitation.

“Of course, I can perform on camera,” she told him over steaming cups of chai served in gold-and-white china. “I used to do theater in Russia.”

“With films here,” he explained, “Indian women are not allowed to dance. So, we need you.”

She became a Bollywood star. Nothing to be ashamed about. She took what she had, and she made it into something more. She became what she had to become. Soon after, she met and married the dear, deaf diplomat who could not keep his hands to himself.

“Joseph and I lived in Bombay. We befriended Indian royalty. They introduced me to my guru, the one you saw in the film.”

Helen wants more from Ananda. A desire to live amongst American stars is not enough to explain why she flung herself across the world. What about the diplomat? Why isn't he here? Did she leave him? How can Helen ask what she needs to know?

“You were very brave to go alone,” Helen says. “I couldn't have done it. Not without my husband.”

“I thought like you.”

“And then what?” Helen finds herself literally leaning forward in her chair, waiting for Ananda to say something that will make Helen feel better about wanting to leave her children and her husband, to escape to somewhere far so she can be alone, somewhere she doesn't have to pretend to be something she's not. Is there such a place? Being a housewife isn't bad, but Helen thinks there must be something inside of her that is vast and miraculous and full, that is worth more than their silver collection or her diamond ring, something that doesn't require others in order to exist, and this desire frightens her. She could never leave good, dutiful

Richard. He loves her too much. She doesn't have that belief, that much faith in the whole idea of freedom.

Here I am, Ananda thinks, reborn in the Hollywood Hills, and now, here she is, Gloria Swanson herself. She can't understand why the actress doesn't look a day over thirty. That must be how they are in real life. The star's beautiful, dark eyebrows and hair shine against her emerald dress, but she seems distracted. Ananda was told that there are those who would like to bring the film star down, those who have accused her of being a communist and tried to end her career. Her recent divorce must have been hard on her as well. Ananda will build her up and give her courage, for if she can reach this woman she can reach them all.

"Being brave," Ananda says, "doesn't mean you aren't afraid. I experience fear all the time, but when you're brave, you go forth carrying the light and the truth despite the fear because you must."

Helen sways, trying to memorize Ananda's words, so that she can think about them when she's not so dizzy. Later she'll decide what to believe. She's not aware that the queasy feeling comes not only from the alcohol but also her recent pregnancy, her third and last, a daughter.

Helen follows Richard down the hall. He's barefoot. She slips into the bathroom after him and locks the door behind them so they will not be bothered.

"What's wrong with you?" he says. "What are you doing? People will think—"

"Let them think," she says, standing in front of the door, blocking his attempt to open it, "whatever they want."

“Helen, really. What has gotten into you?” He wonders if she’s found the papers. Maybe she went through his blazer. “Let’s get back to the party.”

“Where are your shoes?”

“By the pool.”

“Something. Something’s happening in that head of yours,” she says. “Tell me who she is.”

“She? Oh, Helen. No. It’s not like that.”

She searches his face. She can feel that he’s starting to crack.

“I think I lost my job.” He looks up at her as if she might scold him.

“What?”

“But I refuse to name names.”

“Richie, what are you talking about?”

“The subpoena came this morning.”

“No.”

“I guess we’re un-American,” he says.

“We’re un-American. Us?” It sounds funny, and she laughs. He’s serious, though. She can see it in his eyes. She thinks of the times when they lived abroad. She had no friends, nobody to connect with who spoke her language, while Richard went out at night to drink aperitifs with people who might give him a lead or publish a story. So much he gave for his career. So much she gave.

“But, Richard,” she cries, knowing that she sounds like their children when they want something they can’t have. There’s nothing to say. In the end, Richard will decide. She goes where he goes and does what he wants. He reaches out for her hand. She gives it.

“How can I go out? How can I buy milk at the grocery store if everyone thinks you’re a communist?”

“I’m not a communist.”

“Are you sure? Maybe you are.” Could she have married a communist without knowing it?

“Of course, I’m not. I’ll find another job. Move on, until this all blows over.”

But to Helen, it doesn’t feel that way. It would be easier to name names. She would do that for him. She remembers something else that Ananda said in her spiritual talk, and she repeats it without thinking: “If you are bright enough your light will consume every one around you, and you will set all the world free.” But what does that mean?

“I don’t know about setting the world free, but I’ll take care of this.”

“Richard,” she says, reaching for him. “You must name names.”

“I couldn’t do that.”

“But it’s the only way . . . otherwise . . . what? What happens?”

He shrugs. “You,” he says, “are what I need.” He feels better knowing that she will be there with him through it all, whatever he decides. “I’ll take care of this. I promise you.”

He kisses her, and she thinks this kiss means they agree that he will name names, that he needs her and she needs him to do this for them to save the life they’ve built, but she’s had too much to drink. She’s wrong. Later, after the divorce, they will both remember this party, this moment, as the beginning of the end, and Jane’s conception as the last good morning they shared.

She slips her hand under his belt, struggling to unclasp it, to get close to him, to feel him, but he pushes her back.

“Helen,” he says. “Not here.” He hears her mother’s shrill laugh and the sound of Robby marching his army of tiny, tin soldiers down the hall, as he does almost every night when he wakes, claiming something out there is after him.

Richard loosens his tie as they drive away from the party. He feels better now that he’s told her.

In the dark next to him, she sighs quietly and nods off, protected in the cocoon of his sweater, hopeful once again that her life will hold together. She dreams about the sea. The boys sleep in the back seat. Before they reach home, Richard feels overcome with the desire to see the water, even in the dark. He takes a detour and drives out toward Santa Monica. He rolls down the windows. The ocean breeze sends a shiver through his bones. He wants to end up here, he thinks. Yes, this is the place.

Many, many years later, when he dies suddenly of a heart attack at his home in Cape May, New Jersey, his family will honor his wish, in a way. They give him over to the ocean, the Atlantic, not the Pacific, but the ocean just the same. They huddle together, a mass of gray suits and black dresses, an extension of the rocky outcropping that separates land from sea as the waves thrash too hard and high for swimming, and the surf reaches deep into the horizon. The clouds expand and collapse, tinged in purple, pure white in the center. The wind whips sand into shoes, socks, pockets and purses. If they will only move ten feet closer to the water, the nearby boulders will protect them from the elements, but they are too grief-stricken to think of this. His friends hold their hats to their hearts, and the mothers wrap scarves around little necks. Squinting and shivering, they suffer through. The waves and wind wash away Richard’s ashes.

Helen faces the ocean, hidden behind a wall of her children and grandchildren: Tommy and his lover; Robby and whomever he happens to be dating—she’s forgotten the girl’s name already, even with those pretty, heart-shaped lips; Jane and her grown children, all of them: Colette, Sebastian, and Eliot. Eliot, the baby. Baby? He’s not a baby anymore, and she should stop thinking of him that way. He’s wearing a funny cap with ear flaps. When the wind blows it off, everyone laughs, but he doesn’t seem to find it funny. He holds his hand on top of his head to keep it in place. He’s forlorn. They all appear to be, especially Miranda, the woman Richard married after Helen.

After the ceremony, the funeral party returns to the house. Miranda retreats to the kitchen, probably to avoid Helen, who settles into a wicker chair on the screened, heated porch where Richard used to do his crosswords. The children play beneath the table, brushing past Helen’s ankles. Helen faces her grown daughter, who sits between Robby and Tommy on the wicker couch. Seagulls flap their wings and disappear.

“It was that yoga lady,” Helen says, “who gave me the power to leave Richard. But it’s funny you know. I didn’t find out till later, but she had taken me for Gloria Swanson. We wore the same dress that night. The whole time I talked with her, she thought I was someone else. All her ‘messages’ were for the movie star, not me!”

Even in the middle of her mother’s story, Jane can feel her father’s presence, as if he’s stepped outside to have a cigar, and looks behind her. She lifts the bottle of white wine, afraid that if she doesn’t refill her mother’s glass, the story will stop and she’ll never hear the end, the part where she enters. Did they even have yoga back then? Is her mother losing it? She rarely looks back like this. She has osteoporosis, though, not Alzheimer’s.

“Richard went ahead to New York,” Helen continues. “I took you children and lived with Mother. Do you remember?”

Jane was too young, but her brothers nod.

“Richard worked for his uncle. He lived above the deli. He wrote letters. He called for us. I waited. I delayed. ‘When the children are out of school for the summer,’ I told him. But then, when Jane was born . . .” She pauses and points a finger at Jane. “You were the last good thing to come out of that marriage. So I went to New York to surprise him for his birthday, to show him his daughter. Mother had hired this nanny to take care of you children, so I brought the nanny, and we flew. Mother wasn’t happy about our marriage in the first place—she never liked Richard, too intellectual, too quiet, not a ‘good’ family I guess—but she was even less pleased about our separation, how that would look to everyone else. We took a taxicab from the airport and arrived at the deli. A shabby place, fruits and vegetables on carts out front. I asked after Richard, and some boy told us that he was off for the day. I left you, Jane, with the nanny down below, and I walked up those four flights, trying to imagine what it would take to do it every day.” She pauses to take a sip of her wine. “Did I have it in me? I knocked, but I heard no answer, and so I turned the doorknob. He was there. With another woman.”

Jane bites her lip and tastes blood. “I had no idea,” she whispers, and now her mother seems not the bitch that she has always been but possibly the victim, the vulnerable one. She sees her mother in her nurse’s uniform and then her father in an apron, stocking cartons of milk, and later, in suit and hat, carrying his briefcase and umbrella, the professor.

Richard always seemed good and sweet, her mother fickle and bitter. But why? Her early childhood years tumble into the room: the taffeta dresses, piano lessons, hours spent with tutors in the study of her grandparents’ home bump up against her summers with her father in

New York, the bicycle rides through Brooklyn, the Ferris Wheel at Coney Island, her first stolen cigarettes, her first kiss.

“I saw the woman,” Helen says. “I saw her, and she was shocked, of course, to see me. She rose as if to leave, but I left first. Richard followed. He caught me in the stairs. He held my wrist. He looked at me and said he was sorry. These things happen in a marriage. No one tells you, but they do.”

Jane knows this from personal experience and three children from three different men, but what she can't believe is that at fifty-five years old she's hearing this part of the story for the very first time.

She envisions her mother as she was in 1970: beautiful and lost. The family money from her mother's side had dried up by then, and they'd all left the mansion in the hills. Jane, Robby, Tommy and Helen lived just outside of Beverly Hills, on the cusp of a nice neighborhood. Jane can still see their pink-tiled bathroom and the plant hanging over the kitchen sink, the living room with its avocado carpet, the round table where her mother sat late into the night, slogging her way through nursing school only so that less than a year into her career she could meet a doctor, remarry and retire. How small and simple, pale and pathetic, her mother's life had seemed to her then.

By the time Jane finally ran away to New York for good, the twins were long gone. She couldn't bear the sight of her mother's neat stacks of magazines waiting to be donated to hospital waiting rooms. She couldn't stand her stepfather's weak laugh that followed the lame jokes he doled out each morning when he drove her to school, trying to mask his disdain for her bell-bottomed pants and loose peasant tops. They'd all made up somehow, ten years later, when Eliot was born, and Jane had hit bottom.

“I want you to know this. I can’t say it to him, but I can say it to you,” her mother continues. “Even though he was the one who cheated, I’m the one who left. I knew he didn’t care about her. I knew he was lonely. I’d already abandoned him. There was a moment in the stairwell where we stood very close, and he begged me to take him back, to try again. He had such heavy, brown eyes.”

Jane holds her breath. Her mother seems lost back in time, seeing him as he was.

“I knew,” she continues, “if I hugged him that would be the beginning of us but the end of me. We could survive if I was willing to believe in him again, but I turned and walked down the stairs and out the door. We divorced within the year.”

What Helen doesn’t tell them is that when her neighbor cleaned out her closets she left a stack of magazines by the trash, one of which was a yoga magazine from the eighties. In the magazine, Helen found a biography of Ananda, which described Ananda’s unwavering obsession and belief in her famous Indian guru. He turned out to be a fake, a pedophile, a money-laundering lunatic, but Ananda followed him for many years, until finally, she saw the light, so to speak, and separated herself from his teachings. A person who flings herself across the ocean simply to spread love is the same type to fall for a fraud. That yoga lady believed what she wanted to believe, or what she needed to believe, whether right or wrong, true or false. Just as Helen needed to believe that Richard was the problem. Believers push the world this way or that.

“All of that McCarthy era stuff came out much later,” Helen adds as an afterthought. “We learned it was mostly Hoover and his malicious FBI, not McCarthy really, who spearheaded those secret interrogations. Richard was innocent, of course. That subpoena, though, opened everything up.”

Jane holds her breath, waiting for more. “What?” Jane asks. “What else?”

“Oh,” Helen says, flicking her wrist. “Sometimes I wish I had stayed.”

Jane says nothing. This may be the truth, but it was years ago, and what does it change? She has never known Helen and Richard as one.

Robby swirls the ice in his bourbon. Tommy loosens his tie. Jane knows Robby doesn't like dissecting the past. He will forget he heard the story and get on his motorcycle. Certain something out there is after him, he'll drive so fast he'll almost kill himself.

Helen, quiet now, folds and unfolds the blue napkin in her lap. She looks at her children and how they've grown. Well, she thinks, something has lifted. But something more is needed. She ties the blue napkin around her head, puts on a pious expression, brings her hands to a prayer at her heart, closes her eyes, opens them, and winks. She chants “Om,” just like Ananda did at her yoga talk. “Richard, Richard, Richard,” she sings in her best spiritual voice and waits for a laugh.

GOOD NEW DAYS

Lately I've been thinking about that summer, how we lived on Fifth Avenue in my great aunt's apartment and rarely rose before noon. The massive, gray-brick, post-war luxury building stretched almost an entire city block, boasting an impressive circular drive. A doorman greeted residents, received packages, hailed cabs, held doors, and raised an eyebrow when we emerged from the elevator in our paisley dresses and floated arm-in-arm across the marble atrium.

Nights, on that second-floor balcony, we hovered over the city, smoked clove cigarettes, and watched the ever-flowing current of yellow taxis down Fifth Avenue, as if headed straight under Washington Square Park's Arc De Triomphe, or instead counted the cars heading east, slowing down, stopping one behind the other on Eighth Street to wait for the green light.

The apartment was a dust-covered, gold-gray still life. We pushed our way into the frame and circled through the living room past the lone table and dim lamp. That first night, we bought a bottle of wine, unpacked and divided up our closet space, half of which was already filled with lavender sweater sets, cream slacks and powder blue scarves belonging to my great aunt. We opened all the windows. The ficus plant in the corner had long ago given up, and dead leaves covered the floor. None of us bothered to sweep. My aunt stayed in her bedroom, and we unfolded the sofa couch in the living room. We curled up to face each other and fell asleep. In the morning, sunlight washed the parquet wood floors.

Manhattan was dirty then, but we were above the filth or we liked it or we couldn't see it because we were too in love with our freedom. We fastened our hair behind our ears with bobby pins. Some days the village was a circus or a movie set or a bazaar. Other days the avenues shrugged off their grime, and we paraded uptown past department stores, mannequins dripping glitter and glamour. Sometimes we ate pastries with philosophy majors at the Hungarian café across from St. John the Divine. We drank weak coffee and curled up in red vinyl booths in twenty-four-hour diners, speaking as if our words might lose their power if we waited till morning. We posted ourselves outside the Palladium, criticizing films and lamenting the war, shaking our fists at the powers that be, directors and dictators alike. We dipped into those dingy bars to listen to men strum and croon. We followed Butoh Dancers and junkies who performed in public parks. We blew through our money in a single night and lived the week off cigarettes and knishes from Katz's. We waited tables and counted tips. We drank. We smoked. We were carefree. It was the summer, the last summer.

Dear Jane,

How are you? It's been a long time, but I wanted to write. I'm so sorry about your son. I saw it in the paper.

A long time? How long? I can't write that.

We dragged ourselves to work every day by four o'clock, tied our aprons twice around, stuck pencils behind our ears, and filled saltshakers. For the first hour few tourists trickled in, so we scratched down orders and devoured the Village Voice, circling where we would spend our tips when our shift ended. On our breaks we stepped out. We stood on the street, smoking, ignoring the men in suits who reminded us of our fathers and pining after the long-haired musicians who winked when they passed.

Later the streets flooded with commuters, and the boss showed up to inspect our work. He rolled in wearing his best Italian loafers and poured himself a cognac. He settled down at a booth in the corner where he moved stacks of papers from one pile to another, lifting his gaze every time the bells above the door chimed. We tried to look busy, sweeping the tiled floor or wiping down glass tabletops. We peeled garlic. We rearranged the wedding cookies, the canoli, the pizelle, the brutta ma buoni in the display case. We ate stale biscotti and flipped a coin to see who would clean the roaches from the espresso machine. We brewed more coffee. We drank more coffee. We poured bleach into the back sink and dipped our rags in the hot water. Our tables filled up, and we ran back and forth to the kitchen, carrying heavy plates, bottles of wine, and silver pitchers of ice water. We moved too fast to think too much about anything at all besides chicken parmesan, carbonara, and the occasional Caesar salad.

My great aunt always went to bed early. She was deaf. We cracked open the door. Her perfume, powder and sweat pushed us back. Her sense of smell had gone too, her nurses told us. We cared for her. Not well, but we did. We gave her sponge baths, eyeing her milky white,

sagging skin. She was as fragile as a paper kite, billowing out and sinking down with each breath.

When we played cards with her on the balcony on Sunday afternoons, we tapped her vein-ribbed hands gently, carefully. Go fish was her game of choice. She smiled a child's smile when she made a match. We knew she was dying, but we didn't know how slowly. Sometimes, we went to her at night to wrap the folds of her chenille bedspread around her knobby feet. We listened to her draw in air, pause, and release her breath in a puttering sigh. We held hands and sighed that same way, trying to hang on to something that escaped us. We knew time was precious, but we didn't really know why.

On her bedside table she kept copies of *The New Yorker*. When we felt generous, we slipped into her big bed and read her "The Talk of the Town." She patted our arms as if she understood. Maybe she did. When she dozed off, we stole pills that made us feel like we could fly.

She never asked why we came in the spring and stayed through the summer, and we never told her about the protests. What would we have said? Students for a Democratic Society forced a shut down at the university? Men with guns took over the student center in the name of justice? We couldn't tell her about the day militant black students seized Willard Straight Hall, how the times were changing, how we hated the War, the system, the status quo. We didn't lead the insurgency, but we were in it, a part of something larger, carried along by the noise around us.

"Auntie, I want to get you a fedora," you said once, playing with her hair.

"A what?" her look said, but the words never came.

"A hat, you know, like mine," you said, slipping off your hat and placing it on her head.

Something about it didn't seem right. It was too big, and it fell over her eyes, and you laughed and went for your camera to take a photo. And I thought, god no, please let it not be like this, let me not go in this way where I am old and drowning in a too big hat, while young people swim around me, mocking me. Oh god no. I pulled it off her head, but I was wrong. She reached for your hat, put it back on her head, and posed. How it scared me to be so close to old people.

The nurses came on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. We were always dressed and out of the apartment. I feigned ignorance and innocence when my parents called to check on us.

Dear Jane,

Last Friday I went into the city with my husband—you haven't met him, obviously. He's a lawyer too. We met in law school actually. He had an appointment with the orthopedic surgeon not far from where you and I lived. While he met with the doctor, I sat on the bench in Washington Square Park where we used to sit. We used to imagine ourselves as old ladies. I thought how strange it was to find that I have become that old lady, and yet, you are not here to walk with me, arm-in-arm around the fountain. We were inseparable once. What happened to us? It's beautiful now with the cherry trees blossoming. I watched a bum feed pigeons and felt as if time had not passed at all, that it was not years but only days ago that we laughed together and had our entire lives before us. I thought, as I was sitting there, that if I do nothing else before I die, I should at least get in touch with you.

No. Too sentimental.

We walked everywhere. We crossed intersections teeming with tourists. We wended our way through the shady, tree-lined streets of the West Village where we passed brownstones cloaked in ivy and peered through parlor windows at grand pianos and shelves of books, walls of books, from floor to ceiling, books. We marched past loading docks and vacant warehouses, through the cobbled streets of Little Italy and into Chinatown where women beckoned at us from doorways, offering massages, manicures, pedicures, facials, the lunch special, lychee nuts, bok choy, Chinese broccoli, kiwis, artichokes, Kirby cucumbers, mushrooms unfurling like sea creatures, dried bits of ginger, ginseng, crabs swimming in a tank of gray water, swordfish filets, dried crickets, seaweed, almonds, peanuts, mangos, twisted green squash, aloe leaves, coconuts, coconut juice, miniature Buddhas, elephants, lotus roots, light bulbs, tea leaves, apples, carrots, pig noses, gold chains, flip-flops, harmony balls, socks, underwear, New York postcards, coin purses, mung beans, bean paste puddings, sticky buns, soy sauce, fish balls, tofu nuggets, jugs of soy sauce, roasted upside down ducks, red mala beads, jade pendants, and on and on. A thick, gritty, black slime covered the sidewalk, and sometimes we lost our way. Bits of information flew at us: colors, smells, ideas, and we swallowed them one after another until they blurred, and our brains hurt as much as our feet.

At night we closed our eyes and spoke in the dark. Do you remember that crazy man wearing a bicycle helmet and a suit? That woman clapping her hands and laughing? That guy in a tight black shirt whose belly bulged over his belt buckle? The one taking a photo of the girl

with chocolate on her face? He looked like a woman. She looked like a model. Do you think there will be a revolution? What about free love? All together, the teething, drooling baby chewing its hand, the Indian man counting bananas at the deli, the dancer in her loose-fitting tank top formed an ever-expanding mystery.

We feared that wherever we were, there was something else, something bigger, more historic and monumental taking place somewhere else. We thought we'd make it up to Woodstock or maybe out to San Francisco. We hunted for "the moment" and prayed that the party would not end before we got there. We only knew what we didn't want to be, part of the mainstream, like your parents or mine. We were anti-establishment. We wanted the world.

But the one we wanted the most played at a café on Bleecker. Through the foggy windows we could see his fingers slide across the frets. People pressed up against the door, and even if we tried to push through, we couldn't get in. We leaned against the brick wall outside. Graffiti. Garbage in the streets. Your blonde hair looked darker, almost black in this light.

"He's all right," you said, which meant you loved him. I loved him too, but you loved him more. We checked our posture in the reflection of the glass. We didn't want to look like we cared, but we did. Inside, the café tables were filled with light, music, and beautiful people. He finished playing. We clapped. A blonde kissed him on the mouth. We both looked away. He played another set. We waited, and he emerged.

"Hey, ladies," he said. "I'm looking for a light."

You pulled a book of matches from your green, leather pocketbook.

"Nice night," he said, nodding at the people walking through the streets. The hot humid air weighed on our skin like wet silk. We had spent all day at the circle in Washington Square

Park, braiding each other's hair, baking in the sun. The fountain had been off, and women had lounged around in batik wraps skirts, legs crossed, pretending to be as free as you and me. We leaned against each other, back to back. Your long peasant sleeves brushed against the concrete. We were both flushed with color that night. I could see fresh freckles across the bridge of your nose.

“Come on in,” he said, holding open the door. He guided us through the crowd. Our toes burned in our too-high platform heels. We regretted our shoes the moment we left home, but you insisted on sophistication. A man bumped into us, squeezing past your thighs, against my chest and whispered in your ear, an excuse to buy us a drink or touch the vertebra of your lower back. You pushed him off. We rolled our eyes and found a spot against the wall.

Your guitar player disappeared and reappeared across the room, leaning against the bar. We felt his stare, and when we looked his way, he smiled and held up his beer in a salute, to you, to me, to both of us. We were never sure. An older man cupped the microphone in his hand and said, in his British accent, “Thank you. Lovely performance. Next up, next up is—I’m not sure.” He covered his forehead to shield his eyes from the spotlight and scanned the room. “Benjamin. Ben. Big round of applause.”

We clapped with all the rest. And the man, your man emerged. “This one goes out to two pretty girls I found in the street,” he said, nodding our way.

We blushed and grinned.

“Name is ‘Good New Days’, ” he said.

We could not take our eyes off his hands.

*

Dear Jane,

What I really want to say after all these years is that I miss you.

“I’ve got an idea,” he said. “Follow me.”

So we three stumbled through the streets together. We hopped in a cab. He paid. That was the first time I saw him take your hand. Of course, he’d chosen you. Of course, it hurt. He pulled you out of the taxi and didn’t let go as we walked past Canal into a brick building. We rode in a freight elevator that smelled of cat piss and mildew. I held onto you, and you held onto him. As the elevator rose, I said a prayer. Let us get there alive, wherever we’re headed. When the doors opened, we were at a potluck in a loft where some sculptor lived. Men and women held onto each other, hugging, dancing, or sitting in a circle. Some were naked. A woman swayed alone in a corner.

“I’ll get us a drink,” he said. His brown leather boots were thin and narrow with a heel, and he weaved through the crowd in the same deft manner that he played guitar.

When he turned around you squeezed my hand. “Tonight,” you whispered.

“Tonight what?” I asked.

“Did you see his hair?” you asked

“What about it?” Of course, I saw his hair, those beautiful thick curls.

He returned holding a bottle of wine. “No cups,” he said. So we took long swigs, one after the other. My head filled with a dull, pleasant ache, and I smiled at him, but he was looking at you. You were so beautiful sometimes I couldn’t stand to be your friend. Your braids

fell heavy against your back, and your green eyes sparkled. Even without the platforms, you skimmed above the others, tall and graceful.

“You girls always go out together?” he asked.

We nodded.

“Right on.”

We told him that we waited tables at La Dulce Vita. Neither of us told him that we’d only met two years ago, that we’d shared a dorm room and eaten every meal together our freshman year.

“We’re twenty-four,” you lied.

Soon we were both drunk, soaring through the city, dancing on that rooftop high on cheap red wine and music like always. I remember how the moonlight made your eyes glimmer and your hand slipped through his thick curls. You wore my navy blue hot pants, and his corduroy bellbottoms pressed against your bare legs. When I saw how he kissed you, I knew you’d forgotten me, us.

I went home. You stayed.

Later you told me how it went. Days later, I read it all in the journal you kept under your side of the couch.

“Let’s go back to my place,” he’d said, biting your lower lip.

At that time, he lived in a box with two windows that looked out onto Christopher Street. From the window you could see two skinny transvestites fighting. You fell into his bed like it was your own.

I always pictured clutter, a dense oriental carpet, rich purples, a thick layer of dust, as

though he'd lived several lives already, but you only wrote about how he'd rigged a tablecloth of a lion-faced god from India over the light bulb, so that the entire room gleamed, dim and sexy. Even his afghan smelled of marijuana. He played "Lay Lady Lay" or some other Dylan song. You found one of his philosophy books on the floor and read it in your best professor voice. He was an intellectual. He was a poet. That part didn't matter. He played guitar. You two smoked. You talked Buddhism. You fell asleep.

In the morning while he kissed you and undressed you, I fried bacon. In the mirror propped up on a chest of drawers you could see your reflection. The plaster near the window cracked every time the headboard hit the wall. There was a postcard too, maybe from another woman. You stole it. Neither of us could read the cursive on the back.

Afterwards, he asked you if you were okay, kissed your forehead and fried eggs. Sunnyside up. From the bed you could see the kitchen, so you sat around in your underwear, watching the muscles in his back slide together, his naked butt, his sleight movements as he salted his plate. You pretended to read.

"Skip class," he said. "Stay awhile."

"I told you. I'm not in school," you said.

"Stay."

"Can't."

Even though we knew nothing, we knew this much: they want you more when you go.

"Lay, lady. Let's stay in bed all day," he begged. You shook out your hair, crimped from your tight braids. We had not shaved our armpits since we arrived in New York. He nuzzled into you. "You reek like a good woman," he said. He slipped your silver ring with the turquoise

stone, the one I'd given you, off your middle finger. "Now you have to come see me," he said, closing the ring in his fist, "if you want this back."

By the time you got home, the sun was high in the sky, the countertops doused in light, and I think you'd already fallen in love. The hall must have smelled of bacon. I heard your key in the lock, but I stayed in the kitchen, pouring grease into a can.

"Hey," you said, covering my eyes with your palms. "Guess who?"

I shrugged you off, you and your sparkling smile. You popped the last strip of bacon in your mouth and shrugged. "Not bad," you said, wiping your fingers on the corner of the dishtowel. "So. We did it."

I still didn't turn around to look at you. I set the frying pan down with a clunk.

You told me how you walked home across hot cement streets, sure that everyone, the man at the deli, the man with the books, the doorman could tell you'd spent the night out. "Do you think I should have waited? Do I look different?"

I studied you, your hair, your eyes, and the curve of your lips. Something had changed, but I couldn't name it. "Nope," I said. "The same."

"I feel different."

You dragged me out to smoke a cigarette on the balcony, where you revealed the details of your night. Below us a man waved a parking ticket in the air, swearing at his car, at a stop sign, at his wife. Everything changes now, I thought. And it did.

"What?" you said. "What's wrong?"

“Nothing.” I felt like an empty paper bag, about to be lifted away by the wind. How could you be so fearless? How could you be so free? “Where’s your ring?”

You looked down at your bare hands. “He has it.”

“You gave it to him?” I said. “Some guy you just met?”

“Ben. His name is Benjamin. He took it. Please don’t be like this.”

“Like what?”

“Jealous.”

“You knew I liked him,” I said, but it wasn’t what I meant. I said that because I had to say something. I didn’t care about him. I wanted you, but not like that. I wanted us to stay as we were, preserved. Or I wanted your courage. I envied the way you always could take what you needed, go where you wanted, say what you meant. You seemed more powerful than ever. I turned away and slipped inside, knowing you would follow.

“That’s not fair,” you said.

“You know what’s not fair,” I said, waving my hand across your dirty dishes. “All this.” I marched into the living room and circled your art project: a disturbing landscape made from clumps of clay and human hair that resembled unearthed, dismembered body parts in a graveyard. The clay formed a single word, “hair,” like the musical, which you loved. You covered the letters in human hair—mine, the few inches you’d chopped off to transform my identity, and locks from strangers, which you’d collected from salons. You dreamed of being an artist. I dreamed of being a writer. “I hate it,” I said.

“You said you thought it was good.”

“It looks like a dying rat.” I waved my hands at the pile of clothes heaped on the floor.

“And you live like a pig.”

“That’s not true,” you said. “Half of those are yours.”

“You ruin everything. You ruined my purple bell bottoms.” I lifted my leg to show you where the hem had frayed.

“They were like that.”

“Not in the back.”

“I’ll buy you new ones.”

We fell into a heavy silence. I ferociously swept the floor, knowing I should stop.

“Those are my shorts,” I said. “You didn’t even ask if you could borrow them. You always do whatever you want.”

You unbuttoned and unzipped my hot pants, stepping out of them in one swift movement, so that you stood in your platforms and underwear. “Here,” you said, holding them out on one finger. “Are you happy now?”

I snatched them from you and threw them to the floor.

“Come on, Claire,” you said. “I didn’t do it to hurt you. It just happened.”

“Everything just happens to you.”

“We were in the moment.”

You moved back against the wall, shocked at the way I banged the dustpan against the doorjamb. My aunt snored through it all. I don’t know why I couldn’t be happy for you.

“Maybe,” I said. “Maybe next time you’re in the moment, you should think of somebody other than yourself. You should consider whose shorts you’re wearing. You should consider cleaning the toilet once in a while, since you’re living here for free. Maybe you should

consider giving up on this crap.” I shoved your art books off the table and knocked off a vase of dried flowers. The books fell to the floor with a thud, and glass shattered everywhere.

We looked at each other. You laughed, angry me with my dustpan, you in your underwear.

“I’m sorry,” you said. “Something’s happened to me. I think I’m in love with him.” We laughed so hard we cried, and the whole time I picked up glass I wanted to take your hand or your cheeks because I knew he would hurt you, and I knew there was nothing I could do to stop it from happening. But we laughed and swept.

That fall, before I went to study at the Sorbonne and they moved my great aunt into a home and you joined Ben and the others who were heading south in a hippie bus to form a commune or follow some movement or make art or change the world or whatever it was, we stopped for a moment near the fountain in the park.

“Do you think you’ll marry him?” I asked.

“Maybe.”

“What about school?”

You shrugged again. “There’s too much out there to see,” you said. “Too much happening right now at this very moment.”

The leaves sparkled in the bright sun, and the air had turned crisp for a day. We watched a skinny boy bang on buckets. You pulled me away before the hat came around, and we ducked into a pizza place. We ordered a few slices and sipped on our sodas, sopping up pools of grease

with a napkin.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come?” you asked. “We’ve got room.”

The melted cheese stung the roof of my mouth. My parents had already paid my tuition.

A large gold star hung from the awning, swinging from side to side in the breeze. The postman next to us folded his slice of pizza in half to eat it like a sandwich. The sun glinted off your dirty blonde hair, and the light danced in your eyes when you smiled. Let’s always live like this, I thought.

DOG NEWS

When I arrive at the airport in Mexico City, my father waves to me. I hate him already. His eyes are like mine, denim faded in the wash. He's thin. His shirt hangs open at the neck, his sleeve torn like the bums on the subways back in New York. The hugging, singing, laughing people rush past. Maybe they will knock him over.

“Wow,” he says. “You look just like your mother.” He gives me a hug, and his sweat smells. “It's so good to see you.” He looks like he wants me to say the same, but I don't.

“How was your flight?”

I shrug. He introduces his two boys, his sons. I've heard about them. They're younger than me, but not by much. Roman, the older one, the eight-year-old, has a crooked spine, so Archer pushes him in his wheelchair. They speak Spanish to each other as we head to the parking lot. “Speak English to Colette,” my father says, throwing my suitcases into the van. He lifts Roman into the front seat. Archer and I climb into the back with the collapsed wheelchair. Lines of cars stop and start on the bumpy road. Cars honk as we circle to enter the highway. Mexico City clatters and spins, too loud for words.

My father studies me through the rearview mirror as if he wants to say something. I put on my mother's black sunglasses that she bought that day, maybe six months ago, when the sun melted the snow. We both wore boots and dresses and went shopping to celebrate the end of winter. “Sometimes you need to feel like a movie star,” she said, and I held the mirror while she turned her head to the side and made a kissing face. She really looked like a movie star.

Now I wear the sunglasses, but they're too big. The world dims, caught under a cloud, and I can't believe she wants me here with him.

When the radio works, my father sings along. When he drives too fast, he pounds the dashboard with his fist to make the static go away. There's a small hole in the floor, and the asphalt surface zips beneath us. The hole makes me dizzy. The wind crashes through the window and washes over us like waves. In the distance, outside the city, I see mountains. Light moves across their surface, and they look purple and green, gray and forest, ash and turquoise all at once.

Turns in the road rock us left then right. Archer holds onto the seat beneath him, and I grip mine the way he does. The folded wheelchair slides across the van's floor. The radio turns to static now, but my father doesn't notice. He's focused on the road. Roman reaches across and turns off the radio as the engine strains. Moving up feels like falling down. I'm certain the van will collapse and we'll tumble away.

"See that," Archer says, pointing to a mountain apart from the rest. "That's *Tepozteco*." As we drive closer, the mountain becomes shadows, charcoal and emerald, smoky and dark—a woman's face appearing and disappearing. "And that jacaranda, that's where the trail starts," he says as we pass a tree, one branch marked with a ribbon. Now I know he speaks perfect English.

We sputter forward. The road curves toward a house made of clay and wood, a porch and window, a hammock tied between two shady trees, a donkey, a shed, an abandoned school bus, a small trampoline, and pots of flowers. A woman. She has brown skin, eyes, and hair, like the boys. She wears a dress, and the strap falls off her shoulder. When she lifts her arm and

waves, the strap of her dress meets her collarbone. We drive past her, and my father cranks the parking brake. I meet his wife, Maria.

Slate blue tortillas hide in a yellow cloth napkin. My father sits next to Maria. Roman sits on one side of me, Archer on the other. I refuse to speak. I eat only bread, but the meal goes on. I open and close my eyes. Fish. Salad. Rice. Beans. Avocado. Jicama. Honey. Cheese. Salsa. Green soup. And the blue tortillas. The boys squeeze lime and sprinkle salt on their tortillas, roll them up and dip them in chili powder. They love to eat. My father loves to eat. One, two, three pieces of fish. How can he be so skinny? Maria hits his hand away. “*Mi amor*,” she says. “*Basta*.”

When Maria talks, she waves her hands in the air. Her nose is large, her eyes small. I squint, and she becomes a bird. I close my eyes. She slips in and out of the language I can understand. I like it better when she speaks Spanish because then I don’t have to try. Her words become wings beating in the background, pounding like the rain outside. The donkey, George, puts his head in through the open window near our table to beg. His lips fold back against wide, yellow teeth. He brays. I jump. The boys find this funny.

“Do you want to feed him?” my father says. I shake my head.

Archer runs to the kitchen and returns with a carrot. “Watch this.” He shoves the carrot forward, and George folds it into his tongue and chews. He stomps.

“No more.” Archer pushes George’s head away.

“Eat more. *Más. Más*,” Maria says to me.

I shut my eyes. I hope she goes away. I open them. She's still there. She shrugs. She takes the food from my plate and dumps it onto Archer's.

"Maria," my father says.

"*Qué?*" She flaps her wings up in the air. "Benji, she lost her appetite."

Maria understands. I haven't been hungry for days.

"*Pulque,*" Roman says. "She needs *pulque.*"

"No, no," he says. "Not for kids." My father goes to dry the dishes that Maria washes. She does one at a time with only a trickle of water.

"Have you heard of the *Cerro del Tepozteco*? The mountain I showed you?" Archer whispers.

I shake my head no.

He can't believe it. "No, never heard of it? You know, home of *Tepoztecatl*, the god?"

"Yes," Roman says. "He's the son of the wind. The one who makes *pulque.*"

"From the maguey plant," Archer says. "The century plant."

"*Pulque* is magic," Roman says. "If you are sick, you will be well. If you are weak, you will have strength. I need the juice of the maguey for my legs."

"Someone tried to kill *Tepozteco* when he was a baby, but he grew up to be so strong that he turned his enemies into rocks and blew away all the rest. *Pwhswaaa,*" Archer says. "Then he became king. He's still up there."

Roman points through the window, up to the peak of the mountain. "And so is *Quetzacoatl. En mi mente, lo veo.*"

"You can slip and fall," Archer warns. "It takes a whole hour to get to the top."

“*Quetzacoatl* takes many forms.” Roman closes his eyes. “His wings are the wings of god. His mouth spits fire. He’s mysterious as a snake. When he’s happy rainbows fill the sky. When he’s sad, lightning. And when he’s angry, nothing grows. In the beginning of time, before people like us, he gathered all the bones of the men of the *cueva*, cavemen, you know, and brought them to the underworld. He crushed the bones and sprayed his blood all over them.”

“*Pwhswaaa.*” Archer explodes across the room. My father catches him.

“And that’s how he made people,” Roman says. “Like us.”

“Another story?” My father hands Archer the dishtowel and walks toward me. “Every time it’s a different version, but the mountain stays the same.”

I look out the window at *Tepozteco*. My father stands beside me. His palm against my shoulder feels like a foot, calloused and rough. “How about a walk?”

I shake my head. I will not walk. I will not speak, until they take me back to her.

My mother’s hands are smooth, her nails blached almonds. I sit beside her, collapse into her, and she hugs me, laughing. I look up, but her face hides in a shadow.

I wake. The wind howls. Why doesn’t she want me anymore? When will she get better? Strange noises eat through the night: the rise and fall of Archer’s breathing, Maria with her newspaper, my father picking at his guitar, and the chirps of birds and bats, crickets and frogs, something howling far away. The mosquito net makes a white wall around me. A throaty hum approaches and fades. Motorcycles. Mosquitoes. Monsters with wings. Through the open windows, the blackness seeps in. When the wind dies down, the insects cry out. I wrap my

blanket around my shoulders and creep over to the doorjamb. From the top of the stairs, I hear my father's voice.

"But with the paralysis in his arm," he says, "he couldn't even hold the crutches. How could he walk? What's the point?"

"No," Maria says. "The doctor in New York. Look at this. He's the one who can do it. We have to go."

"Give it a rest. Please."

"Fine. You stay here, and I'll take him. I'll get the money from my uncle. I'll ask my parents. Or we'll sell the Volkswagon."

"And then what? They walk to school?"

"It's better to have the operation now when he's young and his muscles can learn—" She switches to Spanish, and I can't understand the rest.

"He can't sit up straight. He can hardly lift his arm or snap his fingers. Stop telling him he's going to walk. Stop lying to him."

Maybe they're lying to me. Maybe I'll never see my mom again. I crawl back to bed. I find the photo of us I keep under the mattress and study it in the moonlight. She's so beautiful. We sit in the park, me in her lap in a pink dress. I let the knot in my throat become tears.

The sun forces me awake. I bathe in hot, white light. Roosters greet the day. Archer rubs his eyes, pushes the mosquito net from his bed, and rolls out. His feet hit the hard wood floor. He turns toward the jar beside his bed. They pee this way in this family. Even Maria keeps a bowl for the middle of the night. She gave me one. Or else it's the outhouse. I press my thighs

together, holding it. Archer runs out of the room, but I stay in bed as long as I can. I stay until my father enters wearing pants tied with a cord. He taps on the wall.

“You know why there’s no door?” he asks. “I built it this way. After you and your mom left, before Maria, before Archer and Roman, all I wanted was to look out that window and see that mountain from every room in the house. I thought I would live alone in peace and quiet. Me and the gods.” He enters. “But I’m happy that I don’t. I’m happy you’re here. You know that, right?”

I roll away from him, but he sits down on the bed and sighs.

“How about a walk to town?”

Through the window, the sky is gold and heavy with the coming rain.

“We need more cheese and tortillas for breakfast. And someone to collect the eggs and feed George.” I turn away again, and he catches my wrists, holding me still so that I have to face him.

“I know you’d rather be with your mom, but she sent you here. When she gets better, you can go back.”

I close my eyes, so at least I don’t have to look at him. I’ve heard it already. My stepdad is gone, and my mom is not well. Does that mean he took my brother? Where did they go?

“We want you to be happy, but you need to give us a chance.”

Why should I? I haven’t seen him since I was four. He looks old. His boys are weird. Minutes pass. They pile up like hours, days, months, years. He wants me to speak, so I don’t. Where is she now? At home? In bed? In a hospital? What’s wrong with her? I would take care of her. I would bring her water and magazines. I would do *jeté* and *pirouettes* for her until

she smiles again. I would even take care of Sebastian. I would read him books and feed him.
Who's taking care of my brother?

“Open your eyes,” he says. I picture myself spinning and spinning. “Some day you'll have to talk.”

Never.

Near the open door of the *carpintería*, which is really a shed out back behind the house, I sit on a crate watching my father build a table. The rain keeps coming, and the pounding in the gutters swallows me. Sweat makes his shirt stick to his back, and the knots of his spine show through. He sings softly. I wish he would stop. I know that song. My mother used to hum it when I was little. He swats a fly, leaving a line of sawdust across his forehead. I'm out of the way but close enough that he can see me. He never lets me go anywhere alone.

Archer bounces a soccer ball from one knee to the other. My father hammers. Roman meditates in the corner, whispering stories of places he's never been and things he's never seen. Purple sea creatures. Flaming red flying machines. Elephants with broken tusks. His imagination is bigger than the world itself.

Maria kisses his forehead when she passes. “My boy has a good mind.” She winks at me. Sometimes her English is perfect.

“Ma,” he says, rolling his eyes, annoyed.

I can tell he longs to walk but can't climb out of his broken body. I want him to get better. I want to go back to New York. What will happen if he doesn't have that operation? What happens if I never get to go home?

The rainy season won't end for another two months. But school will start soon and then, Archer tells me, we wake up while it's still dark outside and put on uniforms that itch. My father will drive us an hour from here to a school where we study all day. We'll be separated. Boys. Girls. We do our homework in the car. How? I wonder. There's a hole in the floor. After school, Maria will pick us up on her way home from Mexico City. She works in a clinic helping mothers have babies, but she doesn't look like a doctor. Her clothes hang too loose from her body. Sometimes when she leans over I can see all the way down her shirt to her belly button. She has no boobs. No bra.

After lunch and *siesta*, the sun shines again. Archer and Roman build a fort on a slab of concrete near the bougainvillea tree. Archer stretches a sheet from one branch to another. Roman describes who rules over the kingdom (*Tepozteco*, of course), how he does it (by defeating *Xochicalco* with flints and shape-shifting), where his power comes from (the *teponaxtli*), and what the consequences will be for the prisoners of war when they escape (not good). He goes on and on in a language I understand, and Archer answers him in a language I cannot. I know what they say when they talk slowly. But still, I don't speak. Not in Spanish. Not in English. And then I see Archer laughing, wearing my mother's sunglasses.

"Tell me what happened," my father says, holding my scraped palm, while Maria dabs at my bruised cheek. The puffiness under my eye narrows my view of the world. "Tell me." His voice shakes. He's angry. With me. With Roman. With Archer. I feel the pieces of plastic, the broken bug eyes in my pocket. One lens I can hold up in front of my face like a pirate patch, but the other has been cracked in two.

I may have started the fight, but I didn't cause it. Archer did. I study my hand. The lines in my palms hurt, shredded now, interrupted by bumpy layers of skin and dried blood mixed with dirt. Soap and water burn through the grime.

My father separates us. Archer must stay in the shed. Roman sits in the fort, but Maria brings him a mango, and he eats it with one hand. His whole body leans to the side, a toppling tower wherever he goes. I know he must be jealous that I was in a fight and he wasn't. A fight would kill him. A fight would make him a man. Mango juice dribbles down his chin. I sit on my bed, staring out the window at the world below: my father with his sagging pants, Maria with her flapping arms. The laundry hangs limp on the line, drying in the sun, which now pierces through the clouds. In the distance, I see *Tepozteco*, and the tree with the ribbon that marks where the path begins.

The next morning I wake so early it's still dark outside. I lie in bed touching the scabs on my palms until an idea comes to me. I need to get that plant, the maguey. If I collect the potion from its center, I can heal my hands and fix Roman. He will have his operation, and I will go back to New York. Everyone will love me. "Oh, Colette," my mother will say when I hand her a whole jar of the magic potion, "you're a miracle maker!" I slip out from under the covers, tip-toe downstairs, and brush my teeth at the kitchen sink. I find a flashlight and a glass jar. I put on my father's poncho, hood up to protect me if the rains begin again.

As I walk, my sneakers kick up red dust. For the first time since I've arrived, I feel like talking. I want to tell someone about the mountains and how I will save the day, but even the

roosters are asleep. The dogs aren't, though. One by one, they bark and howl, running alongside the neighbors' gated plots of land. I am dog news.

After I've passed all the houses near ours, I find the tree with the ribbon and turn onto a narrow path that follows alongside the gorge. The roots of an *amate* tree stretch across my path, and my Converse slides over some of the mossy, slick rocks. If I slip, I'll fall a long way down into nothingness. I take slow careful steps. If I make it to the top, I'll be a hero. The moon, bright and almost full, guides me until the path narrows, and the forest becomes thick with shrubs and vines. The moon disappears as I step under the canopy of trees. Mud sucks at my shoes. I've stepped inside a black hole.

I click on my flashlight, but nothing happens. I press down on the button and fumble with the batteries, trying to pop them out and flip them over, but my hands are shaking. I drop one and crouch down, running my hands over sticks, rocks, mud, lichen, leaves. My heart races. Eyes watch me. My lungs pull in the damp air, but I can't get enough. Turn around. Go back the way you came. Find the moon. But I can't. My legs won't move. Tarantulas. Scorpions. Snakes. Eagles. Bears. Wolves. Hyenas. Coyotes. Monsters. *Xochicalco*. Shadows dance around me, coming closer to crush my bones. Beating wings, screaming mosquitoes, howling, screeching, crashing, breathing, yes, breathing. Something is coming to get me, a steady rhythmic thumping. Steps. Movement.

I stay still, frozen. My chest shrinks. I cry out, but the darkness swallows the sound. Please, send my father. Send someone. Save me. Please, I swear I'll talk. I'll talk and talk and talk. I will fill the world with words. My heart beats, louder and faster, louder and faster. The noise grows. I see pins of light, and finally a great white sheet falls over me. Silence.

*

I stare into my own eyes. No, my father's eyes. My father. He's here.

"Colette, you okay?" he asks. "I think you fainted." He gives me water, brushes the hair from my forehead, and helps me sit up. I'm still in the forest in the dark, but now he's here too and I'm not afraid. He shines his flashlight all around and into the woods. "You're fine. See?"

"I thought something was coming after me, like a wild animal or something." The words are out before I can stop them, but I don't care anymore. "I heard breathing."

"I think you heard me."

"How'd you find me?" I ask.

"Dogs woke me. Then I just followed your tracks."

Once I start, I don't stop. I talk like Roman talks. My ideas about the potion sound dumb when I say them out loud. He tells me there are no century plants here. What I thought was a maguey has another name, and what Roman needs is not a potion but someone to help him do his physical therapy before he can have an operation, and what my mom needs is not magic, but space and time. "I want to show you something," he says. "Can you follow me?"

My legs feel jittery, and I'm still a little dizzy. He pulls me up, hugs me tight and lets me go, looking me over. "It's okay. You're going to be just fine."

I hold onto his arm. He's skinny but strong. With the flashlight and my father's arm, the path isn't difficult. I follow him, and we hike up the mountain. Gradually, the morning turns the gray of an elephant's hide, and the trees give way to an ancient stone temple built for watching the gods. We climb up and sit side by side, both of us sweaty, his arm touching mine, waiting in the quiet where the black molten rock has been worn smooth.

"I miss my mom," I say.

“I miss her too,” he says, and I know it’s true because his eyes wrinkle at the corners like it hurts him to talk. “But she loves you, you know that.”

“Then how could she leave me?”

“She left me too,” he says softly. “A long, long time ago. You both did.”

“We did?”

“Sometimes I wonder why I didn’t follow.”

He tells me about a time before I was born when they lived in the West Village together and then traveled all the way here to live in a commune. My mom has told me this same story, but she told it differently and left out some parts. His way sounds sad, like he wishes he could do it again. “A commune?”

“Where you share responsibilities and live in harmony. A special community.”

“What happened to it?”

“It’s still here, but much smaller. Things changed over time.”

“Why?”

“Sometimes people can’t get along,” he says. “Some people thought they were going to find paradise.”

“But they didn’t?”

“I don’t know. For awhile they did. We did.”

“But paradise is always changing?” I’m about to ask when I will see my mother again when *Quetzacoatl’s* wings, orange and purple, gold and crimson, blaze across the sky. The rising sun swallows us whole. When I close my eyes, my mother’s face appears and disappears as fast as lightning. When I open my eyes, I see forever.

DIRTY SOCK WATER WITH A BOW ON TOP

Elwood honked, and when Susanne didn't come out right away, he pressed both palms against the hot steering wheel and pushed down, good and strong. She was eighteen years younger, a double D—real, not fake. Take your time, he thought, picturing how she'd straddled him that morning. For that reason alone, and not because some lady walking her little doggy looked like she might bite his head off, he released the horn. But what about Billy? Elwood leaned into the horn. No, no, no, he thought, let Susanne be. He eased off and settled in to wait.

Finally she appeared, locked the door, and walked down the stairs from their second floor apartment. Oh how her thighs jiggled in her slinky skirt. This woman, he thought. He jumped out of the car to open her door the way she liked and complimented her on her gold shoes. She popped her gum as she slid into the front seat. She flipped her mirror and painted more of the black stuff around her eyes that made them look more open.

If they didn't hurry up, they'd be late, and the monster would have another reason to accuse him of mutilating boundaries or whatever the hell her therapist thought he did. The idea of letting that woman humiliate him in front of Billy on his only son's golden birthday sent an angry spasm from his gut to his feet.

"I can't believe you really baked a fucking birthday cake," Susanne said, as he pulled away from the curb. "I mean I knew you could cook. I didn't know you could bake."

“It’s my son. He deserves a real from-scratch cake.” He swiveled around quickly. The strawberry cake looked perfect, sitting in a cardboard box on the floor of the back seat right there next to the twenty-four case of High Life, his contribution to the party. “You think you were busy working. So was I. While you were at the salon, I did all the steps: went to the grocery, bought the box, the eggs, the milk, the fruit, the frosting in the can, the whipped cream. I came home and set the pre-temp. You missed it, baby. It was a beautiful thing. All from scratch.”

She smiled when he said “from scratch” like she found him funny or maybe just proud of him because he’d spun the whole thing up all by himself. “I swear if you put the kind of love and devotion that you put into baking that cake into getting that job over at Home Depot—”

“You know how I feel about paying taxes.” The government could suck it. Ever since he cracked his knee one Friday night and the roofing company dumped him, he’d been collecting unemployment and living with Susanne. When those checks dried up, he’d started three days a week at Ted’s Used Tires. He’d sit on a pyramid of tires, gathered up from junkyards or worse, stolen late at night from cars parked on dark corners, and inhale that tar-rubber-gasoline stink that reminded him of roofing. He’d wait for sorry people who didn’t know anything, not even how to change oil, to roll up—thwap, thwap—begging for a quick fix.

“You’ll be back in a week,” he wanted to tell them. “Don’t you see I’m selling you a busted tire? This shit is dirty sock water with a bow on top.” So maybe he sold patched-up, broke-ass tires, but he made up for it by selling those same suckers high quality marijuana at bargain prices. He could sleep better knowing that whenever that next flat showed up, those poor folks could at least have a puff on the peace pipe.

In the rearview, he admired the way Susanne had blow-dried his hair. During the prime of his metal days, Carol had used an actual iron to straighten it. “Watch the hair,” he’d say when people bumped into him at concerts. Now, with his ball cap on, nobody could tell that he only had hair on the sides and in the back, not on top. At least he didn’t have loads of middle-aged flab hanging over his belt. He could still be considered a catch. Susanne was the real catch.

“Thirteen on the thirteenth. He’s a man now,” Elwood said. “And this here is a cake for men.”

“You told me already,” Susanne said, lighting a cigarette.

“I wish you’d quit those cancer sticks.”

“You’re one to talk.”

“Weed doesn’t count. You know that.”

Susanne drummed her fingers against the dash. “I mean who said thirteen makes you a man? I met a lot of men that are a lot older than thirteen that are not men. You know what I’m saying?”

Was she trying to tell him something? Like maybe he was in that category of not-yet men? “Here’s what we’re going to do,” he said. “We’re going to roll up that joint then shoot over to the Barnes and Nobles so I can pick me up a few things for Billy—”

Susanne inhaled and blew a puff of smoke out the window. “You didn’t get him something?”

“I’m about to. Something educational.”

“What? A book? You think he wants a book?”

“He loves sports. He needs a few of them books about players. Ask him any statistic

about any player. He knows it. He reads so fast you can't believe. He gets one book from the library. Bam. Next day, he's done. Devoured it. Like that kid show, Cookie Monster, but with words. You'll see."

She dabbed her pinky finger against her lips, greasing them up with something that made them look wet.

"We'll smoke that joint on the way over," Elwood said.

"You think that's a good idea?"

"It's the best idea I had all day."

"What about the ex?"

"The monster." Carol. Carol and Turdface Stevens. Now she was Mrs. Stevens. More like Mrs. I Eat My Oatmeal Every Morning and I Forgot How to Have Fun and I Work in A Bank Now and I Think I'm Better Than You Because I found God and You Didn't And My Husband Has A Tiny Weenie But He Owns A Lawnmower. He couldn't believe she was the same woman who used to let him do lines off her bare ass. "Exactly, which is why we're going to relax before we get there."

"Well you've just got it all figured out, now don't you?"

Elwood pulled away from the red light and turned up the ACDC so loud he almost didn't hear the sirens. But he sure saw the lights. "Oh fuck. Oh mother," he said as the cop car nosed up right behind him with those spinning blue lights. "I'm going to jail. That's it. They got a warrant. Oh mother fucker. I'm going back to jail."

"Jail? A warrant for what? What are you talking about?"

“Nothing, baby doll.” She didn’t need to know the details of that little mix-up he’d had when he visited his brother in Alabama. The knife, the fight, the bashed in car window happened before her time. Those were the jackass days. “Parking tickets.”

“How much? Why don’t you pay?”

He gripped the steering wheel. He pressed his foot on the accelerator. He’d lose the cop. He’d only been practicing Grand Theft Auto his entire life. Well, not quite, but long enough.

“Pull over,” Susanne snapped. “They don’t arrest you for parking tickets.”

“I can’t. What about the weed? Throw it out the window! No, no. Stick that shit up your pussy. Go ahead. Put it up your pussy. C’mon girl. I know there’s room.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Put it up your pussy!”

Susanne wiggled in her seat. “You owe me,” she whispered.

He slowed down and pulled over. The pig squeezed out and approached the car. He tapped on the window; Elwood cracked it.

“Roll it all the way down,” Susanne whispered.

Elwood cranked the lever then straightened his baseball cap. “Good afternoon, Officer,” he said, grinning with half his mouth closed to hide his dead tooth.

“Afternoon. Do you know why I pulled you over?”

“No, sir.” If Elwood went to jail, he would will his electric guitar to Susanne, no to Billy, no to Susanne to hold for Billy.

“Here in the fine state of Louisiana you need to wear a seat belt at all times.”

“Yes sir, Officer. Thank you, Officer. You right, Officer,” Elwood said, turning toward Susanne. “Come on, baby doll, you heard the man. Put your seatbelt on.”

“You too,” the cop said. “Buckle up!” The officer squinted and gave him a laser look. “And drive safely.”

“Thank you, sir. Yes, sir. Yes indeed, Officer. Will do.”

Elwood reached for his seatbelt and pulled it across his chest. He touched his armpits. He’d sweat right through his undershirt. He’d have to change for the party. No problem. He had two choices in the back: his Saints jersey and a Hawaiian that he bought in the Quarter that night he’d polished off a bottle of tequila and lost his shirt. More importantly, he had escaped the law. Thank you Lord. Thank you Mother of God. Thank you. He quickly rolled up the window, threw the car into first, shifted into second and peeled away from the intersection.

“Elwood! What’re you doing?”

“We made it. We’re okay,” he said. Elwood threw the car to the right then forced a quick left down a pot-holed side street. “Where’s that weed, baby doll?”

“You know where.”

“Good. Good. Keep it right there. We should charge extra for that. Anything that’s been up my girl’s pussy. Ten dollars extra. That’s what I’m going to tell anybody who wants to buy something off me. Not that I’m in the business of selling.”

Elwood couldn’t believe his luck. It must have been a sign from the Big Guy Up There that he was meant to deliver that birthday cake to his son in person. No accidents in this world. Everything happens for a reason. He didn’t belong back in prison, not today. No Sir. Thank you very much.

After he lost the cop, he gunned it. He merged onto I-10 then zipped across three lanes in one swift motion. Sure enough though, they smacked into traffic. Time oozed away from him while he inhaled bus exhaust. While the party officially started, they sat there behind some

grandma who couldn't get her stinking Buick going. They'd be late. No problem. In New Orleans being on time is being early. Being late is being on time. He told himself this whenever necessary.

“Okay. You wait here if you want,” he said when they got to the bookstore.

“I got to take this out of my va-jeeg if you know what I mean.”

“Let's make this quick,” he said and took a nice handicap spot right up front. He didn't have a sticker, but he knew they'd only be a minute. She nodded, and they hopped out of the car. He weaved Susanne around a mess of mamas and babies and little booger kiddies getting into or out of a van. As soon as he entered, he pulled his baseball cap down to cover his eyebrows.

“Meet you at the car,” she said. “Baseball's not my thing.”

He hustled past the name-tagged employees until he found what he needed. He licked his index finger and paged through a whole stack of sports books. Not enough pictures. Not enough words. No statistics. For fags. For nerdy fans. He found one he liked. Twenty-four dollars? Did they think he just shat money out of the corn-hole? For a book? Are you kidding? He looked around, leaned over, pretending to look for something and dropped the book down his pants. Holding his hand against his leg where the book slid toward his knee, he glided out the main exit. As soon as he crossed over to his parking spot, out of view of the guards, he pulled the book from his pants. He smiled at Susanne, but she sat hunched over, playing games on her phone.

“Got it,” he said, handing it to her.

“That's it? You're not going to wrap it?”

He shrugged. Wrapping? Who needs wrapping? Maybe he had a plastic bag in the trunk. "I'll be right back."

"But—"

"I saw something else I liked."

He ran back into the bookstore, found another book and dropped it down his pants then hurried out to the car. He did this a few more times. On his last mission, the alarms went off, but he timed it just right and walked out with a whole bunch of people. Nobody questioned him. They checked some other guy's stuff. Suckers.

"You stole them, didn't you?"

"No."

"Elwood!" She slapped his arm. "I told you to quit that juvenile stuff."

"You like those earrings you wearing right now, don't you? Where do you think those came from?"

She touched her ears and rolled her eyes, but she smiled. "Enough already."

Even after all that shopping, the party had only been going for a half hour. About thirty minutes after something started was a normal time to show up somewhere. He calculated driving time and smoking time. They would get there forty-five minutes after the party started. Well, perfect. No problem. Susanne sang along with the radio while she shook the weed free from the pink plastic baggie. She rolled a joint, and the sun shined down on her smooth hair. He had four books to give Billy and a cake. The asphalt stretched out ahead, and he blared the music. He swerved through side streets, utilizing his favorite shortcuts, away from the strip malls and shopping centers. When he flew over a speed bump and smacked his head on the roof of the car, he didn't even feel pain.

“Goddamn, Elwood,” she cried. “Look what you made me do.” The joint fell apart. She licked the shake from the surface of her shiny purse so that it wouldn’t go to waste. Elwood watched her and thought about the other things she might lick.

“If you would hurry up and light that damn thing, maybe I could relax and chauffer us in peace.”

Susanne lit the joint and inhaled then blew the smoke up through the crack of the sunroof. “That sure is better,” she said.

“Now let me have some.”

She held the joint in front of his lips, and he pulled the smoke into his lungs. They might be late, but they’d be happy. The last time Elwood saw Billy had been a month ago, no maybe two months already, whenever it was that he finally got off parole. They’d gone to a bar to eat red beans and rice and watch the game. The monster had been all pissed off because Billy came home stinking like cigarettes. Secondhand smoke can kill, she’d told Elwood. She had a point about that one.

“Pussy smoke,” he said and laughed. Pussy smoke can’t kill.

“It’s not like it’s actually flavor-enhanced. Didn’t really touch anything. It was in plastic.”

All the houses looked the same, with long drives and carports. Elwood had only been there once since Billy and the monster had moved in with the step-dad and the step-kids in the cul-de-sac, but he thought he’d recognize their dumb “Welcome” sign. He couldn’t find it. It killed him that Billy had to grow up in a place where decent people could get lost because everything

looked the same. He looked for kids playing in the driveways. He thought she'd told him 903 Sycamore, but maybe not. He had a sick, sick, sick feeling that maybe the party wasn't actually today but a different day last week. His throat dried up, and he punched his fist against the dash.

Susanne told him to hush, but he punched again. She reclined her seat all the way back. She told him that if he continued to ignore her, she would ignore him. Fine. He didn't mind. Soon she fell asleep. Nap away, sweetheart, but he had to get there. "Think," he said. He pulled over. He knew he had their address on a piece of paper somewhere, the back of someone's business card maybe. He searched through his pockets. Not there. He looked in the glove compartment, wishing he'd paid his cell phone bill so he could call and get the address. Not there. He checked the floor of the car. Nothing. He rested his head against the steering wheel, so he could pull his thoughts into one place and remember the monster's address, but the hot sun felt good, too good.

"Wake up," Susanne said, shaking his shoulders.

"What? What?" he said. He wiped the drool from the corner of his mouth, hoping she hadn't noticed. The sun had set. "Shit!" He hit his head against the steering wheel then his fist against his head, but Susanne made him stop. "Forget it," he said. "We're not going. Let's go to the Quarter."

Susanne shook her head, biting her lip, studying him in that way that made him feel like a little kid again. Was she disappointed in him? Was she bored? He had to take care of her. He wouldn't drag her into his mess.

“I’m going to get a bottle of Jim,” he said. “Let’s you and me celebrate our way.”

“No,” Susanne said. “Let’s keep looking. I got a feeling.”

Elwood put the car into gear and pulled away from the curb. “But Susanne you don’t understand. It’s too late.” The monster would say things about him like she always did. She would tell Billy the bad stories and fail to mention how he, Elwood, actually rescued her, the monster, from her pop, the pervo. One time he even saved her from choking to death on her own vomit when she was high out of her fucking mind. She failed to mention how things were actually good for them in the beginning, how he could drum, and she could sing and together they could have gone places. They had some happy days, but then there was the kid and the “let’s not have an abortion and let’s get sober” and the “let’s get a divorce, no work it out, no divorce,” and the “let’s not talk to you forever because you had a little trouble with the law,” and then Turdface, the wedding, the new house, the visitation hours, and all that crap.

She only told Billy about the crap. All Billy had to go by was thirteen years of crap and little sprinkles of the truth when Elwood could get in there to prove he cared. “I fucked this one up, and Billy’s always going to have bad ideas about me. He’s going to believe that woman.”

“You baked that cake from scratch.”

Elwood whipped around and looked at his cake. The outside had melted. The cake sort of floated in a cardboard fish tank of frosting.

“Mother humper,” he said. “How could I be so stupid?” He drove down the desolate street. At the stop sign, he looked right and left. He was about to go, when he looked left again. “That’s it,” he said, pointing. “You found it.”

He gave Susanne a big smacker. The whole dumb time he’d been napping, Billy’d been celebrating his manhood right around the corner. While he slept, slobbering like a dog in a hot

car by the side of the road, other people had been sucking out the crawfish and slugging down cold drinks, growing up and getting along in the world.

Before he got out of the car, just to ensure that things would go just right with Billy, Elwood took a quick look in the rearview mirror, picked the crust from his eyes, and straightened his cap. His hair still shot straight down to his shoulders. Susanne applied more lip stuff. She looked prettier than ever.

Carrying the books under his arm and the cardboard box with the mushy cake, he marched forward, Susanne by his side. Gold-and-black crepe paper streamers for the Saints swirled around the iron railings, and helium birthday balloons bounced against the doorway. He peeked through the windows into the living room. The monster had found a nice, boring-looking life. He wished he could swipe her giant TV, but he could not care less about her doilies hanging on the walls. Who did she think she was? He knew where she grew up. He peered through another window straight back to the kitchen where people stood around drinking wine. He put his finger over his lips, signaling for Susanne to keep her trap shut. He crept back down the stairs and over to the side of the house.

Susanne's heels clicked on the concrete behind him, as she followed him alongside the house to the back. Empty paper plates cluttered the picnic table. An old lady sliced another piece from a store-bought, fancy-decorated birthday cake that was four times as big as his cake and had sugar footballs around the edges.

Turdface must have gone inside, but some guys with loafers and no socks swung pretend golf clubs. Their feet probably stank like a locker room. The monster came out of the house with another pitcher, followed by a cluster-fuck of ladies in flowery dresses. "White sangria, anyone?" she said. She stopped as soon as she caught sight of Elwood. Now everybody turned

to look his way. His throat felt dry and scratchy. He needed a drink, something cold. He backed up and turned quickly, crashing into Susanne, almost smashing the cake and knocking her over.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said to her. “I don’t see Billy. This isn’t a Billy party. This is a wine-o golfy-golf party, and I don’t have clubs!”

He could hear the monster coming toward him. “It’s about time.”

“Throw this damn thing in the garbage,” he said to Susanne, but she snatched the cake and wouldn’t let him dump it in the trash.

“Carol,” he said, whirling around. “Good to see you.” He faked a grin. When he looked down he could see the tattoo on her ankle, a snake and a heart. He had the same one on his back. She could put on a flower girl dress, but she couldn’t wear socks all summer. “We had some previous arrangements, but we’re here now, right?” he said. He laughed off her ugly expression.

“Can I talk to you?” she said. “Over there.” She backed him right up against the fence, where the guests couldn’t see them as easily. “I cannot believe how inconsiderate and selfish you are,” she hissed. “You can’t even get it together to make it to your son’s birthday party. You selfish man-child—”

“Whaa, whaa, whaa,” he said, rubbing his eye like a baby. “Heard that one. Where’s Billy?”

“He left with his friends.”

“Where’d he go?”

“Out.”

“Out where? I got something for him.”

Susanne held out the cake, but the monster didn't notice.

"Too late," the monster said, crossing her arms across her chest. "Please just go."

"How do you mean?"

"You promised you would be here."

"I'm here."

"Every time I give you another chance you find a way—"

"We got in a friggin car accident for chrissakes—Susanne, didn't we—"

Susanne opened her mouth, but before she could back him up the monster was in his face again.

"Shhhh, Elwood," she said, lowering her voice and talking all slow and calm, like she was the librarian talking to a retard. "I refuse to stand by and watch you continue to disappoint him. It's not fair to me. It's not fair to him."

"Can I please see my son?"

"No." She leaned forward. "Will you stop making a scene?"

"BUT HE'S MY MOTHERFUCKIN SON," he said, throwing the books down on the ground. That got him some respect. A few nerds popped their heads out and started quacking like a bunch of duckwads. Carol waved them away.

"Then pay child support," she said.

Still about the money, he thought. It's always about the money with her.

"Let's go, El," Susanne said, picking the books up. "Let's go home."

Elwood walked over and reached into the cooler on the ground near the picnic table. He popped open a can of beer and downed a nice long swig. He snatched the books from Susanne

and placed them on the table. “Contrary to popular belief,” he said. “I do care. These happen to be some educational books for my son. Make sure he gets them, you heard? You heard?”

“What’d you do?” she said. “Steal them?”

“Hell no! No Siree Bob I did not!”

“Great, Elwood. Fine. Please leave us alone.”

Elwood chugged down the rest and followed Susanne back out to the car. He kicked the side of the house a few times, but he’d tied his steel-toed boots to the balcony when he stepped in dog shit last week. His sneakers didn’t even nick the beige paint, and his foot hurt.

“That woman,” he said, getting into the hot car as Susanne put the cake in the back. He bashed his head against the steering wheel a few times. They’d been divorced longer than they’d ever been married. Weren’t they supposed to be friends by now? Helping each other out? Making good examples for Billy. “If I was Billy, where would I go? If I was turning thirteen, where would I go?”

“To the park?”

“I’m going to wait right here until he comes home. That’s what I’m going to do.”

They sat in the parked car.

“It’s hot in here, Elwood,” Susanne said.

He rolled down the windows then reached into the back for a High Life. Not cold, but not hot. He put one in a koozie for Susanne and turned on sports radio. He popped one open for himself, drank it slowly, and then cracked another.

Susanne won all the games on her phone, and he made a few imitations of the weather guy on the radio, which made her crack up. He could always bring the party with him. They didn’t need a backyard or a piñata to celebrate Billy’s birthday. Who needs a football cake?

Didn't they know he liked baseball better than football? They did, however, need Billy. He wished he had a bottle of Jim, so he could stop thinking about his son. After an hour or so, six beers later, he felt better. "Save the best for last, right? Isn't that what they say?"

Susanne didn't say anything.

Just when he was about to give up, Billy appeared. "That's him. Susanne, that's him on his bike. That's Billy. You see the one with the cap on? That's him!" He took her sweet cheeks in both hands and kissed her. "We just had to wait it out. You're the best, baby doll. Wait here." He jumped out of the car and reached in the back seat for his cardboard box. "Billy," he said as he waved and slammed the door shut with his foot.

Billy rode toward him under the uneven glow of the streetlights, still a half block away.

"Billy, it's me, your old man. I got something for you."

Elwood made his way half-running, half-walking toward Billy who had stopped biking and stayed on his bike seat, one leg down, talking with another boy on a bike, a shrimp of a kid. Billy wasn't that big yet either, but he would be.

"Billy," he called out. Billy held up a hand, sort of a wave, sort of a wait there, sort of a back off. Elwood stopped dead in his tracks. What? Billy didn't want his surprise? That couldn't be true. That couldn't be it. He strained to hear their conversation.

"Who's that?" the shrimp said.

Billy shrugged.

"Some weirdo," the shrimp said, hopping on his bike.

"See you tomorrow," Billy called as the boy sped away. Billy stepped off his bike, pulled his cap low over his brow and slouched toward Elwood, weaving his bike by the handlebars to the right then the left. He looked as if he might swerve right past Elwood, but

Elwood blocked his path.

“I know what you’re thinking. ‘What is this guy doing on my street?’ And you are right. You got a right to pretend you don’t know me because you a man now, but I got a right to be here because I’m your father.”

Billy looked up real slow and serious. Elwood had never seen him look like that.

“I got to tell you something,” Elwood said, pausing for dramatic effect. “Happy Birthday. That’s what I got to tell you.”

Billy gazed up at him, and his eyes looked sad. No, angry. Worse, like he felt sorry for him.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“I’m sorry we missed your little party. You know we got in an accident, and you wouldn’t believe all that traffic—”

“I have to go.” Billy swerved the handles toward the house.

“Come on,” Elwood continued. “We’re here now, right?”

That frown seized Billy’s whole face and wouldn’t let go. For a minute he looked old, like Elwood’s father looked when he sat in front of the TV, choking, dying of emphysema, his lungs gunked up. Let Billy never smoke. Let Susanne please stop that filthy habit, he said in his head, glancing up to the sky. Please let those demonic thoughts planted in Billy’s head by the monster dissolve so Billy stops wrenching his mouth and squinting his eyes like he’s about to squeeze out tears. Please let me have another chance, he thought.

“Wait,” he said before Billy walked away. “I know I don’t do things right. I don’t go places on time, drink too much, stay out too late, blah, blah, blah. Yup, that’s me.” He nodded toward the house. “I know that one over there hates my guts, but please, I’ll tell you one thing,

when it comes to you, I only want the best. I swear.” Elwood pulled off his cap, exposing his baldness, held his hand over his heart and closed his eyes for a second as if somebody was singing about stars and stripes. Then he hobbled down on his bad knee like he was proposing marriage or something. “I’ll be better,” he said. “I promise.” He pushed himself up to a standing position and brought his hand to his forehead, saluting like a soldier. He marched in place. Maybe he could get a laugh out of Billy. He usually could. “One two. One two. Straight and narrow for me. No more monkey business.”

Was a smile hiding behind Billy’s frownie face? Okay. Not funny. Elwood placed one hand on Billy’s shoulder, so he could look him in the eye. “And if you still don’t want me around, even me the angel version,” Elwood said, standing back and brushing one palm against the other the way his father always did to show he’d gotten the job done, “finito. I’m gone. I’ll leave you be.”

Billy bit his lower lip and squinted toward the house, like he was considering Elwood’s offer. His eyes softened a little, just a little.

“And look what I made you. Hold on,” Elwood said, running back to the car. Nobody could resist his cake. Billy knew it. Susanne knew it. The monster wished she knew it. Melted or not, no doubt about it, that cake would taste damn good with a nice cold glass of milk. He presented the box to Billy. “It’s a cake. You know what kind?”

Billy peered into the cardboard box.

“You can’t tell? It’s a titty-cake! Melted a little, but see that round part is the titty, and that little vanilla cupcake there with the strawberry right in the middle, that’s the nipple—”

“A titty-cake?” That plaster frown cracked into a smile. He was laughing at the cake, at him. No, with him. Didn’t matter either way because at least Billy’s smile was real. “You gave me a titty-cake?”

“You know why? Because you a man now.”

Billy looked at Elwood then over at Susanne in the car.

“This is the best kind of cake,” Elwood said like he was twenty-five again, back selling air conditioners, promoting a good product. “This kind here teaches you to respect a woman and appreciate their womanhood. Isn’t that right, baby doll?”

She waved, nodded, and stuck her head out the window. “Hello, pleased to meet you. Happy Birthday,” she said. “And that’s not all. Elwood brought you some gifts. They’re inside though.”

“Now, Billy,” Elwood said, “I got sports radio, and you can see about a billion stars through the star roof. All you need to do is run back in there past the monster—I mean your mother—and get us forks and milk. If you get a candle, you can make a wish. I got a lighter.”

Billy shook his head, almost like he couldn’t believe it, but he was still smiling. “A titty-cake.”

“Tell me,” Elwood demanded. “Who paints baseballs with glow-in-the-dark paint so we can play catch all night? And who lets you rig the potato shooter to the top of the car up over by the levee? Who else brings you a homemade titty-cake?”

“Only you,” Billy answered.

RESONANCE

Colette has a tattoo. Years have passed, but when a first date or new dancers in the company ask her what it means, the question brings to mind the way they always kept the windows open, even in the winter, but with the blinds closed so that shafts of light penetrated the darkness of that second floor apartment; how they stayed in bed, naked, listening to the sounds of the East Village—drunk couples fighting, dogs barking, boys on their skateboards weaving through the cars, loud techno beats from the Egyptian hookah bar and the occasional abrasive honking of a car alarm; and how in the summer, there was thunder, rain, the swish of tires on wet pavement.

When Mourad, a regular at the health food store where Colette worked, bought vitamins and said he'd like to henna her hands, she wasn't sure what to expect. At his apartment the next day, he fed her olives, hummus, spicy carrots, lentils, white wine, and later something sweet his cousin had sent from somewhere far away. She liked how he soaked up olive oil with the pita then used it to push food from their shared plate into his mouth. So she did the same. After their meal, Mourad painted beautiful, intricate patterns across her hands, shoulder blades, and feet. Above her ankle, he drew a symbol of an open hand with an eye in its center. "A *hamsa*," he said. "To keep away the evil eye."

He inked his way across her white, freckled skin. Then his tongue found its way, and Mourad became Colette's "Moroccan lover." At least, Colette's friends, the ones left over from college, called him that. She didn't correct them. Morocco. They didn't understand her anymore. She knew they talked about her, wondering why she was with someone who spoke broken English, someone fourteen years older. This is my life, she thought, so I'd better live it the way I want.

Colette usually rehearsed with her modern dance company after work. They practiced in a room on the seventh floor of a brick building in the middle of the block where West Third becomes Great Jones before it becomes East Third. The view captivated her: the smoke stacks, the ant people, the traffic spilling into lower Manhattan, and especially the empty hole in the skyline where the towers should have been. The choreographer encouraged rolling around on the floor. They improvised monologues about those who were being kicked out of the Lower East Side by gentrification. They formed a close-knit family, but when rehearsal ended, she slipped away to Mourad's cozy den and left their world for his.

He gave her a key to his place three weeks after they started dating. She often found him hunched over the kitchen table, his brow furrowed in concentration, repairing a radio or gluing together shards of a broken vase he had rescued from the garbage of the building where he worked as a doorman. She watched the delicate movements of his calloused hands then stretched on his oriental carpet, another one of his found treasures, or flipped through a magazine until he lifted his gaze and smiled. "Fixed it. Like new," he would say, triumphant, and they would go out. Walking for hours, they made the city their museum. "Look," Mourad said one night, at the same time Colette pointed to a plastic bag dancing down the street. They laughed. She loved how they both savored small moments of beauty.

When she twisted her ankle during a disastrous rehearsal, Mourad went to her apartment. He elevated her leg and held the ice pack for twenty minutes every hour. “I will take care of you,” he said, taking her foot firmly in his hands.

“I’m fine,” she said.

“No.” His voice took on a quiet and serious tone. “Slow down. You push too much, and you hurt yourself.”

He brought her arnica, prepared a steaming footbath, and made her call in sick. He wouldn’t let her leave her apartment or put weight on the swollen ankle for three days. Being still felt torturous, but he was right. Her ankle healed quickly, and that short time of quiet allowed her to reflect on their relationship. Mourad was older and not as well educated as the man she had imagined for herself, but he made her calm in a way that Michael or Zach or David never had.

After her ankle healed, their dates turned into something real, and they fell into having that serious talk about commitment. But before they could get very far, he kissed her neck, her eyes, her mouth, and the ticking clock was the only sound.

“I need water,” he said, as he abruptly pushed off the couch, shaking his head like a dog waking from a deep sleep. “We was flying to the moon, and you forgot the water.”

Colette translated. Kissing her was flying to the moon. And he was thirsty.

“You have a lot in your mind.” Holding up fingers, he counted on his hand all of her problems. He didn’t say it as a judgment but more to acknowledge that her indecisive nature puzzled him. This job or that job? This apartment or that apartment? This dance class or that one? All she had ever wanted was to be a dancer. She had finally found her way into a company that was experimental and absurdist enough to make her feel as though she had not yet

given up on her dreams, even if she would never pay off her student loans or impress her mother. They might go on tour! But that was down the road, a distant possibility. In the meantime, she worked at a health food store, selling green super foods, hope and miracles in tiny bottles, and promises, *natural* promises for better vision, improved immunity, and cleaner kidneys. She could walk to work. The pieces were coming together.

“Doesn’t bother me or nothing if I get close to you,” he said, which she understood to mean that he liked her and was willing to henna her hands forever. “But you choose.” Mourad made eye contact in a city where most people looked away. He made her laugh without trying, and he didn’t mind the rigidity of her morning ritual: wheat grass, flax seed oil, vitamins, supplements, Kundalini yoga breathing and Pilates abs. Counting her equivocations on his fingertips, he made her problems seem silly and small. Her vanity amused him. This was a good, though frightening, thing. After so many years of self-absorption, running away from one thing only to get close to something else and repeat the act, she said, “Okay. I’ll move in.”

The next weekend, he helped her transport her pots and pans, suitcases of clothes, and the few pieces of furniture she owned to his place. He built shelves for her books and cleared space in his closet for her clothes. With two incomes, Mourad’s rent-stabilized apartment became finally truly affordable. They went out to dinner often. Arm in arm walking through the East Village, over to Tompkins Square Park, after sushi or a drink at Café Lucia where Mourad knew the owner Ziad, they moved as one. Sometimes, though, in the early hours of morning his body felt thin and cold. She could sense all the life he had already lived and pressed her body close to his, knowing she could never catch up. “I’m an old man,” he said once. “I’ve seen so much.”

Maybe they would never have children. Maybe that was okay. They would fuck; they forgot time. In the beginning, they were happy.

*

Mourad sat in silence, except for the buzz of a fly, arms cuffed behind his back in a Brooklyn jail. He'd been arrested, but he didn't know why. His lunch break at work would be over by now. He tried to stand, but he was tied to the chair. His face throbbed, and he couldn't touch where the pain originated. No windows, no light. He forced his chair forward, and metal scraped against concrete. His bare feet felt cold.

Metal slammed against metal. A door. A beeping alarm-like sound followed, like the security system at the condominium where he worked. At work that noise meant that the basement door had been left open and that most likely Xavier was smoking marijuana. Whenever Xavier smoked, the day became a slow, messy puzzle for Mourad. Once, he found Xavier in the bathroom holding the mop like a microphone, singing into the mirror. When Mourad laughed, Xavier held the broomstick across Mourad's throat to shut him up. Xavier had only been joking. Mourad tried to laugh, but his Adam's apple hurt all day.

Mourad's throat hurt now. He was thirsty, and his legs had fallen asleep, but a rattling ache in his brain kept him from drifting off. He waited in the dark room for so long that he began to imagine that he had died and this was eternity. The smell of the room reminded him of the basement at work, the same bleached-brick dampness. He missed his storage locker in the basement, his uniform, Xavier, the rich people and their junk.

Finally, after what seemed like days but was probably only hours, the lights came on all at once, fluorescent. They vibrated. Mourad closed his eyes quickly, and a heavy boot kicked his foot.

“Get up,” a voice said.

*

When Mourad didn't come home for dinner, Colette called his cell phone. When he didn't pick up, she made excuses. Maybe he stayed late at work to help someone fix a dishwasher or hang curtains. Maybe that's why he couldn't answer his phone. This happened sometimes. When, after three more hours, he still had not returned, she paced and made short wheezing exhalations—ha, he, ha—to calm her mind with her breath. Her insides ached with hunger, anger, and fear. He's out with friends, she told herself. He drank too much. He'll be home later. When, hours into the night, he still hadn't returned, she decided he was with another woman. She flipped channels, seeing nothing, waiting for his return. She fell asleep for a few hours on the couch. When the morning light shot through the cracks in the blinds, she awoke to find that Mourad still wasn't home. Only then did she consider calling the police.

Instead, she hurried to the café and marched past the cash register. Mourad's friends stood together in the kitchen, waking up over cups of coffee.

“Where's Mourad?”

They shrugged, irritated by her demands. Tareq raised his eyebrows, smiled his signature grin and made jokes about strip clubs.

“He didn't come home last night.”

“Really?” Ziad asked. Tareq also shook his head and frowned. Tareq and Ziad exchanged a look, spoke rapidly in Arabic, and threw up their arms, frustrated with Colette for not knowing more, frustrated with each other. They decided that Tareq, who drove a taxi, would check the building where Mourad worked. Colette called in sick and joined him. Ziad contacted Mourad's cousin in Queens. Cell phone numbers were exchanged. Colette wanted to call the police, but the guys said to wait. He would turn up. Turn up? Like a missing sock?

*

The guards left Mourad alone for a few hours, and his mind returned to that morning, waking up next to Colette. Before work, he had stopped by the café for a quick espresso and a piece of bread with butter, said hello to Tareq and Ziad. Ziad didn't charge him. Mourad had said he'd be back later. He wondered how a day that began the same as all his days had so quickly turned violent.

At work, Mourad had entered his basement storage unit where he kept his belongings. A wall of metal mesh separated him from the rest of the storage units. He had greeted Xavier, the maintenance guy who reminded Mourad of a cartoon dragon. His hair was twisted in wild knots, and his skin as thick as the scaly surface of a reptile, but it was the fire in his eyes and the tattoos of flames over his bulging, brown biceps that made Mourad imagine mythical creatures. As usual, Xavier moaned along with the R&B singer, his headphones vibrating. Whenever Xavier recognized a line, he sang loud and strong, but like a woman.

“Whassup Moo-rat?” Xavier had said, as always. Mourad never corrected his pronunciation.

Xavier had talked about women and drinks and the money he spent over the weekend. He pulled out a magazine with photos of women, shaved bare, heads back, and mouths open. Mourad had been grateful for Xavier's unusual friendliness. He needed his help. The widow on the eleventh floor was moving. If he could carry the organ, he could have it. “If you don't have nothing to do,” Mourad had said, “there is something I want to move.”

Xavier rolled his eyes, and Mourad offered to buy him lunch, Korean barbeque. Xavier held up his fist; Mourad punched it. Xavier's hand opened like a small explosion, the kind the rap stars and basketball players made on TV, a good sign. Mourad stripped down to his undershirt before putting on his crisp, white shirt and the wooly jacket with brass buttons. His

job was to wear a uniform, guide and protect, smile politely, with his lips closed, hiding his coffee-stained, crooked teeth. After work, when he laughed about something with his friends, he smiled the way he wanted, showing his teeth, despite his teeth, with all of his teeth.

In Algeria, Mourad smiled that way. He had studied a bit of everything; he could build boats, fish, cook, play the drums, fix bicycles, cut hair, cover the floor in mosaic tiles, paint, henna a woman's hand, and construct an entire house, but in Manhattan he was only the man who opens the door. Now, he was not even that.

Except for the organ, it had been a day like all the rest.

Tareq waited in the cab because he couldn't find a parking spot. At the door of the building, Colette hesitated. She realized how much she didn't know about her "Moroccan Lover." He lived an entire Upper East Side life, every day, without her. The front desk was empty.

"Excuse me," she said to the big guy in a janitor's uniform who was cleaning a mirror. His dreadlocks covered his headphones. She thought he was ignoring her.

"Excuse me," she said again, finally touching his arm, resting her fingers on his scary tattoo. "Excuse me. Have you seen Mourad?"

He pulled the headphones off. "What?"

"I'm looking for Mourad."

"You mean Moo-rat? He not in today."

"But he was here yesterday?"

“Made me move a piano thing all the way to the basement, and then he took off,” he said, annoyed. “And I got this.” He lifted up his shirt to reveal a back brace. “He still owes me lunch for that shit.”

“Can I see the piano?” she asked.

He sighed. “Why?”

“I don’t know. He’s missing.”

Now he seemed curious. He led her to the freight elevator, and they rode down together. He stared at her breasts for a moment too long.

“How you know Moo-rat?” he said.

“I live with him.”

He seemed blown away by this information. She followed him through the cavernous basement over to the piano, which was actually an organ, housed inside a locked storage unit. Colette looked up, silently asking if he would open it for her. He shrugged. So she reached in her purse and offered him a twenty.

She played a few notes and remembered a story she once told Mourad about singing in the choir at her grandmother’s church. The organ was out of tune, and a few keys were missing, but she knew he was probably saving it for her birthday. She opened his desk drawer and found a photo they took at a street fair in Soho. He wouldn’t go away like this without a good reason. He was the most reliable person she knew.

Later, she walked to the East River. *Bring him home*, she begged the icy waters.

*

Mourad, released from the chair, catapulted to the floor. His legs were numb, so he stumbled forward to rise. “Wake up!” the guard said, as he slammed Mourad against the concrete wall. Another guard, a woman, laughed. Mourad was dead, and this was his punishment.

“You know why you’re here,” the male guard said. “Don’t you?”

He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. The guard slammed him against the wall once more then unlocked the handcuffs, and Mourad massaged his sore wrists. The guard ordered him to strip and hit him swiftly across the shoulder with his baton.

Mourad shook his head. Everything was wrong. The lights hurt his eyes. “I can’t. I can’t,” he whispered, but he managed to peel off his shirt, his pants, and his underwear. His shoes and socks were already gone. He remembered placing his wallet, a hand-me-down from a wealthy lawyer, in a plastic box and handing it over, but that seemed so long ago.

“Turn around,” the guard said. “Spread your legs.”

Mourad knew what was happening now. Torture. He had heard these stories from friends, friends of friends, stories of abuse, rumors. Not here in America. Not him. He was legal. He had papers. He paid taxes. He had been in this country for almost fifteen years. Ask anyone. Ask the Pakistani who ran the Indian store on Second Avenue where Mourad regularly bought incense to mask the must of the carpet in the living room. The man always said, “My friend. What can I do for you, my friend?” And so Mourad went back even when the man charged him too much because Mourad liked that feeling of being in a place where people spoke as friends.

“Spread your legs, you Arab motherfucker.”

The rest was a blur. They forced him to pry apart his butt cheeks and bend over. Yes, he was Muslim, but only by accident, only because his parents and his friends were, only because it

was a part of life, like learning to swim. When he moved to New York, he left religion behind. He fasted for Ramadan each year, but only to make up for all the drinking and casual sex, only because it kept him connected to his country. Tradition, not love of God, made him hungry for one month every year. But here, bent over like an animal, humiliated, now he found God. Now he believed and prayed silently. *Allah Akbar*. Please, help me.

In Algeria, as a boy, he murmured the same words when he was pushed, along with all the other boys, from a cliff into the Mediterranean Sea thirty feet below. This was how he learned to swim. When he told this story in this country, people laughed. They didn't believe him. Colette told him that most people learned to swim indoors in swimming pools with paddleboards. He thought of the East River. Mourad went there during breaks at work because he liked to see water every day if only for a minute or two, if only to remind him there was more to life than bricks, cement, walls, doors, elevators. Would he ever dive into the ocean again? And Colette. Colette—a nice French name for an American girl, easy to pronounce. Would he ever see her again? He thought, legally, he was granted one phone call.

For twenty-four days, Mourad waited in a bright box. He lived inside a bubble of glowing, pulsing, radiating, fluorescent light. He closed his eyes and saw for a second the colors of the real world. He thought of his apartment, a museum of salvaged goods, and his bookshelves, a library of titles in a language he could barely read or write. The walls were someone else's colors—burnt sienna Colette called it, but it was orange. She called the bathroom mint green. Mint? He thought of the leaves. Mint leaves: alive, green, furry, like the creatures that become butterflies, not the faded-toothpaste-film covering his walls. This country mixed up colors.

But if he closed his eyes for too long, the dogs barked or the guard turned on the radio or he was beaten or pushed or made to stand. For one hour every day, they took him to another room and made him run with his ankles tied to chains. They interrogated him. They asked questions about his friends and family back home. When he answered wrong, which was always, they pulled the chains, and the floor flew out from under him. He smashed into the ground. With his hands tied behind his back, there was nothing to brace his fall except bruised bones.

They were obsessed with his connections to Hamburg. He realized over time that they associated him with the 9/11 hijackers. Seven of the nineteen hijackers spent time in Hamburg. Mourad had been to Hamburg once to visit his brother. Having this brother made him guilty. He felt guilty, wished he'd never gone to Germany, wished he never had a brother.

His last day of freedom played itself over and over. He thought of the long walk he had taken down Second Avenue to the Korea Town Diner. When he had arrived, he only had time for something fast, to go. He ordered Xavier's favorite barbeque dish and, for himself, filled the Styrofoam container with the lunch special—miso soup, pork dumplings, tender strips of beef, *kimchi* and fried scallion pancakes from the buffet. While he waited in line to pay, he looked out the window at the bank decorated with flags he didn't recognize: a red, white, blue and yellow flag, a green, red and white flag. He remembered listening to the Mexican radio station in the Korean fast food restaurant full of French tourists, and wished he had appreciated watching the indistinguishable, unrecognizable masses walking by outside the window. His brown skin was the same as theirs, his foreign tongue as strange as theirs, his love of New York as genuine.

He repeated *Allah Akbar* silently now. He counted to one hundred over and over. He did this to keep sane, but he was sleep-deprived, and the walls began to sing the music from his childhood. Colette came to him in his daydreams, soaring and falling, as he'd seen her do on stage. The concrete bricks, the lines of the tiles on the floor danced and swayed. He moaned sometimes, loud like Xavier had when he sang with all his heart, for attention, intentionally, so that the dogs barked and the guards yelled because at least then he knew he was still alive.

Colette thought Mourad looked like a ghost. He was broken. He sat, his hands limp and soft in his lap, in the same straight-backed chair in the kitchen where Colette had once waited with outstretched arms for Mourad to paint her with dye. When Colette jumped up and turned on the radio, he flinched. She turned it off, but the silence and darkness—he couldn't stand the overhead light now—were killing her. He pressed his temples with his thumbs, and she wondered, for a second, if maybe he really was a dangerous criminal, a terrorist. She hated herself for allowing the thought.

Eventually, Tareq and Colette, with the help of Colette's lawyer friend, had found Mourad at the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn. It took a few weeks to process the paperwork, prove his citizenship and free him. There was a mix-up; another Mourad should have been in his place. Mourad did have a suspicious brother in Hamburg, but not suspicious enough to warrant an arrest. Colette knew that Mourad was initially held in solitary confinement as a precautionary measure and was told little else. The lawyer suspected Mourad had a strong case and advised filing a lawsuit.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked, but Mourad, the one who always looked her in the eye, kept his gaze down and shook his head. She was both relieved and offended that he didn’t want to share. Though she wanted him to feel comfortable enough with her that he could tell her anything, she believed his silence meant that he still valued their relationship enough to keep what happened out of it, that he was still, even in his weakened state, trying to protect her. “Do you want to talk to someone else about it? You know, like a shrink?”

“I want to forget it,” he said, with such exhaustion. “I don’t understand.” He finally looked up, and the bewildered, fearful expression in his eyes broke her heart.

“Me either.”

They walked over to the East River. She could see his eyes fill with longing for the sea. He told her of the squid, the starfish, the clear waters and the sharp diamond rays of sunlight. She stared at the slate, steady currents of the East River, so unlike the sea. Now, he spoke often of Algeria and ran his finger around the globe in their bedroom, but she believed that if she loved him enough, he would stay.

When they went to bed, Mourad slept on his side turned away from Colette and when she wrapped her body around his and held him, he kissed her hands but nothing more. She felt that his essence had slipped away and left only bones and tired skin. It wasn’t that he didn’t smile or try, because he did, but he was distracted watching the dance of lights behind the blinds or the fan swivel from side to side—always half there and half far, far away.

“Where are you going?” she snapped once, when he walked out the door and down the hall leaving the TV on, and the refrigerator door open. “Hello? Where are you?”

“To check the mail,” he explained, massaging one thin hand with the other, as if trying to infuse them with feeling. She could sense he was trying to come back into his body, but even after two weeks, she couldn’t find him, the real Mourad. Each day she missed him more.

“I’m sorry,” she said, taking back her words. “I’m so sorry.” After all he’d been through, how could she be harsh with him? She felt responsible, as if she’d deceived him.

Mourad shut the door, and Colette steamed kale for dinner.

His first day back to work Mourad stood in the basement looking at the rescued organ.

“Welcome back, Moo-rat,” Xavier said as he walked by and gently body checked Mourad. Xavier kept talking, but Mourad whipped around and caught Xavier’s thick, cobra neck in his hands; he squeezed, blocking out Xavier’s words. If he could only shut him up.

Xavier, in one swoop, knocked Mourad to the floor.

“Whoa. What the fuck, Little Man?” Xavier said.

Mourad pulled himself up and escaped out the basement door. If he stayed here, he would hurt people. The crack of sky through the buildings was as bold and blue as the Mediterranean, lucid and light-filled. I am free, he thought, so I’d better live. *Allah Akbar*.

When Mourad disappeared for the second time, Colette knew he was gone for good. The organ, shellacked and elegant, waited for her in the center of the living room when she came home from work. She cried immediately.

“Yes,” Tareq said, when Colette called. “He went back to Algeria.”

“But how do you know?”

“He told me.”

“Did he say anything else?”

“He missed the sea,” Tareq offered.

More than that, she supposed, he could not forgive such a colossal mistake. Perhaps his body simply followed where his heart had already fled. She ran her hands across the varnish. Etched into the wood in the back of the organ, she found a message: “*To Colette. Love, M.*” and next to it an open hand with an eye in its center. But that wasn’t enough. She wanted him with her always, so Colette snapped a photo of the hamsa with her digital camera and went to the tattoo parlor around the corner.

With each painful pulsation of the needle, she felt the barriers burn away. She was summoning him, bringing him closer to her, drawing him inside through her skin, into her blood, so that his story would become her story. The tattoo artist wiped the droplets of blood from her ankle then continued. Later she peeled back the bandage and ran her fingers over the distinct lines and healed scabs. The hand seemed to wave hello and goodbye at the very same time, telling the beginning of the story and the end.

THE GREATEST BOAT BED EVER

Eliot's notebook was missing. "I know you took it," Eliot said to his roommate Harrison, a retired yet gifted computer programmer turned experimental scientist who looked like Einstein and quoted the genius whenever possible. From the pot on the stove, Eliot shoveled spoonfuls of black beans directly into his mouth and scanned the room. His notebook had to be somewhere amidst the empty bottles, newspapers, bug collections, mouse carcasses and Harrison's other experiments gone awry.

"That's dumb," Harrison said, tugging at his white beard. "Why would I want your notebook?"

Eliot had been working on an experiment of his own. Ever since the news that his father was not in fact dead, but actually a total mystery, even to his mother, he'd been doggedly pursuing a theory of his regarding relationships. For weeks now, he'd been trying to use the power of his mind—telepathy, psychic powers, lucid dreaming, call it what you will—to pierce through The Fog, a term which he'd coined himself. The Fog summed up for him a problem he'd observed with human beings. None of them, himself included, could glimpse with certainty the underlying order of the universe, The Truth as he called it, because they were all caught up in searching and wanting love, addicted to it really. They all ran around like a bunch of junkies, and did it make the world a better place? No. Did it make people happy? Not at all. The majority

of human beings, then, functioned in a state of mind malaise, idiocy: The Fog. He was convinced he could get everything he needed strictly through dreams, imaginative visualizations and ESP if he could only properly condition his mind.

His project mostly entailed going to sleep and waking up. The magic happened in those few breaths between wakefulness and slumber, or so he had read. He took copious notes on his dream life and believed that with practice his brain would function in a hypnagogic state throughout his daily life, and he'd finally be free, out from under the clouds. As of yet, he'd only been able to maintain this constant state of bliss, ease and contentment in his sleep. He therefore slept as much as possible. He was aware, early in the process, that his plan was ill-conceived and had some connections to new age ideas about enlightenment, but it was his only plan.

"Thumb war?" Harrison asked, holding out his thumb.

"Can't," Eliot said. He opened the refrigerator, kitchen cabinets, and a chest of drawers looking for his notebook. "No time. I've got to find my notebook. It's full of data."

"Give it up. The damn thing is gone."

"Goodnight, Harrison," Eliot said. "I'm off to work."

"You mean sleep?"

"Same thing."

"It's only eight o'clock."

"And every minute you keep talking is a minute that stops me from penetrating reality.

Do you want me to have a breakthrough or not?"

"Reality is merely an illusion," Harrison said.

"Precisely."

"Albeit a persistent one."

"Stop with the Einstein," he said even though he knew Harrison would never stop.

"My mind is my laboratory," Harrison said.

"Enough."

"Words of a genius."

Outside the window of Eliot's bedroom, there was a high-beam construction spotlight. Workers were digging tunnels underground, and they illuminated their equipment with enormous, hanging lights. Eliot could have bought curtains or put his sheet over the window, but instead he configured a tarp from one wall to another, a partition of sorts that created a black hole. Eliot crawled into his cave, his fort. Alone at last. Stacks of books piled up around his mattress, which he kept on the floor.

Eliot had a hairy roommate, some hobbies, habits—good ones and bad ones, but overall his life lacked something. Or everyone else lacked something? He knew his likes: ethnic food, darkness, the color green, books. His hates: long walks on the beach, anything pink, small dogs, authority figures. However, he had absolutely no idea what he was expected to do or achieve. His days consisted of waking up, going to work, and sleeping, over and over. Characters in books could take action, unlike Eliot, who, trapped in the bowels of the Lower East Side, passed his days with a petulant old war vet.

Eliot stretched in his bed, unzipped his pants, wiggled out of them so he wore only his

boxers, closed his eyes and summoned his only memory of his father—based on a photograph, not an actual memory. In this image, a tall man in a ragged suit with a babyish, round beer belly and a mullet smoked a cigarette and leaned against a car. This man, who looked fantastic even with that blob for a belly, was his father: El, short for Eliot, his mother had assumed, but had never been sure. Maybe it was Elroy? She couldn't remember. For years his mother had lied to him. He hadn't died in a car accident, as she'd told him. There had been a concert, a one-night stand, and by the time she'd sobered up enough to realize she was pregnant, well, it was too late. She could picture the man but had no idea where he might be or what had become of him. He was as good as dead, right? Did it matter? "Are you sorry that I told you?" she'd asked.

They had not spoken since.

Eliot put on his headphones and let his mind wander before disturbing thoughts about his mother ruined his meditation. Melodies of trickling water and wind instruments filled his ears. This first step, creating an extended layer of consciousness, challenged him the most. Alaska. He imagined Alaska. Wolves. Fur hides. Fur hats. Snow drifts. Eskimos. Trekking across the powdery, white acres of land. Powdered sugar. Donuts. Coffee. Beans. Green beans. Gardens. Life. Babies. Baby girl. What did a baby girl have to do with his father? What could it mean? A subconscious message from beyond? With telepathic communication, Eliot discovered, he never knew if he was missing the signs, or worse, if there were no signs. He closed his eyes again. Ocean. Waves. Water. He floated.

He woke to the sound of percussion. Rain. In the rain, beneath the rain, he found another

sound, chimes. The ping of metal, a raindrop against the window unit air conditioner. It sounded like Miss Godfrey's music class. In first grade they sat on circular orange carpets, and Miss Godfrey with her long, beautiful hair parted in the middle bowed down over the xylophone. Ping. Ping. Ping. Her hair closed over her face like a curtain.

But now something was calling him, the chimes, rain playing across the metal. "Come on," it said. "Come on." And the sound went on. Come on. Come on. Come on. I'm coming, he thought. Yes, I'm coming, and a jet flew over the building, swallowing the music. Sometimes this happened. He awoke and could not go back to sleep. He rolled over on his side to check his alarm: 2:32 A.M.

Inside the core of the earth, he thought, there must be fire. Beneath the rock and sediment and sludge and layer upon layer of protection, inside all of that, the earth's center consists of hot, cooked metallic mud. And here he stands, no lies down, upon it all, in his bed, listening to the rain, hearing it, thinking thoughts, wondering about his day, the people at the bookstore, the books they buy, the words they read, the thoughts they have while lying in their beds. The city throbbed and hummed with all the books, the words, all those thoughts. Where to put them? What did they mean? What came of them? Buildings. Bridges. Space ships. But what of it? What did it matter that long ago there were dinosaurs? And now people walked around with little, white buds in their ears, filled with music, lyrics, more words, more thoughts. But did those dinosaurs have thoughts? What did they think? What are thoughts? Do we make them or do they come to us and how do we catch them, hold onto them, retain them? Oh, why did he always have to think so much about such things? Why did he care?

The sound of his heart beat in his chest. Did the earth have a heart? Did it beat away?

Did it melt? Did the earth's heart become hot, cooked mud or was it always that way? Perhaps the earth had once been alive, like us alive? Flesh. Blood. Ticking. A heart. And what if now, it's dying. The trees, its veins, are shriveling. The rivers, its arteries, have flooded now with toxic water. The lakes, the mountains, the vast deserts, once thriving, are now shrinking, the verdant past covered in concrete and black smoke. All of it could be true. Why not? Or was the past set? It happened like this. One and then two and then three. No, not for Eliot. No, existence was far more malleable than that. He didn't used to think, for example, of his mother as the enemy. At one time the things she'd done for him had seemed kind, noble, needed. Now, even the time she had peeled his tongue off the stop sign at the park, even that seemed another way of killing him slowly, destroying the real Eliot, trying to make him helpless and dependent on love for his survival. He didn't need her. He didn't need anyone. Just himself. A whole other world existed in his dreams, in his mind.

He could imagine his past, see it unfolding, unraveling, revealed. He could unwrap it and inspect it now, or watch it flash like slides, click, click, click, projected onto the walls of his eyelids: his mother, his toy truck, the gardenias, his blue-and-white baseball pants, blood, stop signs, the dog, his college roommate's graphic novel collection, the library, the cafeteria with the burnt toast smell, and then the bookstore. There was nothing he needed. Nothing he desired from outside his window. Miss Godfrey, a memory, his childhood. Of course, he went to school, of course they sat on tiny carpets, of course, it all came back to him, but did it count? What did it mean? What was the point? How could he be so aware of himself? Who is the he that is thinking? These questions nagged at him.

People, he thought. People think. That's the problem. People are the problem. They

cause chaos. They drill into the earth and pull up black liquid, gallons of gunk, oil to make things go because it's a good idea to go places in cars and carry food in trucks and turn on lights with bright beams. People are the ones who murder innocent rats just trying to get some dinner, but dress their dogs in sweaters and let their cats pee in boxes of store-bought gravel. People fly over the clouds and dump retired trains into the heart of the ocean. People hurt babies. People break hearts. People destroy what they touch. People think. People think too much, too big, or too small, much too small.

If only he could stop the spinning. The ideas. He could not stop them or change them. They came, and he corrected them. He collected them in his notebook. "Harrison is an ugly pig," he thought, and then, "No, not true," or "So, are you, Eliot," or "Pigs? People are pigs. All of them, pigs. Hungry, hungry, hungry. Me, me, me. Couldn't they see that the earth was only a pigsty? Mine, mine, mine." He'd figured it out. He could see the order. Oh, the purpose of life is to find God. Oh, the purpose of life is to love. Oh, the purpose of life is to get rich and be a great success. Oh, no, no, no, he thought. It's me. It's what I want. I want. I want. I want. The purpose of life is to get what you want. That's the only connector between us. The only thing that brings us together as individuals is that I want what I want, and you want what you want. That's it. That's all we share.

The thought, now that Eliot had finally put his finger on it, weighed heavily on him, almost suffocating him. Could it be true? That wanting was the only thing we all shared? I want to be happy. That's what people say, in the end, when you ask them. What do you want? I want to be happy. But what would make him happy? Finding his notebook? Meeting his father in his dreams? Nothing. The key was to not want. He would not dare desire anything

anymore ever again.

"Has anyone seen a green composition notebook?" Eliot asked his co-workers in the staff lounge. Already, he'd forgotten his resolution from the night before. He needed his notebook. It was a need, not a want, he told himself.

They looked dumbstruck. Perhaps because he rarely spoke. He asked again, and they shook their heads no. One girl pulled on her sports bra underneath her sundress and suggested he stick a note on the bulletin board near the bathrooms. She released her finger, and the line of spandex snapped against her rib cage. Eliot wrote a note, but who would read it?

Feeling morose, he went back to the Industrial Revolution section and, just to look busy, he put back the books he had dumped on the floor. He would never find his notebook. Not to mention, the loser who lifted his lab journal had access to the inner workings of his mind. How could he go on? Someone had his notebook. Someone plotted his destruction. He would be found out and ridiculed for his bizarre subconscious desires, for his analysis of those bizarre desires, for his crude sketches of dreamed visions, for his hopes of a life that reached far beyond a four-block radius, for his strange thoughts of things he had not seen or were yet to be.

Harrison had been right again. He'd warned Eliot to keep track of his stuff, and Eliot had ignored him as usual. Now he would pay the price. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. He let his forehead fall into the bookshelf. "Am I dreaming?" he asked himself. He did this throughout the day, so that the habit would occur even while sleeping and he could therefore answer, "yes!" and enter a lucid dream. He also tested the boundaries of the material world. The bang didn't hurt,

so he did it again until he felt a dull throb. He rubbed his forehead. How desperate and sad that the only thing he cared about could so easily be wrested from his grasp!

Eliot took his lunch break early and went to the bar on the corner where he could buy chicken fried rice and a beer for a \$3.50. The dim bar, almost empty at this hour, which he liked, made him feel slightly better, especially since the bar maid, who was hard of hearing and wore a housedress, didn't try to talk to him. He could eat away his worries and work up a more optimistic attitude. He *had* filled out the address/phone number section in the front of the notebook. Someone would find it. Someone would turn it in. Someone out there had to have a heart.

Eliot watched Harrison read. His eyes jumped around the page. He slipped his glasses on and off. Paragraph one, skip to the bottom. Paragraph two, skip to the penultimate. Tufts of yellowing white hair protruded every which way from underneath his army cap.

"The Dow goes up. The Dow goes down," Harrison mumbled, holding his magnifying glass over the paper. "This is the greatest economic crisis since '87." He jotted down yes and no on a scrap of paper, what to sell, what to divest from this fund or that fund, what to move into stocks and replace with bonds.

"No!" Harrison cried out. "I lost it all!"

Eliot sighed. It wasn't real money. Harrison lived off a veteran's stipend, but his second favorite activity—doing science experiments was his first, of course—was playing with pretend billions. This time he had made bad bets, risky bets, and he had lost. Harrison popped a few

more pink antacid pellets in his mouth, belched loudly, and cleared his throat.

"We should collaborate on something," Harrison said.

"We collaborate on communal living. We collaborate on paying utilities. Isn't that enough?" Eliot mashed his cold, stringy mountain of Ramen noodles with his fork.

"We should start dating."

"Dating? I wouldn't date you—"

"Not each other! Oh God. Are you kidding me? Not us date—"

"Even if the world were covered in molten lava and rats were eating my ankles and serpents were swimming inside my intestines and there were nobody else on earth, but you—"

"Us date other people. Like on the Internet. We should go Internet dating."

"No way."

"But as a team. I don't want to go out on a blind date by myself. And I'm sure you don't either. Together we're attractive. What you lack in maturity, I make up for—"

"In white hair and flatulence."

"What I'm saying, my friend, Eliot, dear boy, if you will hear me out, is that I believe such an endeavor would be advantageous to both of us to break us out of our shells, so to speak.

You've clearly been in a rut—"

"Me?"

"All this business about finding your soul."

"I never said soul. I said my father."

"But the visions with the pumping hearts—well, anyway, I'd like to put you in charge of setting up our account. I'll take our photos, since I'm better with the arts."

Eliot scoffed.

"I have an eye for things," Harrison continued. "You know I do. And you do the Internet page since you are so technologically agile—"

"Listen, I will not date you. I will not date with you. I have far more serious business to attend to."

"What could be more important than the gentle caress of a woman?"

"I'm going to vomit," Eliot said, dumping the noodle mountain in the garbage. "This romance stuff . . . you're actually making me physically ill."

Eliot coughed dramatically into his napkin. He feigned choking and excused himself.

In the bathroom, he picked green flecks out of his teeth and pondered where his notebook might be and what it would be like to date. He had read about it.

When Eliot looks down, his fingers become magnets. With outstretched arms, he runs through the endless bookstore touching the books, which fly off the shelves and become white-winged birds. The birds fly up through the ceiling then up through the sky. He follows into clouds of translucent, amoeba-like people. Warmth emanates from them and he can feel their hearts pumping, pumping, pumping—

"Wake up, Eliot!" Harrison banged on the door.

On his days off Eliot liked to sleep and had been dreaming on and off for the past eleven hours. Pulling himself into full consciousness, he reached blindly around his fort for a scrap of paper. He still hadn't bought a new notebook. He wrote down his dream quickly, and his

thoughts about his dream: Birds/books—interesting parallel. Another pumping heart image – what does it mean? He would have written more, but Harrison's incessant knocking distracted him.

"Is there no peace?" Eliot moaned. "This man is my demise." As he dragged himself to the door, the sleeping bag twisted around his legs. He stubbed his toe, tripped, and fell to the ground. "Ahhh!" He wasn't hurt, but he sat there holding his limbs close to his body. "I cannot go on like this."

"Open up, Baldy."

Eliot had recently cut his hair. He didn't do a great job, but he was not bald. Harrison wouldn't stop giving him a hard time about it.

"Can I help you?" Eliot cracked open the door.

"What are you doing in your tent? Jerking off?"

Eliot was sick of Harrison's crude jokes. "What do you want?" Eliot tried to slam the door shut, but Harrison stopped it with his foot.

"There's a girl here to see you," he said. "You have a lady friend. She's in love with you. She can't wait to run her hands along your long, lean quadriceps."

"Get a life, Harrison."

Harrison cleared his throat and moved in toward Eliot so that Eliot could smell his tuna fish breath and hear his raspy inhale. His tone became more serious. "Did you sign us up for match dot com already? And so fast. Just like that. She's here."

"Very funny."

"Wait here."

Harrison disappeared and moments later returned with his arms extended as if presenting a sacred tome. And it was a sacred tome! Eliot's green composition notebook. At last, at last, his lab journal. It had been two weeks and three days.

"Give it," he cried. "It's mine!" He reached for it.

"First things first. Get dressed."

Before Eliot could retreat, a girl appeared at the end of the hallway.

"Who's here?" Eliot asked. Eliot ducked into his room and pulled on his pants. "Who is she?" Eliot held out his hands for his beloved notebook.

"A natural beauty that's for sure. No makeup. She's got a brown spot on her nose, and her figure . . . a little square-shaped, but overall . . ."

Eliot peeked down the hall. She stood in an awkward half step in a shadow. A long brown braid fell to one side, but he couldn't see her face well. He thought she might be pretty. He noticed that her legs were thin. Her boots were laced up like little boats around her ankles, and she had tucked her thumbs beneath the straps of her backpack.

"She's right there," Eliot whispered. The girl swayed from side to side. "She can hear everything you're saying."

"Well, I'm being complimentary here." Harrison lowered his voice, or tried to, and continued, "I'd do her in a second."

"Stop talking. Let me do the talking." Eliot rubbed his hand over his very short hair, snatched the journal from Harrison, and walked toward the girl. "Where did you find this lab journal?" he asked her.

"At a bookstore." Obviously, he had left it lying around at work somewhere.

"Did you read it?" he said and tilted his head to one side like a TV detective. He squinted and stared her down. Her pale, smooth skin looked cool like paper, a paper doll girl.

"Did you read it?" he said again, more slowly. "Answer the question."

She half-smiled. "Yes and I loved it. Every word. I've had those dreams too. Every night. About the ocean. About sailing. About people being idiotic pigs. I had to find you. I mean to know that you had those dreams—"

"So now you know everything about me?"

"Well I know about the cats that you used to feed and that you feel alien most of the time, except when you observe compassion in the eyes of some people, but that happens rarely . . . I'm sorry. I had to read it."

Now that she babbled on, he could see that she had a dime-sized birthmark on her nose and something in her mouth that made her talk a little funny. She didn't have a lisp, but something a little off. "Are you wearing a retainer?" he asked.

"Yes. Why? You could tell?"

"No, no, of course not," he said, when he realized that he'd embarrassed her.

"You could tell," she said again.

"Yeah I could tell, but that's okay. You don't talk that weird."

"I can take the top one out when I eat. The bottom part comes off in six months."

"Oh that's good, and then what are you going to do?"

"Without my retainer?" she said. She looked up and then down. "I don't know. Same things I always do, but I'll have straighter teeth." She switched her weight from foot to foot and laughed.

Eliot was funny, funny without even trying. He looked behind him and down the hall to see if Harrison could see how funny Eliot could be. Harrison, though, put his reading glasses off and on, squinting at a painting that had probably been in that spot since his wife left him thirty years ago. Harrison admired the painting, as if he was at a museum, but he could probably hear their conversation.

"You're not square," Eliot said.

"I'm not square?"

"Harrison said you were, but you're not. Don't mind him."

"Thanks, I guess."

Eliot, not knowing what else to do, stole Harrison's move. He cleared his throat. "I would appreciate it," he said, referring to the notebook, "if you could keep this between us . . ."

"Ginger."

"Yes. If you could keep this between us, Ginger."

"Of course," she breathed. "I knew it would be weird to find you. I mean sort of inappropriate and dangerous to follow you, but your address was there, and I thought, I have to know. I have to see the person who wrote this because he's like me, but not. And I was right. I knew you'd live . . . like this," she said, looking around, sort of like she was in awe of his messy apartment. "So I brought it to you. I brought it to you because I thought you should have it."

"You did the right thing," Eliot said. "Are you expecting a reward or something, or is the knowledge that you did the right thing enough?"

"I don't need a reward."

"Good. I can't afford to pay you right now. Not in my budget."

Harrison proceeded to cough. He choked. He cackled in a loud, grotesque way, and Eliot knew that he'd said the wrong thing.

"I could . . . well, I could buy you a piece of baklava," Eliot offered. At the Greek diner around the corner, baklava was always half price on Wednesdays.

"You don't have to buy me anything."

"Suit yourself. Baklava is very sweet. If you haven't tried it you really should."

"I think I've had it."

"You would know. So, do you want to try it? Like next week. During the day. On a Wednesday."

"Sure."

Eliot scribbled down the name of the diner and ripped out the page from his notebook. Before he could stop her, she leaned over, snatched the pen from his hand and wrote, in slanted narrow print, her name and phone number on the last page. "Just in case," she said. They arranged a time to meet, and Eliot walked her to the door.

"Well," she said, shrugging her shoulders up to her ears. "This was funny."

"Not for me. You have no idea what a relief it is to have this back. Thank you," Eliot said, with a sincere half bow. He even made a Zen prayer gesture with his palms closed in front of his heart. "You saved my life. You have no idea . . ."

He closed the door after her, put his lab journal flat on his head, balanced it there, and sauntered past Harrison. "Got it back," he said.

"Holy moly, what a night! She was something else, huh? And you're taking her out for baklava. This is a pretty big deal. This is bigger than Match.com I guess."

"It's not like that," Eliot said, tipping his head forward and dropping his notebook into his hands in one swift motion.

Eliot and Ginger met on Wednesday at the diner to wash down baklava with tall glasses of milk. Before the waitress took their order, Ginger turned away from Eliot to slip her retainer out of her mouth and into its hot pink case. He laid his notebook on the table beside him so that he could record important discoveries in case anything came to him while they were eating.

"Good?" Eliot said, when Ginger took her first bite.

"Delicious."

"Told you." Eliot liked to cut the baklava up into halves then fourths then eighths before he ate any of it to ensure that he had enough milk to go with each bite.

"So, you must like to sleep?" she said.

"It's almost impossible to access reality if you don't do dream experiments. I'm curious about the origin of things, myself and my thoughts included."

"Me too," Ginger said. She scanned the room, as if she was gathering words off the walls with her eyes. "Like that photo over there. How old is it? I mean when was this diner built? Where was this table cloth made? I love finding out where things come from. I do research at the antique store where I work. I mean my whole job is about figuring out where stuff comes from and how old it is so we know how much it's worth."

Eliot listened as she went on about the way she could use books and historical documents to trace where and when a table had been made. He gulped down the rest of his milk and decided

he'd order more. He was able to polish off an entire piece of baklava without having to say anything at all.

"We have this piece that just came in," Ginger said. "It's really lovely."

A forkful of baklava hovered above her plate as she spoke. She ate so slowly Eliot almost couldn't stand it. He suppressed a strange, unfamiliar desire to reach across the table, take hold of her wrist and steal her bite.

"I have no idea where it's from. It's old, I'm sure. A sleigh bed. You know what I mean?"

Eliot nodded, picturing something Santa would sleep in.

"It needs to be restored, but in the right light—I don't know—it looks sort of magical, sort of silvery, sort of like you could hop in and sail away somewhere," she said. "I keep picturing it in some big bedroom in a mansion in Georgia with billowing white curtains."

She waved her hand in the air. The forkful of baklava danced before him as she outlined the shape of the bed. In the booth next to theirs, the waitress poured someone a cup of coffee. Eliot didn't want to cut Ginger off, but he needed more to eat. He was ravenous. All this talking and listening was taking immense concentration. He needed energy, sustenance, baklava, now. He leaned his body to the right, trying to get the waitress's attention. Ginger shifted her body as well, mirroring him, maybe even unconsciously, until he focused on her. The waitress walked off. He would have to wait.

"That bed. I mean it's almost like you'd be sleeping in a boat or something. Like in that book Where the Wild Things Are, which is one of my favorite books of all time, by the way," she said, jabbing her fork toward him for emphasis. "It's the kind of bed that you could hop in and float away. Totally be free. Disappear to another planet. That's what I keep picturing, the

greatest boat bed in the world." She waved her hand in a gesture of grandeur. "Wouldn't that be the best?"

Eliot considered her question, but she started right up again, waving her fork, talking, smiling at him.

"Can you imagine a boat that rocks you to sleep? Not a rocking chair, not a hammock, but a boat-bed? Like what if beds were made with little wheels, sort of in a track or something and they rocked you side to side, maybe a little up and down? Like have you ever fallen asleep in a canoe? Like that." She sliced through the air. "Oh god," she said abruptly, shrinking down in her seat. "I'm sorry. Mrs. Ranier's always telling me she's not paying me to run my mouth. I know I talk too much."

She bent over her plate, quietly plowing through the baklava, but then as if she couldn't help herself, she lifted her gaze. "If I knew how to make things, that's what I'd make," she said softly. "The greatest boat-bed in the world."

"A boat-bed, huh?" Eliot said, contemplating her idea. He liked the sound of it.

"Yup. That's what I'd do." She popped another bite in her mouth, chewed and nodded.

"Do you think it's a crazy idea?"

"Absolutely not," Eliot said. "I like it."

"Oh."

"Yeah. It's not bad." The more he thought about it, the more he liked it.

Ginger, Eliot quickly learned over the next few weeks, exuded brilliance. "Supermind!" he said

when she had drawn some connection for him based on his dreams. "You're the smartest individual I know." He openly admitted that she was smarter than he was. He showed her off and told Harrison things she said. She sold costume jewelry, rosewood chiffoniers and Art Deco lamps. She appreciated old people and old things. She wore only vintage and fashioned her hair in barrettes. Sometimes she stopped by the bookstore. Sometimes she came over for dinner.

"I think you should move your bed off the floor," she said when she saw his room.

"Only kids sleep on the floor."

Eliot often looked at the slanted numbers she had written in the back page of his notebook and thought about moving his bed or calling her, but he never did. He feared that she was getting in the way of his original mission to free himself from human-ness. His mother, his desire to know his father, Harrison, Ginger, his co-workers, his customers, all these delusional people believed that love could cure everything. Love would save the day! Not true. Love caused pain. Eliminate love, eliminate pain. He needed to free himself from all these complicated relationships that would only hold him back from something deeper and more profound: truth. He had deliberately chosen Harrison, as a roommate, because he did not seek friendship.

Ginger stared out the window. "Isn't it crazy how we met?"

"Are you going to eat that?" Eliot said, pointing to her triangle of baklava.

"Go ahead. Do you ever think about what we might look like to other people?"

"No. What do we look like?"

"Like two lonely people who found each other," she said, smiling. "Like this little booth is our own little boat, and we might just float away. Like we're meant to be."

Eliot swallowed down the rest of the milk. He called over the waitress and ordered

another baklava to take home.

"I have to go," he said.

"Did I say something? What's wrong?"

"I'm not lonely."

"Oh I know. You have Harrison."

"I don't need him. I don't need him at all. Are you kidding? And we, you and I, are not a thing."

Ginger, pushing her lower lip in and out, looked out the window of the diner. Her pale skin began to flush with color. She stared into her empty glass of milk. Eliot studied her contorting face and realized that she might cry.

"I thought maybe you liked me. I thought when I read that notebook that you'd be different. Because you could see things beyond . . . just this," she said, gesturing to the diner.

"And this," she said, touching her nose. "I thought you had vision. But you're like all the rest."

"I'm not," he said. She gathered up her backpack and left two fifty on the table for the tip. "You're delusional. You care more about your stupid dreams and what's in your own head than you care about real life and real people."

Oh, his mind was sick. Something was sick in his head, his thoughts. This was the problem. Everything he saw, everything he touched, everything he loved, eventually went dark. Even a lily or that perfect tomato. "Isn't it beautiful, Eliot?" Ginger had said once. A tomato? Beautiful. But it was. Fragile, whole, ripe, and even in its holy perfection, it was dead, or dying. In a few days, it would rot, ferment, grow mold. This over and over and over. The beauty replaced by darkness. It was all he could see. Even in the good, he could feel the mold

encroaching, the nasty parts reaching out, covering everything. He was sick. His head hurt. Thought after thought, The Fog set in. He could not push the clouds off or away or beyond. He alone suffered under the weight of his own mind, a tremendous fog. She was ruining him.

"I need to break through The Fog. Try to understand."

"You try to understand."

The waiter delivered the baklava that Ginger had suggested he buy for Harrison. He ripped off the brown paper bag, opened the plastic container and ate it, his fourth piece that day. He tried to understand because Ginger was smart.

Eliot decided not to see Ginger again. He ignored Harrison. Time passed. He slept more, but his dreams became dull. The green composition notebook lived under his mattress, until one day Eliot came home from work, and Harrison handed him an envelope. The small, alien letters, tilted and strange danced across the page. The return address was a P.O. box and a name: Eliot McBride. So, this was it. Contact.

"Well," Harrison said, setting down his crossword and his pencil. "Aren't you going to open it?"

Eliot leaned against the stove. He fondled and studied the corners of the envelope, which was sealed evenly and completely. With care. One might even go so far as to say it was sealed with great care. "I have a feeling," he said, "that Ginger wrote this."

"Why?"

"Crooked letters."

"Ginger has bad penmanship?" Harrison said. He seemed appalled.

"Not bad. Not great. Sideways. She writes like a piece of grass. All her letters blow to one side."

Eliot slipped into his bedroom to grab his lab journal. He flipped to the back of the book and found Ginger's name and number tipping sideways across the page.

"Hmm," Harrison said. "I'll get to the bottom of this." He snatched the letter and unearthed the magnifying glass that he kept in the silverware drawer. He looked from the letter to the notebook and back. "In my expert opinion, this is definitely," he said, looking up at Eliot. His voice lost momentum. He looked down again and back up at Eliot. He swallowed his cough.

"What was that?" Eliot asked. "Are you choking?"

Harrison cleared his throat, took a wide stance, put both hands on the countertop and said, "Definitely NOT Ginger's writing. Whatever this letter says comes straight from the man himself. Your father. You found him. The hunt is over."

"You think?" Eliot said. Harrison was pulling his leg. He was always pulling his leg. He was a leg-puller. "How would my father find me?"

"It's obvious that all that mumbo jumbo ESP, all your dream talk has worked. You were right my friend. Clearly he got the mind messages, remembered your mother, looked her up, perhaps even, through internet research of course, learned that she'd given birth to a son, and then, with that knowledge, set out to find your physical locality."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Are you doubting my scientific capabilities?" Harrison asked with a hurt expression.

"Who calculated the amount of light pollution in this apartment?"

"You did."

"Who invented a mosquito repellent shoe polish?"

"You did."

"Who makes the best beans and franks in the whole wide world?"

"That's not science."

"But you admit I do?"

"No. Seriously, how do you know that Ginger didn't write that letter?"

Harrison glanced down at the letter. "The 'g', my friend, was the first clue." Harrison showed Eliot the difference in the shapes of the g's. He had a point. They were slightly different. "The second was the depth of paper pressing. Under the magnifying glass I can tell that this document was written by a much heavier, steadier, slower hand, a man's hand. And besides, why would Ginger write this letter after you abandoned her like a dog?"

"Abandoned her? I told you she left because she didn't understand my work."

"Right."

From what Eliot had seen, Harrison excelled at all stuff scientific, but to the naked eye the handwriting looked almost identical. Maybe he would know the sender by the contents of the letter. "Read it," Eliot commanded Harrison. "If there's anything good in there, let me know."

Harrison snatched the letter, ripped it open and read it quickly. "All nice things. Loves you very much. Thinks about you all the time. Truly sorry he never knew you. Says you should be nice to your roommate Harrison—"

"Does not."

"He says don't make the same mistakes he did running away from people. Here," he said, shoving the letter toward Eliot. He picked up the yellow piece of paper ripped from a legal pad and read his father's words. They were nothing special. After all that, his father lacked personality. He said absolutely nothing insightful about the nature of the universe. Eliot didn't feel different or more complete. Oh well. If his father had really sent that letter, he was a dope.

Eliot shoved the letter in his back pocket and shuffled out of the room.

"Where are you going?" Harrison called after him, but Eliot didn't answer. He slipped into his room and crawled into his fort. They were all liars: his mother, Harrison, Ginger. What was he to do about it? Cut them off? Forgive them? Ginger had sent it, he was sure of that, and Harrison had gone along with it. Why? So that Eliot would stop his dream experiments? So that he would give up his quest?

"Is my experiment a bust?" he said aloud.

If Ginger had sent the letter, well, she must be trying to tell him something. But what? Eliot folded the yellow paper into an origami fortuneteller. "Should I call her?"

"Pick a number," he answered back. "Four." If it I open it and I see my name, it's a sign that means I should call. He switched the paper back and forth between his fingers. One. Two. Three. Four, but realized before he unfolded the letter that it was impossible to play the game by himself since he'd made up the rules and could change them if he liked. He crumpled the letter into a ball. So many lies. Even this game he'd created was another way to lie to himself.

Eliot rubbed his hand through the cropped hair on his head and paced up and down in his

bedroom, until at last the buzzer rang.

"I'll get it," Harrison shouted.

Eliot checked his watch. Ginger was seven minutes late. He and Harrison had planned everything out. Harrison would answer the door and lead Ginger back to Eliot's room. Harrison would build things up, mess with her expectations. "Eliot's not doing well. Not sure if you're ready to see this." That sort of thing. Eliot checked over his room one last time.

He heard them talking in the hall, then footsteps. Harrison knocked.

"Yoohoo, Eliot," he called.

Eliot cracked the door. "Hi," he said.

"Hi," she said. She looked exactly the same in a good way.

"I'll take it from here," Eliot said, nodding for Harrison to get lost. "I've been thinking . . . I wanted to tell you . . . Do you want to come in? I want to show you something."

She shrugged. "I only have five minutes."

"Oh, okay. This will only take a second. In fact, I should tell you right now.

Unfortunately my experiments were flawed. You were right, and I was wrong." He'd practiced the words with Harrison earlier that day, but now that she was standing right there he felt nervous. "About a lot of things actually. And, well, more importantly, I want to tell you . . ."

"What?"

"I'm sorry for my myopic thinking, lack of sensitivity, and narcissism." Eliot opened the door wide so she could see his masterpiece. "Also, you were right. I had to get my mattress off the floor."

"What is it?" she said.

Eliot pulled back the tarp he had rigged around the perimeter of his bed. "See, these are the grooves, so that the bed can go side to side like this, and here's how you get the up and down motion. I thought about replacing my mattress with a waterbed, but I didn't think that was part of your vision. Bad for the back. This pull system controls the angle here."

"It's a boat-bed!" Her eyes lit up and teared in the corners.

"Well, my version of it. Try it out."

"Really?" She looked at him. "I thought you said you don't allow anyone in your bed. You said foreign smells might cause insomnia."

"You invented it. You have to try it."

She unlaced her boots and slipped off her backpack. Slowly, carefully she pulled back the curtain and climbed in.

"Are you coming?" she asked, stretching out. "Come on."

Eliot followed behind her and lay down beside her. He reached overhead and pushed away from the wall behind his head and pulled on the rope pulley overhead so that the bed began to rock back and forth and side to side.

"How did you do this?"

"Well, in addition to philosophy, I also studied engineering in college on the side. I had a friend from M.I.T. who helped with the design. And Harrison's nephew is a contractor, so he supplied most of the power tools. Took about seventeen hours to complete, not including the time it took to conceive of your conception of the project. You know?"

"It's lovely," Ginger said. "It's like being on a cruise without actually going anywhere."

"Yes," Eliot said. He inhaled her sweet, saffron, sugary foreign scent. "Einstein would

say: imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world."

"It's very dark in here."

"To protect from light pollution."

"Right."

Her breathing was slow and steady. "Where are we going?" she whispered.

"I don't know."

Across the quiet, he reached out and took hold of her hand.

THE ENDING OF THE DUCK JOKE

Nannies and mothers, ready to praise paper bag puppets and wrap their kids in hats and scarves, crammed into the hallway outside May's kindergarten classroom. They gave Colette the "you're late" look, even though she'd arrived right on time. East Village parents could be so relaxed when it came to recreational drug use and politics, but parenting made puritans of them all. Even Colette's free-spiritedness seemed to be disintegrating with May's increasing autonomy.

The teacher clapped her hands, and the students jumped from their seats. A noisy, reckless wave of arms and legs and moving mouths poured into the hallway. Colette almost toppled over from the power of May's running hug.

"Mom, we made puppets," May said.

"That's great," Colette answered, struggling to gather up her purse and May's lunch box, jacket, backpack, and scooter.

"Mine's a shark." She attacked Colette with cardboard fangs.

"Mine too," May's friend Sasha said. Polly and David were out of town, and Colette had agreed to watch Sasha for the night.

"Ooooh, so scary."

"No. Mom. Not scary. He's hungry, and you are the food. It's not scary. You get eaten—that's all that happens."

Colette felt the implied, you stupid idiot.

“Yeah. That’s all,” Sasha chimed in.

Colette sensed the beginning of her slow, painful death as Sasha and May grew into malevolent teenagers, hands on hips, scowling at her. Normally Andrew picked May up from school and took her to his apartment on Rivington or to the park on Houston for a few hours; then Colette met them after work, dragged May home for dinner and put her to bed. “You can’t count on that,” her mother said when she told her about Andrew’s duties as an afternoon dad. She’d been freaked out ever since 911 and begged Colette to escape to the country “so May can bike up and down the driveway,” a perfect example of why Colette did not want to leave the East Village.

“Look, Mom,” May said, thrusting her pointer finger in Colette’s face. “It hurts.”

Colette squatted down to inspect May’s latest injury. A slice of nail crowned the top her tiny finger. Raw, pink skin peaked out. “It’s a hangnail.”

“I think I need a band-aid,” May said.

“Let me cut off this ragged part.”

“Cut it off? No way!” May snatched her hand back, knocking Colette onto the floor. Without noticing that Colette had fallen, May and Sasha skipped away down the hall singing.

Colette dug through her purse, searching for her keys with the little pink pocketknife key chain. She dumped the contents of her handbag on the floor. Where were they? Had she left them somewhere? The orange elementary school walls seemed to close in on her. Probably at the dry cleaners. No need to panic. She stared at the shark puppet’s oily, white, pastel-crayon, cardboard fangs and exceptionally small, glued-on, bouncy, plastic eyeballs. Where could they be?

Had she forgotten them at the cafe? She'd had a meeting with a possible patron for her dance company. To keep her NYU teaching gig, she knew she had to continue producing avant-garde, Off-off-Broadway, experimental performance pieces. Her last reviews in *The Times* had been so disappointing that she now needed to prove that she was as brilliant as the critics had once thought she was, not a weird, stroke-of-luck, amateur, artistic fluke.

But she didn't feel brilliant. She felt broke and tired. She needed to raise money and soon before Amex cut her off. If she didn't get this project going, she would never be able to raise more money for other, experimental and possibly more lucrative projects. She would lose her cushy position at NYU teaching courses like "Experimental Forms" and "Feminism, Movement and Desire." She'd have no choice but to move to a subdivision in Jersey and teach ballet to spoiled, pigeon-toed nose-pickers. She could ask Andrew for help, but the agreement was always that he would cover college and she would take care of everything else. Plus, his graphic design work had slowed down these days.

May and Sasha skipped back and circled her. "Ashes to ashes, we all fall down," they sang and joined her on the floor. In the next breath, they were on their feet again. They raced down the hall. She wondered what to do with a five-year-old with a hangnail, another with a bad attitude, and no keys.

Trip was to blame. Mindlessly picking apart a bagel that Sasha had shoved in her hands before scampering off to climb the jungle gym, Colette realized that Trip occupied far too much space in her brain, so much space that there wasn't room left for remembering her keys and balancing

her checkbook. She thought of his smooth back and the way he had stood on the bed, turning for her, doing that impersonation. He was so unusual, so witty, and far too young.

“Mom, harder. PUSH HARDER,” May yelled.

“Please don’t yell like that. It’s not nice. Would you like it if I yelled at you that way?”

There was no response. Why would there be? Colette pushed May on the swing, harder than before. The leaves crunched under her feet, and the air felt crisp. Soon winter would be upon them, and they still didn’t have a permanent place to live. When their lease ended and she realized the landlord was completely serious about raising the rent, Colette put almost everything in storage and moved around the corner to a much smaller, more expensive, partly furnished, temporary sublet. Andrew had offered to take them in, but Colette didn’t want to wreck their unconventional parenting arrangement by living together.

May pulled herself up, trying to stand in the baby swing. The parent-teacher coordinator and the other mothers over by the slide gave Colette a look. Yes, thank you very much. She knew it was dangerous.

“Stop that, May. If you want to get out, just say so.”

Trip looked like a movie star when he shaved in the morning. She didn’t know, but she was pretty sure he woke up looking energetic and handsome. She was pretty sure he wouldn’t want to wake up next to a five-year-old, snarled and tangled in a nest of stuffed animals and baby blankets.

She really had to get May to sleep in her own bed. Five was way too old to still be sleeping with your mother. But when May slept in her own bed, she had accidents. And if there were accidents, they were usually late to school. And if they were late to school, May turned into a grump, and Colette showed up late for her office hours. Colette knew she should take

responsibility for the chaos, but she resented giving up their routine. She liked how May fell asleep in her lap watching the news. May became a perfect angel when she slept. Those moments made up for moments like these, when May, just for fun, decided to finger paint with cream cheese from the inside of her bagel, first on her face, then on her clothes and finally across the front of Colette's leather jacket, just as Colette introduced herself to the parent-teacher coordinator.

"Kids," Colette said. She laughed, threw up her arms, and tried to play it off as a joke, as she always did, but May always made a mess of things at the most crucial times, when Colette was most vulnerable. May had no way to know that this first impression might somehow determine her entire future, and she ran off towards the water fountain. If this PTA mom was as connected as everyone claimed, then May's grade school, high school, and college career were all at stake. This was the problem with New York. Everything felt incredibly important all the time.

The PTA mom turned away from Colette. The conversation would have to be picked up another time, perhaps without the cream cheese.

Maybe she left the keys at the gym. They would have to go for a long walk, retracing all their steps. Colette wished she could get rid of Sasha to make the whole journey easier, but that was impossible. Maybe if she offered to buy the girls' dinner, she could at least get them across town. Then, if they were really being miserable, they could all jump in a taxi. But that wouldn't work. Polly would find out, and she was still weird about Sasha being in the car, any car, even her own, without a special booster seat contraption. Colette thought that Polly was being ridiculous about the car thing. Five was old enough to go in a car. Colette rode around in cars when she was five.

Across the park she could see Sasha and May fighting. They did this sometimes for no apparent reason. They tore at each other, not physically—they were girls after all—but verbally over shovels, Barbies, and hair barrettes. Colette hurried over to arbitrate their dispute, when it occurred to her that it was not only her keys that were missing, but also Polly's keys and Andrew's keys and her office keys. Maybe she should call Andrew and take the kids over there, but she realized that he would be at the airport by now on his way to Montreal for business.

“Mine!” May said, stomping her foot. Sasha, faster and smaller, grabbed the shovel from May and ran. May chased after her.

“Stop that. If you can't play nicely, I'll take you home.” They didn't seem frightened and ran away as she called, “And make you sit in the dark with no shovels.”

Her phone vibrated. Maybe someone had found her keys. Her entire life consisted of empty threats and meaningless text messages. *I want to open u up and eat u.* Clearly not a poet, but he was direct. Another one came a moment later. *right now.* She remembered their night and something stirred. She started to compose a message but couldn't think of what exactly she wanted from him. How to respond? Maybe she should tell him what underwear she was wearing. Ugh. Was she even wearing underwear? That was so cliché.

She checked her emails on her phone. She stalled until the girls had worn themselves out enough that they could be easily convinced to eat dinner. Sasha hardly ate. Her tiny, muscular, little vegetarian body lived off almond butter and tofu. Polly wouldn't feed Sasha any processed foods and absolutely no refined sugars. Colette pitied Sasha, and so she broke Polly's rules whenever she could. Children shouldn't be so strong. They should be round, soft, little dumplings. Corn syrup was obviously detrimental to a child's development, but constantly

depriving a child of meat and candy seemed equally cruel. “Eat candy now,” she always told May. “Because when you’re my age, you can’t get away with it.”

“She pushed me,” May said, suddenly sobbing, and Colette knew they were tired. The time had come to hunt for the keys.

“Hel-lo Miss A-mer-i-ca. Back so soon?”

She wasn’t special. The man at the dry cleaners called everyone Miss America, and he always pronounced it the same way, breaking up the syllables.

“Forgot my keys.”

The kids made faces, looking at each other, sticking out their tongues, touching tongues—that was a new one. Growing bored with that, they played hairdresser. A quiet game. She liked that one. She wondered what it would be like if her daughter grew up to be a lesbian. She couldn’t really imagine a woman kissing her daughter, or her daughter kissing a woman, but she would prepare for anything. She could be that open-minded, supportive parent, similar to her own parents but also different.

“Well, you like women. That’s okay,” she imagined herself saying. “I’ve done it. We’ve all done it. It’s a common thing in college to go around kissing girls. Sure, I’d like to meet your girlfriend.” She pictured shaking hands with a butch lesbian, whom she would treat like a man. She would let this lesbian open doors for her and fix broken things. That’s probably how it would be. If, that is, May turned out that way.

More likely, May would turn out like Colette, a desperate, hopeless romantic, who could not stay focused on one man at a time or keep the ones she wanted. Most of the time, Colette

thrived, happy alone. She had her books, wine, friends, television, art openings, and her work. She wasn't in need, not in that way. Her friendships and May's father provided companionship, but the other part she could never quite find on her own. She craved the physical part. Kissing, touching, flesh was missing from her life, until Trip. But Trip was more of a child than May.

As if he could feel her thinking about him, another message arrived. *Are u ignoring me? Only makes me want u more. Come over tonight.* Colette had to stop acting like a teenager, propping up pillows in her bed, leaving the TV on, locking, double locking the doors, and sneaking down to his apartment. May had not yet discovered her absence, but she could. She woke sometimes. She had bad dreams. Colette knew that leaving her daughter, while she crept away for a quickie, made her a terrible mother.

“No keys. Not here.”

May grabbed at her crotch, and Colette realized that they would need to find a bathroom. Starbucks was always filthy. They could go to the Tompkins Street Library around the corner, but the homeless people showered in the sink. She once saw a man emerge from the ladies' room, completely drenched, without his shirt. Perhaps, they could pee at Life Café. She peeked through the window, hoping Clarissa—or was it Larissa?—was working. She was not. Well, Colette would have to walk them to the back, with purpose, as if she was looking for someone, and then scoot them out quickly when they were done. Colette kneeled so she was eye level with the girls. She wiped a booger off May's nose, and May squirmed away.

“Okay, when we go in there, follow directly behind me.”

“Can we have milk shakes?” May asked. “Daddy lets me have a milk shake.”

“Yeah, well, then let Daddy be responsible for your sugar addiction.”

“I want one now. Pleeeeeeeese.”

“Darling, listen,” she said, exasperated. “Here’s why you can’t have a milk shake. Number one, you just had a sucker and a bagel. Number two, they’re expensive. Number three, too much milk gives you a monstrous stomach ache. Number four, they have no nutritional value, and so you’ll be eating loads of empty calories and though you’re young and will burn them off, someday you won’t and you’ll get fat.” Now she sounded just like Polly. She was losing their attention, but she held on as they squirmed. “I’m not done. Number five, we’re going to have a race as soon as we go in there and go to the bathroom, and you’ll lose, if you’re filled up from a fattening milk shake.”

“But you’re fat, and you don’t eat milk shakes.”

May had funny logic, but she knew how to get right to the heart of Colette’s argument and turn it all around.

“May, Mommy is fat because she doesn’t exercise enough because she’s taking care of you.” She shouldn’t have said that last part. She shouldn’t blame her child. She shouldn’t have brought up fatness in the first place. She wasn’t actually fat. She complained about getting fat in order to prevent it from happening, as a reminder that at any moment she could become that way if she wasn’t careful. Or could May see something she could not?

“That lady is fat,” Sasha said, pointing at a woman in a big overcoat, waddling past them. Colette slapped her hand down, but it was too late.

“She’s not,” Colette said. The overweight woman glared at her. “I’m sorry.”

“Yes she is,” May whispered. At least she whispered it.

“Don’t be rude. Apologize right now.”

“Sorry,” Sasha said. She fondled the zipper of her jacket.

“And Mom, milk doesn’t make me sick. I drink chocolate milk every day.”

May's eyes grew bigger, and Colette knew that she was lying. She always nodded when she told a big one.

Teachable moment. "Girls," she began, "you never, ever, under any circumstances tell a woman she's fat. It's not nice. It's like saying ugly. Women are sensitive. There could be a thousand reasons a woman is fat. She might be pregnant. Or have diabetes or bad genes. Or be in an unhappy relationship. Or have a tragic eating disorder. You just don't know. So, do you get it? Women are not fat."

They nodded in unison.

"Now, when we go inside please follow directly behind me. Do not speak to anyone. Pass go. Do not stop to collect two hundred dollars."

"What? Two hundred dollars?" Sasha said, the little capitalist.

"It's a joke. From Monopoly. Seriously, though, please not a word to anyone. We're going in, and we're going to use the bathroom. No talking to anyone, understood?"

The girls nodded obediently. Perhaps they could feel the exhaustion in her voice. As she pushed the door, it jingled, and before she could usher the girls inside, she heard her name.

"Colette, is that you?" a man asked, holding out his hand. "Henry."

"Oh, Henry. Yes."

"How are you? It's been... you look great."

She didn't look great. He looked great, exactly the same as when they had met a decade ago.

"You have children? Twins?" he said, looking at Sasha and May. They held hands and covered their mouths with their free hands.

“Oh, yes. No, not twins. This is May, my daughter, and her very best friend, Sasha. Say hello, girls,” she instructed, remembering that she’d just ordered them into silence. They shrugged, helplessly, giggling through their fingers.

“Say hi. Stop that no-talking rule for a minute. Please.”

“Hello, May. Hello, Sasha,” Henry said.

His dark hair and glasses made him look just as intelligent and mysterious as he had appeared to her the first time, many years ago, when they’d met at some recital on the Bowery. He was an aspiring musician, and she, well, an aspiring dancer, a bartender really. Or was she working in that health food store back then? She gave up on getting the girls to say hello.

“So what’re you doing here?” she said, hoping that he was, perhaps, still a bachelor. “You live in the neighborhood?” She briefly entertained the thought of a reunion.

“No. Actually, we’re out in LA. I got married two years ago. Crazy, huh?”

Colette nodded.

“We just bought a little place in the Hollywood Hills. Nothing extravagant, but the price was right. So many deals. Couldn’t resist. I actually have a mortgage. Can you believe it?”

She said she couldn’t, and he went on about the good old days. Romanticizing their youth in that way was dangerous. Those nights were far more sinister than he made them sound; they drank, exchanged partners. Some exchanged needles. A whole group of them, all lost, trying to be something they’d never become, but it was fun, sure, if you distracted yourself from being poor and confused. They had all hated the establishment, and now they worked in it, for it, consumed by it. They’d grown up. Now, at least, her life had purpose. She had May to look after, and when everything else seemed chaotic, that responsibility grounded her.

As he spoke, she watched the girls play a silly game of zipping their mouths shut, then opening them for a split second to produce unintelligible sounds, before zipping them up again. They pretended to toss imaginary keys behind them, scamper around on the floor looking for them only to discover another set of invisible keys in each other's pockets.

"Better for musicians out there, right?" Colette asked.

"Well, I'm producing now."

"Good for you... May, stay near me, please. And your wife, what does she do?"

"Well, she's pregnant. Actually."

Being pregnant. What a great occupation.

"Oh, congratulations."

"We love it out there. So much space and it's sunny. I mean New York is great, but we weren't interested in schlepping kids around . . . California is the way to go." He sounded like her parents. He must have realized mid-sentence that he was backing himself into a corner and so changed directions, quickly. "But you found a way to make it work. You always did. Tell me. What you're up to these days?"

"Oh a little bit of everything. Where to begin? I'm swamped really. Doing choreography now. I have a company actually. And I teach. NYU."

"Your husband must be a saint."

She didn't quite understand his meaning. Why would her husband be a saint? For marrying her? For taking May when she was at rehearsal? If he was her husband, wouldn't that be his job?

"Oh, right," Colette said. "Yes. May's father is an angel." She didn't feel like getting into the whole story with Henry. Andrew wasn't her husband, had never been her husband, and

would never be her husband. Colette and Andrew were friends. They were purposely *not* together from the start. Eventually she would have to tell May that her existence had been carefully considered. Andrew had wanted a child. So had Colette. They'd decided they'd better hurry up and do it before she stopped producing eggs. A long time ago, over fifteen years ago, when they were punks, they'd fallen in love. It seemed silly to think of it now.

"We have to scoot," she said. Let Henry wonder why she didn't wear a ring. Let him find out through the grapevine sooner or later. Made no difference. May grabbed her crotch again. The Michael Jackson move. This conversation could only be torture for a five-year-old. "So good to see you again, Henry. Give your wife my love. When is she due?"

"February."

"Good luck."

"Thanks." Henry leaned in to give her a peck on the cheek and then another like the French, but she wasn't prepared for the second kiss and turned her head the wrong way. His lips grazed hers and landed close to her mouth. She could smell his aftershave. He lingered for a moment too long. "I'm staying at the Soho Grand," he whispered before he pulled away, and Colette wondered how to take that. Was he suggesting that she visit him at his hotel? He said it so quietly and looked so at ease, she thought she had imagined his words. Both May and Sasha were uncharacteristically quiet, watching the awkward goodbye. Colette smiled. She felt her cheeks flush as Henry, calm as ever, sank into his seat to enjoy his newspaper and a cup of coffee. What a luxury.

In the bathroom, May wrapped her arms around Colette's neck, and Colette squatted down, holding May's little, pink thighs, so that May was suspended over the toilet seat. They waited for the tinkle.

“Mom, who was that?” May asked.

“An old friend from a long time ago.”

“Was he your boyfriend?”

Children could be so intelligent and intuitive when they felt like it.

“Yes. No. Not exactly. I don’t know. It was a long time ago.”

“So, why don’t you have him anymore? Because you have Daddy?”

Colette wondered about this question. May was good like that. She got straight to the point. No easy questions. Oh, no. She asked the tough ones. Why don’t the subways follow a schedule? Why are mean people mean? What color is vitamin C?

“Yes. Daddy’s my best friend.”

May’s question tugged at her. She never fully understood the real reason she and Henry had fallen apart. Henry, when he was dating Colette, had sought a diversion from the path his life should take just so that he could some day look back and reminisce, as he just had, about the days when they lived amongst drug addicts and punk rockers.

Colette had gotten along quite well with Henry. They’d spent endless hours walking through Chinatown, Little Italy, the West Village, the East Village, with their arms linked, planning their impossible futures. His had turned out well. Although, not as he had hoped. He’d wanted to be a rock star, but probably, underneath it all, he always wanted to be the one behind the scenes. And hers had turned out well also. Though not as she’d planned. Or exactly as planned? Better than planned? She’d always wanted to be a dancer. But that was the thing about it—she’d never made a plan. Things came at her, and she took them or left them, avoided them or confronted them. She’d been fun, but apparently not the kind you marry.

“Mom. Mom. I’m done.”

Colette realized that May had been pinching her neck.

“I think Daddy is my best friend,” May said.

“Oh, really. What about Sasha and me? That doesn’t make us feel very loved.”

“Well, you can be seconds. Daddy is the most funnest. He buys me milk shakes.”

She let it go. She let Sasha and May hash it out about best friends, the requirements, the privileges and duties of such a title. She was happy that they had each other, and she wasn’t going to worry about buying milk shakes, just to become the favorite. When she pulled down Sasha’s tights to hold her over the toilet seat, she realized that she was too late. Sasha hadn’t given Colette the warning signals, and her panties were soaked with urine.

“Oh, Sasha, you had an accident.”

Sasha burst into tears. Colette kissed her forehead.

“It happens to all of us. Accidents happen. Even I had an accident today.”

“You did?” Sasha said.

“Well, I only went a wee bit in my panties, but I had to go sooooooo bad and someone made me so excited, and it just came out.”

Sasha felt better now. She could tell.

“But the really big accident I had today,” she said, as she tried her best to wrap wads of toilet paper around Sasha’s undies so she wouldn’t feel quite so uncomfortable, “was that I forgot the keys at home.”

“You did what?” Sasha said, as if trying to understand how someone could make that mistake. She really was just like Polly. “I know,” she said, always a serious thinker, “let’s go to my house, and then we can check the message machine and see if my mom and dad called.”

“Only thing is. I forgot those keys too!” Colette smacked her own forehead like a clown and said, “Silly me!” This didn’t seem to make Sasha feel better.

“What are we going to do?”

“Don’t worry. I have a plan. In fact, I have a surprise,” she said. She had to say something. Sasha’s bottom lip quivered.

“You must behave like little angels if you want to find out what it is.”

Why had she brought up any of this in the first place? The children didn’t need to know that she was worried about the keys. What had she done all day? Maybe she could make a few phone calls. She’d taken May to school, picked up her dress at the dry cleaners for the meeting with the board, grabbed a coffee, changed in the bathroom of the Starbucks, taken the subway from St. Marks up to 23rd, been fifteen minutes late to her meeting, lamented the lack of funding for the arts and the precarious position of modern dance, headed downtown to critique a student’s final project, eaten a late lunch at that little place in Soho, worked at the studio for a few hours, picked up tampons at the bodega, and walked over to May’s school.

It was possible, she thought, that her keys could be home, inside the apartment. They had one of those doors now that locked automatically, and this morning had been hectic. She had her hands full. Yes. Most likely they were sitting on the kitchen counter.

While the girls climbed up and down the steps of someone’s brownstone, she made a few calls to confirm that she’d not left her keys at any one of those places that she’d been to earlier. She’d have to call a locksmith or the building manager. Because it was not her apartment, only her apartment temporarily, she’d scribbled down the super’s name and stuck it on the fridge. She

hadn't thought to enter it into her phone and had no idea how to get into the building or what to do with an emotional little girl with wet panties.

Lately, it seemed, that every day was like this, containing some sort of dramatic event: losing, finding out, forgetting, bumping into or discovering something. There was none of the gentle lull that the summer had brought, where all the days were essentially the same, lazy and long, easy to understand, less dramatic. The world seemed to conspire against her, and she wished, briefly, that she had a little bungalow in West Hollywood, where she could put a key under a rock and know that she was always free to go home.

She really didn't want to deal with her landlord, but she had no choice. She called him. No answer. He screened his calls. She was sure of it. Who else did she know in the building? Trip. Her salvation. She texted him before she could stop herself. She needed help. This would be the end of things for sure. *In a bind! Do you have the number for the super?*

He was always home at this time. Half of his apartment was devoted to his work. He photographed food. It was odd to think that he spent all day, adjusting lighting for a glass of milk or a chocolate chip cookie. His job seemed as ridiculous as hers. He was an artist, but this was how he made money, and now the money making part had taken over—it always did.

Trip knew that she had a child, but he didn't really get it. She never talked about her daughter. She never introduced May. He never saw them together. As far as he was concerned, her daughter was a magnificent excuse for anything she did or didn't want to do. This daughter made it impossible for them to have dinner dates. This daughter made her seem wise. This daughter ensured that nothing would ever become too serious. He liked this invisible daughter, but meeting her would change everything. Seeing her in person would make Colette a real mother with a real daughter. Colette would cease to be the mysterious dancer down the hall and

become instead maternal, old, boring. Not to mention, how it might confuse May if Colette had Daddy as her best friend and this other man as her second best friend.

But May was only a child. She would get over that. Colette hardly remembered anything from age five. Trip wrote back:

anything for you. Come and get it.

Well, he was persistent. She liked that in a man. And he had the number for the super.

May balanced on the third stair. Colette wanted to stop her but let her jump. When May scrambled back up to jump from the fourth one, Colette watched May swing her arms and rock onto her toes, drawing up courage and momentum. She flew, landed on her feet, and pitched forward onto the concrete, scraping her hands. When she stood, the knees of her tights were dirty and possibly ripped. Colette pretended she hadn't seen the fall. Sometimes if she didn't react, May brushed herself off and continued playing, but this time she wailed in pain and held out her hands. Colette kissed her and held her until she calmed down.

“Come, girls, let's walk home,” she said, thinking about surprises.

Colette heard the sound of running water, the shower, coming from the other room, but Trip had told her to walk right in, and so they did. Despite a little voice that told her not to, she entered, only to find Trip naked in the kitchen, talking on his cell phone, looking at a tiny magnet calendar on the fridge. His exposed, firm buttocks stared back at her. She quickly turned to cover May and Sasha's eyes, but they'd already seen his nakedness.

As he swiveled around, holding up a finger over his lips to tease Colette and put her off for one more minute, they saw the rest of him, including his erect, now half-erect, penis.

“What the?” Trip said. He reached for a dishtowel to cover up.

“Oh, so sorry,” Colette said. “Girls, come.” She led them into the hallway. He disappeared into the bedroom.

“I think his thinger is bigger than my dad’s,” May said to Sasha.

“Why was he naked?” Sasha asked.

“What I want to know is why dads all have hairs on their butts.”

This should make her laugh. Later, she might laugh, but instead she felt a sickening tightening in her stomach: guilt about exposing her daughter and her friend’s daughter to Trip’s nudity. But why should she feel that way? Was nudity such a bad thing? Europe is full of nude beaches. She wished they lived in France where naked people could run free amongst children. She had spent a year in Paris in her twenties. Perhaps Europe held the answers to all her problems: health care, education, sexual liberation. She and May should move to a villa in the south of France.

Colette thought of what she would tell Polly. Nothing. Everything. She wasn’t sure yet how to explain what had happened.

“Trip was about to take his shower,” she said. He probably thought that she was coming over to romp around before she ran off to pick up the children. She should have told him that she was with the kids. She meant to send him another text, but she was distracted. He probably planned to pull her into the shower. It wasn’t such an insane gesture. She might have done the same. In fact, she was almost certain, that before May, she’d done the same thing. “And then he got an important phone call and his phone was in the kitchen, so he didn’t have time to put on some clothes before he ran out to answer it.”

The simple explanation seemed reasonable enough.

“Then why did he buzz us in?” Sasha asked. Sometimes she was too smart for her own good. Colette didn’t have an answer. She hesitated. For some reason an image of Lana Turner in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* came to mind, and she wanted nothing more than to be back in her old apartment with a big bowl of buttered popcorn watching the movie channel while May slept next to her.

“He must have thought it was the mailman dropping off a package downstairs.”

“But who is he?” May said. “Where’s his kids?”

“Where *are* his kids? He doesn’t have any.”

“Why not?” Sasha asked. This seemed to disturb her even more than his nudity.

“I don’t know. You’ll have to ask him. He’s just a neighbor, and he’s going to help us get into our apartment. That’s all.”

Trip returned, wearing jeans. He seemed agitated, but he invited them into the living room, which looked very different than she remembered it. His bookshelves didn’t hold books but rather expensive camera equipment and a strange collection of super hero toys, while all of his large coffee table photography books lined up in a neat vertical stack against the exposed brick of the non-working fireplace between the windows. He probably never read them. They were too neat.

“Don’t touch, anything,” Colette said. The girls sat in the high stools at the breakfast bar spinning left and right, laughing, ignoring the adults.

“I apologize. I’ve just had a horrendous day,” she said. “Really. I ran into an old friend and I had this thing, this meeting. You don’t want to hear about it. And the keys on top of all that.”

He nodded as he searched through his phone for the number of the superintendent of the building. She could have avoided all of this.

“I thought that, you know,” he said, raising an eyebrow in the direction of the girls, and continued, “that you were coming alone.” He was not apologetic. He seemed irritated, as though she’d been responsible for exposing him.

“I’m sorry,” Colette said.

Finally, he found the number and dialed for her. He handed her his phone and when the man answered she explained her situation, pacing around the room near the stack of books. She noticed that they were arranged alphabetically.

In the kitchen, Trip tried to make conversation, asking names, ages, basic information, and May answered quietly, while Sasha drew pictures with her finger on the counter top. Then she heard May ask, “You don’t have any girls like us?”

“I only want boys,” he said, laughing at his own joke. “Just kidding.”

But he didn’t answer the question, or if he did, Colette didn’t hear his response. She made plans to meet the super in an hour and prepared to take the girls elsewhere to wait, but then Trip offered to make them a frozen pizza for dinner. He opened a bottle of wine, poured a glass for himself and one for Colette. There were only two stools so the girls sat while Colette and Trip stood. May peeled the cheese off the pizza and left a congealed mountain on her plate. She told the only joke she could tell.

“A duck walks into the store and says, ‘Got any gwapes?’” May began.

“And the owner says, nope,” Colette said, who loved the duck joke and had taught it to May. Watching May tell a joke was painful because May had to get every word right. She was

reminded of that first time May had glided away on her scooter in the church parking lot. If May missed a beat, the punch line was ruined, and there was nothing Colette could do about it.

“I’m telling it,” May said, kicking her feet against the stool under the counter. “Then the duck goes back the next day, and he says, ‘Got any gwapes?’, and the owner is getting mad, and he says, ‘I told you yesterday, I ain’t got no grapes and if you ask me again I’ll nail your beak to the wall. So what do you think happens?’” May said.

Trip shrugged.

“Take a guess.”

May got that from her dad, Colette guessed. Andrew always wanted her to postulate on how things might turn out.

“I don’t know. Maybe the duck asks for apples.”

“Nope, you’re wrong. The duck goes back and says, ‘Got any nails?’, and the owner says, ‘nope,’ and so the duck says, ‘Got any gwapes?’”

They laughed. Colette sighed in relief.

“Get it?” May said. “If he doesn’t have any nails he can’t hammer his beak.”

Trip choked on his wine while doing Donald Duck impersonations, and it squirted through his nose, which the girls found hilarious.

The super was late, and they watched TV, sitting around like a family. Colette hoped it would help them forget everything else from earlier. This, she thought, was how something sexual turned into something more. The roadrunner zoomed through the desert. She wanted to reach over and take Trip’s hand, but that was his job. As they were leaving, Trip leaned over and whispered that he already knew the ending of the duck joke. “Thanks for pretending,” Colette said, squeezing his arm, feeling his bicep as she stepped out into the hall.

When Colette and the girls finally got into the apartment, the keys were on the counter, just as she'd suspected. They were all exhausted, but she stripped the kids down and forced herself to give them a bath, which took up a good part of the evening. They fell asleep after some whining and stories, and she was at last alone with her nightcap and her book. She wondered if Trip would text. He didn't. Before she went to sleep, she sent him a message.

you were gweat

But he never wrote back.

That Sunday when Polly and David returned and took Sasha home, Colette and May sprawled out in their urban emptiness. They devoted the afternoon to nothing. May had been wearing her pink tutu since Saturday morning and was still prancing about casting magic, happy-princess spells with her wand. Stretched out across the hard wood floor, Colette had dozed off underneath the "castle" of pillows and bed sheets, with an unread newspaper. The afternoon light blazed through the open window.

May slid under the sheets and into the fort next to Colette. She put her face so close that Colette could feel her hot, deep breaths. Colette opened her eyes, and May stared back.

"My stomach hurts," May said, with great sincerity, and Colette opened her eyes wider, yawning, roused with concern.

"Like how? Where?"

"Here," May said, pointing to her bellybutton and then circling around.

"Are you hungry?"

"I need a milkshake."

“You do, do you? Would that make your stomach better?”

“Every girl needs a milkshake sometimes,” May said. Her voice strained for the same authority her teachers must express when repeating the golden rule or facts about mammals, but her eyes glimmered, innocent and hopeful.

“You know what I think,” Colette said, reaching for May, wrecking the fort as she sat up and leaned over her. “You’re full of it.” She blew a raspberry on May’s belly.

“Full of what?” May asked.

For dinner, they walked over to Avenue A, sat down in a booth at Odessa, and ordered a large chocolate milkshake with two straws. When the waitress brought it out, May clapped her hands.

WE ARE WHAT WE HAVE LOST

Ella cleaned baking-soda residue from miniature volcanoes and took down crepe-paper streamers. At next year's science fair she would ban explosions. When she turned to toss a paper towel in the wastebasket, she noticed Logan standing at the door of her classroom, his pale-green button-down shirt now untucked from his khakis and unbuttoned at the top. He held his hands clasped behind his back, looking more like a student than a fourth-grade math teacher. Ella and he often graded papers together in the teacher's lounge, working their way through each unit, since the math and science curricula overlapped.

"I'm looking for the Environmental Threats and Global Warming exhibit," Logan said.

"You're in the right place."

"Very nice," he said, inspecting a diorama of the earth's core. "Yes. Well, I need a drink." He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and cracked his knuckles. "Do you have any booze?"

She shook her head.

"Me either. Let's go get a drink."

"I can't." She dunked a T-shirt rag in a bucket of soapy water and wiped down a desk.

"You're too good," he said.

"I'm being observed tomorrow. Got to clean."

“I’ll help you.” Logan pushed his sleeves up and dunked his hand in the bucket, catching her wrist a second before stealing the rag. He sopped it against the chalkboard, wiping away students’ names: Tamika Jones, Christopher Reynolds, Joseph Riley. He erased the list in a few sweeping motions.

“There. Done.” He dropped the rag in the bucket and took a step toward the window. “Look at that,” he said, gazing at the New Orleans sky.

“You mean that?” she said. She pointed to the tangle of wires hovering near a streetlamp. She should send him away. Instead, she stood beside him, observing the clouds, the limbs of a sprawling live oak, and the telephone wires stretching from one vertical post to the next. She felt his gaze transfer from the skyline to her profile. If she looked at him, he might kiss her, and she’d have to admit that since her husband had deployed for duty, the marriage was stretched taut.

But Logan wouldn’t cross the line. They were in school, in her classroom.

“It’s New Orleans,” he said in that forgiving, almost proud way that some of the school social workers spoke after Katrina, as if to take ownership of the city’s rehabilitation. Where she was from in Alabama, the wires and poles were in good order, but here live wires twisted around dead ones. Ella had moved to New Orleans before the storm, but she still didn’t know the city well enough to understand it. Were they sinking into the swamp or rising from the ruins?

When she turned to say something about home, he kissed her.

Ella applied brown eyeliner across her upper lid and immediately wiped some of it off with a Q-tip. She didn’t want to look like she was trying too hard to look good for an informal picnic, and

she hoped Logan wouldn't realize she'd bought a new sundress just because she expected to see him there, at their coworker's birthday party. She blotted her pink lips with a tissue, pulled her dirty-blonde hair into a ponytail, and inspected herself from the back. Jogging paid off, and she was more of a size eight than a ten. She sprayed a hint of perfume on her wrists.

On her way out the door, she hesitated in the living room. Before Sebastian left, he had bought her a bottle of wine at the grocery store. Not a big deal, not expensive, but mostly they drank beer, so it was special. "For you," he'd said, placing the bottle on their mantel. "Drink it when you miss me."

"No. I'll save it." They both knew she wasn't going to drag the canoe around from the backyard, rig it somehow to the roof of the SUV, and drive an hour out of the city to sit in the bayou sipping Merlot all by herself. She loved those moments, though, when they drank good wine from plastic cups and bobbed along over lily pads and through the trees, peacefully listening to the frogs. "We'll celebrate when you get back."

"Whatever you want," he'd said, kissing her forehead.

Now, she was already running late and didn't want to stop to buy a bottle. She would bring this one to the party and replace it afterward. Sebastian would never find out, but as she slipped it in her bag, she felt as if she'd stolen something.

She sat apart from the others at one of the picnic tables. She'd kicked off her sandals, which cut deep, red lines into her feet. The grass felt cool. She'd been drinking sangria. The others had switched to beer, but she'd been scooping alcohol-soaked pieces of peach from her plastic cup into her mouth until she remembered the wine in her bag. She fished out the bottle and found a

corkscrew. She wondered what Sebastian would be doing now. Driving a tank through the desert? Waking up? Watching porn? Eating lunch? No, it was later than that. Maybe he was thinking of her, writing her an email.

She poured herself a cup. Someone had brought a croquet set to the park. They'd played for a bit, but now the mallets and balls lay strewn about the lawn. A couple searched for the pieces of the set as the sun sank below the horizon. A few kids cartwheeled through. Most of the other teachers stood around the keg, refilling their cups and discussing next year's budget cuts. She looked for Logan. Maybe he was smoking a joint or walking with the others by the river. He had avoided her all night. Well, it was for the best. She'd see him Monday at school.

Just as she rose to say her good-byes, Logan appeared. How had he known she was about to leave? He pulled her back into a seated position, sat down, plopped his backpack on the bench between them, and pulled out a small chess set.

"I can't believe you brought that."

"I knew you'd be here. Carpe diem."

"The party's ending, I think."

"Let them go. It's a park. We can stay as late as we want."

"But it's getting dark."

He pointed to the streetlamps and set up the board.

"You'll have to teach me," she said. "I learned from a ten-year-old with a lisp. I never remember the rules."

He explained that the knight could move in L-turns and that the pawns could move two spaces forward the first time, one at a time after that. Ella waved good-bye as some of the guests

headed for their cars. The hosts packed up lawn chairs, and she wondered aloud if she should go help.

“No. Stay here. You’re always so worried about everybody else.” He poured wine into his plastic cup and more into hers.

“So,” he said. “Can I ask you a serious question?”

Her stomach danced. Why did he have to make harmless flirting into something else? Why did he have to destroy the fun part of her day?

“When are you leaving your husband?” He smiled his joking smile.

“Never,” she said, smiling back.

“I like you, Ella.”

“Don’t tell me this.” She placed her left hand on the board so that he could see her wedding ring. “Please. It’s not fair.”

He pushed a chess piece across the board. “This thing we have between us doesn’t happen all the time,” he said. “I mean, we get along really well. Don’t you think? Don’t you find it confusing?”

It was true. She could see their future unfold: They would post the same *New Yorker* cartoons on the fridge and ride their bikes through City Park, armed with binoculars for the birds. They would buy a house and raise tall, brave boys. They would grow old grading tests and marking mistakes, passing their concerns back and forth, smiling beneath their bifocals.

“We’re friends,” she said. “What’s so confusing?”

“I know you’re not happy with him.”

“He’s in Iraq. I’m not supposed to be happy.”

Ella poured herself more wine. She hadn't realized when Sebastian deployed that it would be so hard to keep in touch. Technically, it was easy. There was Skype and email, and cheap long-distance rates. She wrote him long emails telling him about her day and the kids in her class. She ended them all with *xoxo* over and over. He said he didn't know how to explain feelings in words, so he sent her links to YouTube videos. *Ha ha*, she wrote back, *but how are you? Are you really okay out there?* She got one-word answers and smiley faces. He'd always hated writing. In college, she'd outlined his papers for him: thesis; topic sentence one, two, and three; conclusion; suggestions for how he could fill in the details. He'd helped her with history exams. She could never remember the dates of important events.

When he was home he didn't need to announce his love. She felt close to him because they shared the stuff of life. They cooked dinner and watched documentaries on the Discovery Channel. They debated which brand of olive oil to buy, worried about Sebastian's cousin's drinking problem, picked apart whichever movie they'd just seen, discussed how to handle Ella's student who peed his pants to get attention, and planned camping trips. Those conversations sustained them. But all the miles between them made the mundane unworthy. How many times could she write *xo* before the letters lost their meaning? Maybe the distance felt so vast because they'd never been apart this long.

"You're not married," she said. "It's complicated." She'd already told Logan too much. She imagined how her husband might feel, seeing her playing chess and drinking wine with another man.

Her thoughts of Sebastian faded, and she wanted to stretch out the game. Maybe her life had already fractured. Logan pointed to her knight. She went through the possibilities in her

head. He would take her pawn, but then she would take his, and they would be even. She made her move.

“Are you sure you want to do that?”

She moved the knight back and slid another piece over. As soon as she did she realized that she’d abandoned her rook. “Logan.”

“Sorry. Have to take your rook.”

“If you must.” She folded her hands, and rested her chin on her knuckles.

“I don’t think we can be friends,” he said. He looked like a boy, the way he bit his lower lip when he studied the board. “I don’t want to be something that you come to regret. Well, I do, in a way,” he said. “Let’s have an affair or something.”

“Very funny.”

Later that night, she drafted an email telling Sebastian that she had met someone.

In the morning, she deleted the message. She felt good about her resolve. Her head pounded from drinking too much, but she’d survived Logan and that game of chess.

By the afternoon, she was a wreck. Sebastian had been injured in combat. Really injured. As in, will never be the same. They didn’t tell her much about how it happened. She blamed herself. She never should have shared that bottle of wine with Logan. Physically, scientifically, technically, she knew she hadn’t hurt Sebastian, but if she was honest with herself—that was the phrase Logan had used that so irritated her—if she was honest with herself, she knew that she had betrayed Sebastian.

*

Ella pronounced her love on Sebastian's fingertips, one kiss after another. At the hospital, she sat as close to his bed as possible. The nurses showed her how to care for him, and tending to his wounds was scientific in a way that she liked. He'd lost his right hand and right leg from the knee down. Every night before he went to sleep, she washed the stumps and dressed them, to keep down swelling, as if her only purpose in life was to care for what remained of his body. When she saw herself in the mirror, she hardly recognized the red-nosed, blubbering mess she'd become.

"What's wrong?" he asked, when she wiped her eyes during the sports report.

Looking over at him, pale and weak, stubble on his chin, half of him gone, she wasn't sure what to say. She shrugged. "Nothing." She reached for his hand. She resented him for leaving and for returning alive but injured. Maybe it would have been easier if he'd never returned. She hated herself for thinking it.

"I'm fine," he said. "We're going to be just fine."

After a month in the hospital, he came home. Every day was something. Just to wake up on a Sunday morning and see Sebastian eating a bowl of cereal or watching the Saints game. Just to hear the steady whir of the washing machine and know she'd filled it with his dirty socks, underwear, T-shirts. Before he got out she'd hired construction workers to build a ramp along the side of the house for his wheelchair and put in metal bars in the bathroom, next to the toilet and on the wall by the claw-foot tub.

Ella almost forgot that she'd confided to Logan her love of the periodic table of elements and Emily Dickinson and paper dolls, all the little details she'd never bothered to tell Sebastian

because there seemed no point. But when Sebastian fell into a silent and morose daze, or his mug slipped from his plastic hand, spilling coffee on the carpet, she imagined ripping apart what they'd built, their messy, spit-sealed nest of sticks.

The hardest part about being married to the beast (his phrase, not hers), Ella thought, existed not in the ugliness of the stumps and the scars, but in his self-hatred mingled with devotion. She felt he might extinguish her with his love, killing himself in the process. He depended on her, which felt both good and oppressive. She sometimes wondered what her life could have been if she had sent that email. Easier, that's for sure. Or maybe not. Her life now had purpose and duty.

"So, how are you?" Logan said that first Monday, when Ella returned after taking all her vacation days to care for Sebastian. "I heard what happened," he said. "I'm so sorry."

For what? For interrupting her marriage? For her husband's injury? Or was he sorry for her? Sorry that she couldn't have escaped with him?

"Thanks," she said, adjusting the stack of worksheets on her desk. She tried to be polite but cool, so that he understood that she could no longer be around him. He reminded her of the imperfection of her marriage and how she had failed as a wife. She feared that if they spoke, she might reveal too much. She might confess that she had been lonely and bored, not really interested in him. She couldn't admit that in fact he still had a strange, strong pull for her. She couldn't engage with him for fear of losing herself.

He drummed his fingers on the door frame, as if he had more to say. "I'm sorry, Ella." He turned to go, then turned back around. "If you need anything, I'm right across the hall."

Now when she saw him at school, she held up a hand and waved, but they no longer graded papers together.

*

Sebastian didn't want to talk about the war. He made dumb jokes all the time. Laughing meant everything was okay.

"Toilet's running," Ella called out when she was cleaning the bathroom one Saturday morning.

"Well, you better go after it because I sure as hell can't."

"Don't joke." She rolled her eyes to play along but wrapped her arms around him from behind his chair and pressed her heart into the top of his head, kissing him upside down. She hoped he would never stop trying to make her laugh because laughing seemed to be the only normal thing between them. "You're lucky to be alive."

"You know what they call the day you almost die?"

"No. What?"

"Your 'alive day.' You're supposed to have a party. Like bigger than your birthday."

"Well, if you want one of those, you better fix the toilet."

Later, Ella came home from the grocery store and heard loud music coming from the den, something she didn't recognize but that made her smile because that sort of thing had been missing since he returned. She set the paper bag on the kitchen table.

"Sebastian," she called, and went to find him.

He was lifting weights. He finished a curl, grinned, and showed off the bulge of his bicep. The wheelchair sat empty in the corner. They had told him that prosthetics wouldn't work, but he'd been determined to prove them wrong. He'd mastered the vital skills, could do independent transfers, go from a sitting to a standing position, and walk the parallel bars. Putting on his leg by himself took a full hour. With her help, they could do it in ten minutes.

“Just like Popeye,” she said. “I bought pork chops, and I thought we could grill corn on the cob. I just have to run out—”

“No,” he said, kissing her neck and rubbing his hand, the fake one, over her body. She laughed as he poked her ribs with the hard plastic. She tasted bitterness, beer on his breath.

“I forgot to get more beer. And ice.”

He covered her mouth with a kiss. “I missed you.” It had been a long time. Three months since he’d come home. He reached for his cane and held out the crook of his arm. He led her slowly toward the bedroom.

“Take off your shirt,” he commanded.

“It’s a dress.” She laughed, nervous around him, as if they were new lovers and hadn’t yet seen each other in daylight.

“Whatever it is. Take it off.”

“We have people coming over,” she protested, though she’d been waiting for him to take her the way he did when he was whole. He pulled off his shirt, his shorts, and his boxers, so that he stood naked before her. She studied his body: the hair on his chest, the scar from where his appendix had been removed when he was a child, his slight belly, his thigh sloping into a rounded nub where his knee should have been, his white plastic hand, and his eyes watching her undress. She went to take him in her mouth, but he pushed her back.

“Lie down,” he said. He slid into bed next to her so that they were diagonal across the ivory sheets. She turned to face him, and they kissed. He propped himself up on one side and grazed her nipples with his fingers, his real fingers, and then his tongue, more gently than he ever had.

“Move this way,” he whispered. “Give me your leg.” He kissed her calves, her ankles, her knees, the patches of fine blond hair she’d missed shaving. He kissed the beauty mark on her inner thigh. He was deliberate, fumbling, and unfamiliar. He squeezed her butt with his plastic hand, and she cried out in surprise. He laughed. He lost his balance and fell on top of her, and then he was on his back. She moved on top of him as if nothing had changed.

One afternoon as they drove home after physical therapy, Sebastian stared out the window. He’d probably never get used to being in the passenger seat.

“Almost done with all those wrist exercises,” she said, but she could tell he was thinking of something else. The road followed the bayou’s twists and turns. A pair of pelicans coasted then plummeted straight down into the water, fishing.

The baby kicked. “Somersaults again,” she said, reaching for his good hand to press against her belly. The baby had been a surprise, but a good surprise. Sebastian told everyone right away, though Ella was afraid they’d jinx it. He helped her clear out the den to make a nursery and prepared chocolate-chip pancakes when she craved something sweet and heavy. But sometimes he seemed annoyed by the list of possible names she’d left on the fridge and upset by the stack of baby books on the nightstand. Maybe they made him nervous. There were so many ways to screw up.

“I can’t feel anything.”

“You missed it.”

Sebastian stirred restlessly. He'd developed a painful bone spur on his right stump and was having to use the chair instead of his chicken leg, as he called his prosthesis. The week before, he'd fallen in the shower and bruised his tailbone. The complications irritated him.

"Why don't you tell me what it was like over there?"

"What's to talk about?"

"Were you scared?"

"Sometimes."

"Did you kill anyone?"

"It's a war, Ella."

Six months home and he still didn't want to talk about the details. She wanted to press him, but if he told her everything, would she have to do the same? And what would she say?

They ate dinner in front of the television then she showered while Sebastian watched the news. When she went to say goodnight, she found him in the kitchen tearing into the skull of a pomegranate, chewing the ripe, wet flesh to a pulpy carcass and spitting it out. Blood red seeds fell to the floor as he ravished the fruit with his good hand. When he couldn't open the garbage can, he pushed it over in frustration and smashed his head against the kitchen table, unaware of her presence in the doorway.

"Hey," she said.

He turned, unrecognizable, grotesque, hands red, and picked up another pomegranate. He threw it down, and the red shell cracked open, splattering juice.

"Stop," she said, but he looked away. She thought she saw tears. She went to him, but he flung out his good arm and held her off. "Come, please," she whispered. "We have to wash your leg."

“What leg?” he snapped. “You don’t have to do this,” he screamed. “You don’t have to be with me.”

“But I do. *Because*—”

“Because you feel sorry for me.”

“Because . . .” The words of a poem or a book she had maybe studied in college stirred. She closed her eyes, thinking, trying to remember, trying to get it right. “Because,” she said, “we are what we have lost.”

“So, you’re with me because I’m a cripple? Beauty and the beast? Is that it?”

“No, that’s not what I meant.”

“We? What’s this *we* shit? What about you? What have you lost? Your puppy when you were five? Donald Stevens your senior year of high school?”

She collapsed to her knees in front of him. “Don’t you think I feel for you? Don’t you think this hurts me?”

“It’s not the same.”

“Please,” she said. “Let me help you.”

He pushed her off. Eventually she went to sleep without him, afraid for their unborn child, and certain that their words had caused too much damage. She was far enough along that if she slept on her back, she pinched an artery and her legs fell asleep, so she slept on her side, tucked into a cloud of pillows. In the morning, she found the kitchen chairs right side up and the tiles scrubbed white. The scent of lemon erased the night’s shame and doubt. Not a drop. Not a seed. He must have crawled his way across the floor.

Now he sat in the yard, watching the birds.

She remembered a game she used to play with her sister while they waited for their mother to pick them up from school. They sat on invisible chairs with their backs pressed flat against the cinderblock wall, their thighs parallel to the ground, and counted the seconds: one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi, until they could feel their muscles burning.

Torture. How much could they endure before they gave up? To push off the wall and stand meant you had retained some control, that perhaps you could have held out longer, or that you were chicken, afraid to hit the ground. Ella, being the eldest, usually won, but sometimes her thighs had given up too soon and gravity pulled her down. Her marriage had that same sinking feeling. She wanted to let go and fall, but also to stand.

Sebastian must have felt her presence because he turned his head, caught her eye, and smiled. She couldn't deny the heaviness, the weight of making it work, but she couldn't walk away. The birds fluttered, and Sebastian threw them a handful of seeds. She loved him, maybe more than ever.

One Saturday morning, Sebastian placed his hand on Ella's watermelon belly and kissed her before he strapped on his plastic hand, the hook, as she liked to call it, and slid out of bed.

"We need milk," she said.

"I'll go."

She was due in less than a month. She heard the tap, tap, tap, as he hobbled with his cane to find his chicken leg. He worked his way into it without her help. Lying in bed, she watched him walk with a slight limp, his prosthesis covered in denim. A year had passed now, more than

a year. They'd forgotten to celebrate Sebastian's alive day. She gazed out the window. A flock of birds circled and landed at even intervals on the telephone cables that stitched the sky.

HOW TO KILL THE SLIMY BASTARDS

Logan sat on a bench outside the principal's office where the kids sat when they got in trouble. But he wasn't a kid, and he wasn't in trouble. Or maybe he was. He deserved to be fired. A sculpture of a cherubic, bronze child hovered over the stairwell, suspended from the ceiling. A plaque on the wall read, "Aspirations." At one time, Logan had a few of those.

After Katrina, he'd moved to New Orleans, which offered empty, vine-covered schools and more than enough low-paying jobs to go around. He landed a position at a charter school, one of the relatively good ones, through a government program that recruited young people with no teaching experience, good grades, and few other interests or obligations in life. He'd spent summers canoeing through the outer banks, gone to college in a small, sad town in Ohio, traveled through South America with only a backpack and a copy of Catch-22, but none of that had prepared him for teaching. That first day the class looked like a field of sunflowers: brown heads poking out from yellow shirts. He beamed back at them, nervous and hopeful.

Now, three years later, he felt tired all the time. Depleted. The school and the kids ate him up, devouring his sanity. Defeat crept like mold around the corners of his life. Termites chewed through his porch, and orange plaque fanned out around the base of his toilet. His backyard smelled like dog shit. He thought about the pile of laundry in his bedroom and Miranda, probably still asleep in his bed. He hunched forward with his head down the way he

used to sit when the coach benched him during the last two minutes of a losing game. He prayed that Miranda wouldn't be there when he got back and resolved to stop calling her.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up. The word squeaked out of his mouth.

"Ella," he said. Surprised to see her, he stood.

"It's so sad," she whispered.

"What?" He shook his head, not understanding what she meant. He could see that she'd been crying.

"Oh, I thought you knew."

"Knew what? I was just about to talk to Ed." He hated visiting Ed, the principal, the dispenser of bad news, and there was always more of it. Somebody stole a laptop. Somebody brought a knife to school. Somebody beat up somebody else. Somebody's dad was arrested for dealing drugs. Ella was the only one who still got worked up enough to cry, or maybe that just happened to pregnant women. Logan hated that he was used to it, that he had come to expect violence and destruction. "Now you have to tell me."

"You know Jerome?" she asked. "The skinny one?"

"Yes." Jerome hadn't been in class all week, but over the course of the semester he'd become Logan's special project. Jerome had made substantial progress. He'd stopped biting other kids, yelling and banging his desk every time he didn't get his way, and he no longer lit toilet paper rolls on fire and punted them down the hall just to get attention. He did his homework about half of the time. He was smart, though, and he had so much potential. If Logan could just get Jerome to care all of the time instead of some of the time, Jerome would pass and Logan would feel that he had succeeded, even if he had failed with so many of his students.

"He shot his little brother," she said.

"Terell?"

Ella hugged Logan, comforting him. He held on the way he had in the school parking lot months ago. For her that hug must have been a goodbye, but at the time he thought that if he could hold onto her long enough, she would be his. "Almost killed him," she continued.

"Happened Monday night. An accident. I guess all the kids are in foster care now."

The fluorescent lights hummed. He smelled something sweet, her shampoo, and wanted to burrow into her. He could feel her pregnant belly press against him. She pulled away and wiped her eyes. She was due any day.

Monday—the fish bowl incident was Monday.

"I didn't do enough," Ella said.

"You can't blame yourself." Logan blamed himself.

"But I do. I gave back their tests on Monday, and I gave them all this 'talking to' about their grades. I gave him a look, you know, specifically in front of everyone. I was trying to scare them. You know, because testing is next week. I shouldn't have been so harsh with him."

"You were doing your job."

"And there was this time, when I saw him looking out the window, daydreaming, and I said, 'What do you see out there?' and he looked at me with such sorrow, such confusion. I just helped him with one of his graph problems. He left all the other answers blank, except that one that we'd completed together."

"You did your best."

"I can't even teach them not to kill."

"It was an accident."

Ella raised her eyebrows, as if she wasn't sure about that, and rested her hands on her stomach. He couldn't believe she was having a baby. How did he still find her attractive even though she grew bigger each day? He didn't have this same urge with other pregnant ladies. Just her. He shouldn't be thinking about that at a time like this. He forced himself to picture Jerome and his little brother.

Logan had given his class a pep talk at the beginning of the year. "It's not about those kids out there or these challenges around you," Logan had said. "Doesn't matter if kids on the streets are saying this or saying that. It's about what's in here," he'd said, tapping his head. "Use your head. You control your actions."

"But, Mr. McCormick," Jerome had said, smiling his twinkling little smile. "What about in here?" He placed his hands over his heart.

"Yeah, listen to that too."

"That's what my grandma say. But which one? How do you know which one to use?"

Yes, Logan thought. Heart? Mind? Body? Which one? How do you know? Sometimes it felt to Logan that Jerome was the teacher, not the other way around.

"I think life just gets harder," Jerome had said, sighing. "People come out good and then they turn bad. That's what happens."

Was he right? Logan had wondered. Had Jerome turned bad?

"I can't do it anymore," she said. "I can't keep failing over and over. When you know you don't make a difference . . ."

"But that's not true."

"Just when you start to get somewhere, some big wave comes and washes it all away. Knocks you over."

"It's okay," Logan said softly. He tried to be strong for her, but the dead words dropped on the floor. He had so much to say. He missed how they used to grade projects in the teacher's lounge and monitor recess together. He missed helping her rearrange the filing cabinets and pulling down the map in her classroom when it stuck. He missed the way she laughed at his jokes. If only her husband had died in Iraq.

"What are they going to do with Jerome?" Ella said. As soon as she dried her eyes, more tears came. "How do you learn after something like that?"

Logan watched as Ed finished up a call, slammed down the phone, leaned forward in his chair, and banged his fist on his desk. He'd been a lacrosse player in college. The veins near his temples bulged out, and his face always looked flushed and taut.

"Logan, sit down."

"Hey, Ed."

"So, how did they do on their practice LEAP? I didn't get your reports."

Of course, Ed wasn't calling a meeting to talk about the fish or the toilet or Jerome. He wanted to talk about testing. "I put them in your box."

Ed shuffled through a stack of papers. "My bad." Ed studied the results of Logan's class's practice exam. "We've got to get these numbers up."

"I know."

"What are those other schools doing that we're not doing?"

"I don't know."

"Find out."

"Okay."

Ed slipped his glasses off his face and rubbed the bridge of his slightly crooked nose.

"Oh, one more thing. Bad news about Jerome and Terrell."

"I heard."

"Anything unusual you noticed with Jerome? Anything that would have provoked him to act in such a violent way?"

Logan shrugged, avoiding the question.

"Right. Well, keep your head up, and let me know if you think of anything."

"Will do."

Ed nodded, slipped his letter opener into the corner of a sealed envelope, and picked up his phone to signify that they were finished. Logan stood. Just as he was about to escape through the open door, Ed lifted his shiny bald head and called after him.

"You look terrible."

Logan nodded.

"Get some sleep."

"Yeah. Thanks."

In the afternoon, Logan returned to class as if nothing had happened. He smiled, as if he truly

enjoyed nursing a hangover all day while preparing fourth graders with P.T.S.D. and A.D.D. for standardized testing in subjects outside his area of expertise. He passed out the vocabulary bingo worksheets. He wrote a list of science words on one half of the board and social studies words on the other half.

"So, for example, the definition of democracy is a form of government where people vote for their leaders and are free to make choices about their lives, which is why America is no longer a democracy." Nobody laughed. Obviously. Fourth graders have no sense of humor, he thought. "Just kidding. Don't repeat that part. So, I'll read the definition, and if you have the word on your paper then you cover it with your poker chip. You're trying to get three in a row. Diagonals are okay. Got it?"

Some of them nodded to show they understood.

"Okay. Here we go. The energy of motion." Logan moved around, past Jerome's empty desk. He couldn't stop. He paced. He walked through and around them while they bounced and tapped their pencils. "The energy of motion." Kinetic. They studied their words. Come on now, kinetic. Some of the kids got it and covered the word with a poker chip.

"An element on the map that tells you what the directions are." Compass. "A circuit that is not complete." Open circuit. Duh. "The transfer of heat from one object directly to another."

"Conduction," Lanika yelled out.

"Shhhhh," Logan said. "You just gave everybody the answer."

She covered her mouth. He should have deducted points for that, but he was too tired to care.

"The path one body takes in space as it revolves around another body. Like the earth around the sun." Orbit. "The next definition—we're coming down to the wire, looks like Stacy and Azadah might tie—a resource that once used cannot be replaced in a reasonable amount of time." Non-renewable resources.

From across the room, Shaun stood, bounced and banged his desk.

"Sit down, please."

But he flew up again. "I got it. I got it. Renewable resource."

"Almost."

They finished the game. A few kids won lollipops. The stomping stopped, and he admired the stillness in the room. Though it had taken almost all year, they could finally put their heads down and work for five minutes without interruption. He noticed that they behaved better without Jerome. They must not have heard the news or maybe some of them had, but they didn't mention it.

Logan graded papers at his desk and drank lukewarm coffee. He placed a star sticker on each paper, for effort, even if the student got more wrong than right. Monday would bring more questions about Jerome. Maybe the administration would discover what an asshole they'd hired. Maybe that would be a good thing. He wasn't sure anymore about anything.

At least it was Friday.

Logan couldn't stop thinking about Ella or Jerome, so, naturally, as soon as the last little maniac ran down the hall and out the door, he texted Miranda, who wrote back in irritating exclamation

points. By the time Miranda met him at the bar, though, Logan had settled deep into guilt and decay, watching the disco ball dance above the pool table.

"Tough day with the kiddies?" Miranda asked, sliding onto the bar stool next to him. She had crooked teeth, which Logan had at one time found attractive in a British pop star way. Ella didn't have crooked teeth. Across the room, a player cued up, took a shot, and flailed his arms in exasperation, knocking the disco ball above the table so that it swung violently from side to side. Pins of light scattered around the room.

"The worst," Logan said.

"Tell me about it," Miranda said. "This guy came into the store today and honestly . . ."

She was easy to talk to because she did the talking. The sound of her voice irritated him as much as the elephant stomp that disturbed his classroom during band rehearsal. She went on and on, about herself. Logan watched her hands wave in the air and remembered how he used to observe Ella's class for inspiration. She always clapped her hands together, while explaining photosynthesis or precipitation, brushing the chalk dust from her fingertips as she spoke.

Somehow, despite all the behavioral problems, the antagonistic administration, the paperwork, and the standardized testing, she remained optimistic, proud of small accomplishments. She seemed to grow stronger from giving so much of herself. At first, he watched her teach in order to become a better teacher and later because he wanted to win her over. He tried throughout the fall semester to get her to fall in love with him. It worked. Almost. Her husband came back, and now she pretended that she and Logan had never shared anything at all.

"Am I boring you?" Miranda said, suddenly serious.

"No."

"I feel like you're not even paying attention." She lit a cigarette and stared at him.

"You were talking about some guy who couldn't pick out a ring for his wife."

She didn't look satisfied with that answer. Logan bought her a shot. She took it down in one swift motion and seemed pleased with him once again. She tapped her nails against the bar's surface and blew smoke in his direction. She cleared her throat, and he could see her mouth begin to move. She began telling a story, but he couldn't even feign being interested.

"Actually, I have to go," he said. He knew what was supposed to happen. They would drink more and stumble home, the same as last night. She would keep talking then moving then talking and he would keep pretending to care, but he couldn't breathe. The pins of light made him dizzy. The smoke choked him. He had to get air. "Something for work."

"On a Friday night?"

"Sorry."

Logan biked home and found a note that Miranda had left him from the night before. He crumpled up her hearts and loud punctuation marks. He ordered a pizza, ate half of it, and started on his case of Bud Light. He enjoyed promising himself only one beer then drinking six more. He watched a special about the invention of the light bulb. The whole premise seemed to be that everybody gives Edison all the credit, but many more people were doing the same sort of thing before he ever came along. Stupid. All of it.

Logan flipped off the TV, threw the rest of the beers in his backpack, and set off on his

bike. He thought he'd find his friends at Fat Harry's. Instead, he found himself riding through the Irish Channel where Ella lived.

He hadn't planned to go to her house, but once he was in her neighborhood, he thought he'd take a look. He rode past quickly. Too quickly. He couldn't tell if she was home. He circled the block, and the next time he pedaled down the middle of the street and paused. Sweet potato vines and pansies flowered in the window boxes, and two white Adirondack chairs faced the street.

The clouds skated across the sky. Logan finished his beer and threw the can on someone's lawn. Being reckless felt good. He didn't give a fuck anymore about that bullshit school and all his sorry kids, about lame excuses, and the tests, and the principal breathing down his neck. He locked his bike to a stop sign and drank two of his beers quickly. S-T-O-P. Stop what? he thought. With a third beer in his hand and a fourth in his pocket, he started toward her house. He felt determined to see her and know what she was doing. What could she be thinking about after a day like today? Did she tell her husband about it?

He approached from the side, crossing the neighbor's lawn, and noticed lights on in the middle of the house where the kitchen or dining room might be. He hadn't been inside, but he could picture the layout: the living room leading into the dining room, then the bedroom. He crept along the side of her house. He couldn't see anything because the curtains were drawn shut. When he jumped up to peer through the window to what he thought was the kitchen, he knocked his foot against a metal watering can. If someone came out, he'd crawl under the house or jump the low metal fence and hide in the neighbor's yard. Nothing happened. Satisfied that Ella must not be home, he marched on through to the back.

The yard, mostly grass and a few banana trees, didn't impress him. He admired their grill, which looked expensive, and a few cheap lawn chairs around a table with an umbrella. As he crossed the yard to sit, the motion lights switched on. He froze. He should turn around, but nobody came out, so he took a seat and stretched his legs and sipped his beer. A fat, black slug chugged along the plastic lip of the table. Logan watched it slime its way forward, extending its sensory tentacles into nothing. Could he really see anything or was he just feeling for the next place to go, the right thing to do?

He poured beer on the slug. "Didn't see that one coming, did you?"

The liquid pooled and dripped off the table. The slug kept moving, reaching for something. Ella taught him that the way to kill a slug was to leave out a saucer of beer. They drink it and drown. She found a website called "How to Kill the Slimy Bastards." Beer was the most humane method. When she'd told him about her slug problem, they'd stood close together in her classroom super gluing the handle back onto her favorite mug, which he'd dropped on the tile floor of the kitchenette in the teacher's lounge. She kept using the mug even though he offered to replace it. That was the kind of person she was. She liked saving broken things.

Logan kept going over the fish bowl incident in his mind. He'd started the day with Bob Marley the way he always did. For the length of one song, the kids knew what to do. Like some kind of performance, they rearranged desks, picked up folders, and put away binders. When the song ended, the kids were usually calm and focused.

"Please take out your study guide number five," he'd said, and from there everything went

to shit. Emmanuel had gripped his desk, covering his mouth, laughing so hard his body shook.

"What's so funny?" Logan had asked.

The boy couldn't stop. The other kids watched him and laughed.

"Do you need to leave the room?"

"No, no, no," Emmanuel said. "I got to tell you something. Jerome flushed the fish down the toilet." In his New Orleans accent it sounded like ter-lit.

"No, I didn't," Jerome said, kicking Emmanuel's desk.

"Well then," Emmanuel said. "Where's the fish at?"

Lanika, the loud mouth drama queen, clasped her hands over her mouth and clicked her tongue. "Ooooooh," she said.

The class looked over at the empty fish bowl. A thin green layer of film edged its base, and slime covered the coral. Lately, with all the standardized testing, Logan had forgotten to change the water. He'd bought the fish at the beginning of the school year. The teachers had created a school-wide system of "paychecks" and "deductions" to reward and punish students. Logan had told his class that at the end of the year, the student with the most points in his "bank account" would get to take the fish home. Each student was responsible for the fish for an entire week so that they would all be invested in its growth and well-being. Logan had made a poster-board chart to keep track of fish-feeding duties. They named it Saint Nemo. Around the fish bowl, they'd made a shrine to the New Orleans Saints, and on game days all the boys crossed their fingers, kissed the glass, and prayed for victory.

"Thank you for your observation, Emmanuel. Jerome, can you please come up here?"

Jerome slid out of his desk and slumped over to Logan. He bit the end of his pencil and

rotated it with his tongue. He took his time, holding up his baggy pants with one hand. He probably only had one pair of pants, two at most, and they were too long. His mom, a "hooker-crackhead," the social worker's exact words, never came to parent-teacher conferences or answered Logan's calls. The school uniform, a T-shirt with the words "work hard" on the front and "be good" on the back, hung like a dress on him.

Logan had the urge to push him down with one finger at the sternum. He didn't have this urge with all the kids, just Jerome, who he imagined was as skinny and bony as he was as a boy. Because Jerome was weak and underfed, he tried to be bigger, tougher, meaner than he was, and he had days when he turned into a monster. Those days, there was nothing Logan could do. "Straighten up," he wanted to say. "Don't become what everyone expects you to become. Do better."

Pencils tapped. Upstairs, the kids thumped, practicing for the parade during carnival season. The pounding never ceased. Band practice.

"Jerome, did you flush the fish down the toilet?" Logan asked.

Jerome remained quiet, twisting and biting his pencil. His eyes glazed over, and he seemed very far away. Then he looked out the window, as if he couldn't hear Logan. In the past week or so, Jerome had taken to biting again, things like pencils and his clothing. There was a soaked circle of spit on the collar of his shirt. Logan asked him again.

"Yes," he said.

"Why?"

Jerome shrugged, his bony shoulders falling up and down in one swift motion. It made Logan feel that way too. Who cares? A fish is a fish. One fish. Two fish. Red fish. Blue fish.

They had read that book at the beginning of the year as part of the school-wide morning reading ritual. Some of the kids actually couldn't finish Dr. Seuss and had to be bumped down a grade.

"Was the fish alive when you flushed it down the toilet?" Logan asked.

"Yes."

"That means that you killed the fish."

"I wanted to see what would happen."

"What did you think would happen?"

"I don't know."

"What did you learn?"

He looked puzzled. "That terlits are not no fishbowl."

"The toilet is not a fishbowl. Do you promise me that you won't do this again?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, Mr. McCormick."

Logan hated himself, this Mr. McCormick he had become, but he couldn't stop. He bent over and pointed his finger between Jerome's eyes. That apology wasn't enough. Had Jerome purposely flushed the fish as a sort of fuck you to the points and paycheck system? Was that it? Logan had spent extra time helping Jerome with his review packet and stood up for him when he was about to get kicked off the basketball team. Logan had even bought Jerome a sweatshirt and a winter hat since he knew his mom couldn't afford to pay for heat. Logan prided himself on never letting the kids see him worked up, but now Jerome's face blurred. Relax, Logan told himself. It's a gold fish. Buy another one. Let it go. You've made your point.

But this was different. Logan could feel himself turning red. "How would you like it if I flushed you down the toilet?" Logan asked. "Huh? Would you like that?" He was sort of kidding, but when Jerome nodded his head, smiled, and started to laugh, Logan lost it. "What if you were just wiped away? Whshhh. Flush. No more Jerome."

The other kids laughed and whistled. When Logan stood and smoothed his shirt, Jerome reached for the chain around his neck and turned his head to the side. He narrowed his gaze and squinted out the window. If Logan softened now, they would have him for the rest of the day. There would be paper airplanes and gum wads like little turds on the overhead projector. But if he had known what would have followed, he would have stopped.

"Go to the desk in the back and think about what you did," Logan said.

"I hate you," Jerome shouted. He flipped over Logan's stack of folders and ran from the room.

Logan chased after him and caught him in the stairwell. Logan grabbed his shoulder. Jerome refused to look at him.

"You like that gold chain around your neck?" Logan asked.

Jerome shrugged.

"Give it to me," Logan said. Logan knew that Jerome's older brother had given it to him.

Jerome clasped the necklace, but Logan pried Jerome's hands from around the gold chain and dragged Jerome to the boy's bathroom. The stench of urine and shit and bleach and mildew rose from the narrow green stalls. Logan pushed back one of the stall doors and dropped the gold chain into the empty toilet bowl.

"Should I flush it?" Logan asked Jerome. "Should I piss on it?"

"No, no, no, please. I'm sorry. I'm sorry," he begged. "Mr. McCormick."

"Next time," Logan said. "Think. Think, Jerome. Why don't you think about what you're doing?"

"Why don't you?" Jerome said, under his breath.

You're right, Logan thought and released him.

Jerome reached his hand in the toilet to get the gold chain. He wrapped the necklace in toilet paper and stuffed it in his pocket. He pulled at his spit-soaked collar, scowling and muttering to himself like a demented old man.

Logan felt a hand on his back and smelled something sweet, vanilla, Ella, her perfume or lipstick or lotion. He opened his eyes. He felt disoriented until he looked up at her face framed by the night sky and realized that he'd fallen asleep with his head in his arms against the table where the slug had once crawled.

"Logan?" she said. "What are you doing here?" She looked frightened. She wore a man's white undershirt and sweatpants.

"I need you," he said. "I need you in my life."

"Are you drunk? What's wrong with you?"

He hiccupped loudly. "No. Yes. Yes, I am, but that doesn't mean I don't love you. Whatever you want me to do, I'll do it. I can super glue something or buy you new tires for your car like you said you needed. I can do those things."

"You sound crazy."

"I want to do those things. Please let me," he said. "Let me."

"I know you're upset about Jerome. I get it. So am I. But you can't come to my house like this."

"I know. I'm the worst."

"You need to go."

He held his breath to stop the hiccups. "I have to tell you something." How to explain that Jerome's accident was his fault? He had to tell her about the toilet and the necklace. She would forgive him because she could forgive anyone. But first he had to explain that it was all an accident. He had to start at the beginning. "When I was a kid we used to go camping at Devil's Lake in Wisconsin for a week every summer. All us cousins would go hiking and swimming. At night we roasted marshmallows and when you got to be a certain age you were allowed to take out the boats. My uncle—" He hiccuped. "My uncle had this little motorboat. One time my dad put Peter, my brother, on the boat to go trolling near where the railroad tracks cut along the lake, but he didn't bring me."

"'You stay here,' he said. 'Keep an eye on your mom.' I knew I'd been dumped in the same category as the crybaby cousins who had to wear life jackets and the moms with their magazines and my prissy sister who decorated her sand castle with flowers." He should stop now. Where was this going? "I found a bucket, and a net. I was going to show them how smart I could be. I'd have the best bait, and they'd be sorry they left me. I hunted the baby catfish. They look like minnows. They swim in schools in the shallow water." Why was he telling her all this? Was she listening? "Did you know who Saint Nemo is—?" He swiped his hand across his neck like he was cutting off his own head.

Ella nodded. "Monique said that Jerome tried to set him free, you know, like in that cartoon movie."

"What?"

"That Disney movie about the fish. They flush the fish down the toilet, out of the bowl into the ocean or whatever."

"Oh, no."

"Logan, please, I think you better go." Ella crossed her arms.

"So then my mom called me in for lunch, and I forgot the bucket in the sand."

He'd tried hard with Jerome—with all of his students, but somewhere in there he'd given up. He thought he could do anything, but he was wrong. Was that the message? Was that what he'd come down here to figure out? That he wasn't the man he thought he was? That he wasn't as brave or smart or determined as he'd hoped? He'd failed Jerome, Ella, himself, mostly himself. A loser, that's what he was. Or was the system too broken? Maybe you can't change other people. Maybe that's all it was.

"That's it? That's the end?" Ella asked.

What was he doing here? "I went climbing trees and forgot about the fish. Later, my dad found the bucket, and I got in trouble."

The baby catfish had looked like tadpoles with fins and whiskers, normally translucent, but in the bright sun they appeared menacing and dark, silvery, belly up against the baby blue of the bucket. He hadn't been able to look at his dad. Logan just shook his head no, pretending he had no idea how those fish died in that bucket. His father had given him a lecture about fishing. In the morning Logan went out to find the bucket and bury the fish. He made little individual

graves in the dirt under a pine tree and marked them with red legos.

"So?" she said, trying to pull him up out of the chair.

"I just think," he said, remembering his father kneeling down to talk to him, "that I can't do this anymore. I'm not strong enough."

"Do what?"

"My life. I was innocent then. I was kid. Just like Jerome is a kid. But I should know better now." And she should too. She should know better. She shouldn't settle, if that's what she was doing with her husband. To be with someone out of guilt was not okay. In the same way that it was not okay to kill or scare a child no matter the circumstances or the frustration or the situation. People make mistakes. But they should make them right. Of course, Logan would get away with his behavior in the bathroom. Nobody would question him about the necklace in the toilet, and if they did, he could deny it. It would be his word against Jerome's. He disgusted himself.

"You've got to go now. Sebastian's home. I only came out to change the laundry in the shed."

"Sit down, Ella. Sit down. I don't know what to do. I'm trying, but nothing works."

"With teaching?"

"With everything."

"You're being morose."

"I have to tell you something else."

"Please go."

"Just a second and then I'll leave you alone forever."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Ella sat beside him, and he held her arm. He pressed it between his palms.

"I am the one for you. I will make you way happier than he ever will. And I will love you more and forever. And that guy. Don't stay with that guy just because it's easy. And you're having his kid. And you feel bad because he got his leg blown off."

"If you could hear yourself, you'd stop—"

"Forget I said that part. Sorry. Okay, I just want you to know. You don't have to do that. I just want you to be happy. That's what I want for you. And I want you to choose me, and if you can honestly tell me that he's the one you want and not me, then I'll go. I'll leave you alone. Whshhh. Out of your life. Down the bowl."

"Logan," Ella said, as if he was one of her students and she was about to scold him. "You need to . . ." But she paused. His words settled in the lawn. "Logan, you're a good guy. Not right now, but in general you are."

"So?" His eyes asked the rest of the question.

"And that's it. You're a good guy."

Logan held up his hands in surrender. He pushed himself up and reached in his pocket for his last beer. He thought about drinking it but instead placed the unopened can on the table.

TRESPASSING

On the farm two paths lead through the woods. “The road,” as we like to call the first one, climbs straight up at a gentle pace, wide enough for the tractor or an SUV. The other path, nameless, narrow and less used, careens along the ridge, through the black walnut trees, around the perimeter to a rocky outcropping that we refer to as “the point.” You can see cornfields for miles, blankets of green in the summer, and white in the winter. Dairy cows, not ours, mill around in the fields across Highway 78, and our pond looks clear and refreshing, even though it’s not. From up here you can see the terrain below dip and curve, and you begin to understand why the Lutheran Norwegians who settled this part of Wisconsin named the county after the mountains of Vermont. From the point, the path turns, narrows through a patch of wild raspberries and drops you in a second grassy field.

One July day I wandered off the second path after the point, cutting sprigs of holly and cattails, careful to pluck my way around the yellow wild parsnip that can dye a person’s skin with black-and-blue marks that look like bruises. Not more than thirty feet in front of me, I noticed a lean-to with two windows that had been fashioned from scraps of wood we usually kept behind the shed. Protected by a boulder, hidden by the tall grass, and covered in a blue tarp, the tent, if you can call it that, hugged the ground so that a grown man would have had to crawl to get inside it.

More curious than frightened, I leaned down and peered through one of the window-like

openings. Inside, I saw a blonde man, probably in his twenties. He scratched his head as he sat up. Another man, who must have been on the other side of the lean to, peered through another opening opposite me. He too appeared to be somewhere in his twenties, but he had a patch over one eye, like a pirate. Sweat soaked through the bandana around his forehead, and his overalls fit close to his bare chest. He reminded me of someone. He opened and shut that one eye slowly, like a wink.

His look seemed to say to me, "Go ahead. Do what you have to do."

"Can I help you?" I said. I meant it more as a confrontation, but the blond inside the tent answered my question.

"No thanks."

"Is this your land?" the pirate asked. He chewed tobacco and spat the juice on the ground.

"It is." I looked around at the remains of the fire they had built and the pots and pans hanging from tree branches and felt something twist up inside. My throat constricted. "What're you doing?" I said.

"Oh, just living," the blond answered.

I thought about crying for help. I hadn't felt in danger like this in a long time. Who would rescue me? I figured my husband had probably fallen asleep or gone out to the putt-putt.

"Private property," I said. I needed to chop limes for margaritas, since it was getting to be around that time, and my friend would soon be arriving. I realized the danger of having strangers camping on our land. They could burn down the house or steal all my jewelry. They could murder us in our sleep in the middle of the night or fell all of our black walnuts, worth as much as ten thousand apiece, but I surprised myself. "You'll have to move on."

“We know. We always do,” the one with the patch said.

“Well, good,” I said.

The blond leaned forward and grabbed hold of my wrist. “Bring us a knife,” he said.

“What?”

“A kitchen knife. Your sharpest knife.”

“Right now?”

“Bring it tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Or else,” he said. “We’ll have to come and get it.” He smiled.

The one with the patch winked again. It made me feel, I realized as I walked toward the house with the wildflowers in my hand, aroused. Why did they need a knife? The pirate reminded me of someone I’d known a long time ago when I was in my twenties when the impossible seemed possible. I wondered how I must look to them, waddling away in my sundress, my blonde highlights invisible under my floppy hat.

Spencer’s father died seven years ago, leaving us the farmhouse in Wisconsin. Designed by the owner in the early twentieth century, the architectural behemoth, a great mistake or a gem depending on your point of view, lives on. I love it. Dark wood criss-crosses the white exterior and frames the window boxes in that Swiss Chalet style that is sometimes replicated in modern ski homes or hokey restaurants. Narrow stone archways lead to the shed and stables, which were long ago converted into a four-car garage.

Inside, inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright, the low ceiling draws you into the front hall. I

imagine I am being thrust into the belly of a ship. The narrow walls usher you along and spit you out in a room with thirty-foot ceilings. The intention here, I think, was to create a Japanese feel. One wall is mostly glass, made of narrow windows side by side. There's a courtyard with a greenhouse and a kitchen with cobbled floors and a great hearth, which now functions. When Spencer retired this past spring and we decided to stay out here for the summer, we renovated. We added appliances: a stove with restaurant-sized burners, more marble countertops, and a dishwasher.

The millionaire who envisioned the mansion made his money building furniture. He opened one store in Chicago. Soon he'd built a name and a reputation for himself. He expanded his line acquiring other items for the home then clothing, shoes, undergarments, until he'd developed a string of department stores. At some point, he sold off his empire. He was what Spencer calls a "a self-made man."

He married and divorced three times, deciding in the end that he preferred to be alone. He bought this land, built this place, and retired to finish it up, but one summer night, while he was standing on his martini deck, someone stabbed him in the back. When he turned, he was stabbed in the chest. After his murder, rumors circulated. The murderer was after his silver collection or his rare collection of kabuki puppets. Perhaps the husband of his mistress wanted revenge. They never solved the murder. The locals didn't want, nor could they afford, the spooked house, and it was abandoned until Spencer's great-grandfather, who'd made his fortune manufacturing paper in Milwaukee, put up his company as collateral. He paid what seemed like a lot of money at the time but almost nothing now. He was not a superstitious man.

*

By the time I made it back to the house, beads of sweat had formed on the fine hairs of my upper lip. I'd almost run the whole way. Near the driveway Spencer lined up a shot on a patch of lawn. He swung and the ball teetered near the edge of the hole and plopped in. I clapped my hands and hugged him from behind pressing my face into the back of his polo shirt, which smelled of insect repellent. I should have told him right then about the boys. They might be escaped convicts, murderers on the loose.

"You saw that one, Angie?" he asked, smiling.

I nodded. "Look," I said, showing him my small bouquet. I thought about the history of our house. Were they ghosts? Had they come back to haunt us? No, they were real.

"Pretty."

I picked away the dead leaves. "Jane hasn't arrived?"

"Not yet."

"I hope they're not lost."

"Maybe we should have a drink while we wait."

"How about a Blushing Lady?"

"A Blushing Lady? What's the occasion?"

"Oh, I don't know. Just occurred to me I had a whole bag of grapefruits."

He shook his head, probably sick of my experimenting in the kitchen. I smiled back. I didn't often look at him. I mean really look. His hair, all gray along the sides and gone on top, reminded me that I, too, must have aged. I intended to tell him about the boys, but I'd already begun to think about which knife I would bring them and how I'd deliver it without anyone knowing. Something about the way they were living seemed magical to me, old-fashioned. I wanted to preserve the oddness of it. I wanted to send them away well-fed. I'd take care of the

problem myself. I'd prepare sandwiches so they wouldn't hurt me. Tuna on whole wheat wrapped in wax paper. I could bring pickles. No, they wouldn't keep crisp. I'd give them the whole jar. No, no. Perhaps something less extravagant, peanut-butter-and-jelly and some kettle corn or potato chips would have to do. They were trespassing, after all.

I promised myself I'd tell Spencer as soon as I made the drinks.

"I'll take a gin and tonic while you're at it," he said.

"I know," I said.

He'd been drinking them for years, like medicine.

Inside the cool darkness, I slipped off my gardening clogs, cut the stems and put the flowers in water, and wiped down the counters. I felt—the word that came to mind was jubilant. I was nervous and frightened but also pleased to be alone with my thoughts in the quiet of the kitchen and the flowers, which looked darling in the little blue pitcher I'd bought at the flea market.

I squeezed grapefruits in our old metal press and spooned out the seeds. I went through at least six grapefruits to get enough juice. I sliced lemons and rubbed a wedge around the rim of the glass then dipped the glass in a tray of sugar. I poured vodka and grapefruit juice in the metal shaker with ice and strained the liquid into the martini glass, which was cold already because I always left them in the freezer. I fixed a gin and tonic for Spencer and joined him on the terrace to wait for Jane.

"What's this guy's name?" Spencer asked.

"Lewis." At first Lewis was just a guy from Jane's 92nd Street Y painting class, but now he was Lewis. "I'm just happy she's met someone she likes."

“Where’s he from?”

“I don’t know. He lives in Manhattan, I guess, but he goes out to stay in the country with her every weekend. He’s an education advisor.”

“What does he advise? Getting an education?”

“Jane said he goes around to different failing schools and tells them how to improve. I guess that’s a job now.”

“You think she likes it up there in the middle of nowhere?” More than ten years ago now, after 911, she’d given up her rent-stabilized apartment and moved to a ramshackle cabin somewhere along the Hudson in upstate New York. “What does she do all day now that she’s retired from ‘the rat race’?”

He was joking, but I didn’t laugh. She’d never really been in it. Being a seamstress for Broadway shows had seemed tedious and mundane, but in a particular and unusual way. “I guess she works in the library twice a week and volunteers at the community center. Does some of her sewing stuff on the side. She said that apparently there’s a problem with the Manhattanites who are buying up cheap properties on the wrong side of the tracks. They’re displacing poor minorities. There’s tension between the newcomers and the locals.”

“Imagine that.”

“Jane volunteered herself as peacemaker.”

“Of course she did.”

“Hey,” I said. Sometimes Spencer thought Jane was too self-righteous, too involved and opinionated. I always reminded him that she was a widow with three kids. “It’s admirable that she’s so passionate.” But her visits made me nervous too. She’d come in and out of our lives many times over the years. Sometimes when I saw her, the past came up to meet the present.

A long time ago, Spencer and Jane and I thought we were hippies. We all lived on an organic farm in Mexico. It was too cultish. Drugs and people having sex in the name of free love and rules about dish-washing. They made the women slave away taking care of all the men. They had brilliant ideas about how to change the world, but that's all they were, ideas. Spencer and I left after six months. Spencer went to grad school and then took over the Chicago branch of his father's business. We bought a brick, two-flat, fixer-upper in the suburbs, but Jane stayed in Mexico for a few years because she'd had a baby with a guy down there. Eventually, she left him and moved to an art colony in New Mexico. She had this look: long dirty blonde hair, small blue eyes, a wide mouth, and freckles across the bridge of her nose, bony or beautiful depending on your point of view. I guess out there is where she learned how to sew, but she still called herself a painter.

When her daughter was five, an art dealer from New York saw a painting of Jane at a festival in Taos and then tracked her down in Santa Fe. He was older and wealthy. Rodney Silver. He married her and whisked her away to New York where she became a darling of the art scene. They loved her straight hair and her all-American smile.

She looked us up and sent me a letter, including a photograph of her taken at a gallery. It was the mid-seventies, I think. She wore a polyester dress, almost sheer, lime green, and her hair was all wound up in an exotic scarf as if she was part of the exhibit. I almost didn't recognize her. She wrote about their brownstone on the Upper West Side, an up-and-coming neighborhood, around the corner from the Dakota where John Lennon lived. Rodney's real business had been real estate. He'd just bought her a studio in Soho for her art, and she was pregnant again. Her life seemed magical compared to mine. By then, I had two kids of my own. I'd quit my job at the newspaper, and Spencer was busy all the time, traveling, trying to grow the business.

But then we didn't hear from her, and when she finally called, it was to tell us that Rodney had died. A drunk driving accident on the Taconic. The roads were icy, and he was driving into the city from his parents' house upstate. He hit a buck. I remember that part.

He left her some money and the studio in Soho, but it turned out he was worth a lot less than he'd let on. I thought she married him because he was rich, and maybe she had. But I think she must have loved him too. She unraveled after his death. She partied too hard and slipped into something darker, the downtown scene, the beginning of something dangerous, punk maybe. The dark days, she always said and never went into the details. Drugs, I think. His parents took Sebastian for awhile, and she sent Colette to Mexico to live with Ben. We lost touch. Years later, we found her again. She'd had another kid. Eliot. She'd made peace with her mother and borrowed money from her father. She'd started over.

“Does he golf?”

“I don't know.”

I had time to tell him about the boys, but I wasn't sure how to present the information and an explanation might dull the excitement I felt when I thought about them. I decided to wait. The longer I waited, the more I struggled to find a way to begin. Then Jane and Lewis pulled up, and there was no time.

Spencer fired up the grill. Lewis preferred beer, but Jane and I drank cocktails.

Since I'd last seen Jane, three or four years ago in New York, she'd hennaed her hair a reddish color, darker than the dirty blonde I remembered and chopped it short. The henna covered the gray but didn't suit her fair complexion. Her sandals, thick and leather and strappy,

surprised me. They looked too practical, so that she appeared not as delicate or refined as the way I held her in my memory. Her red glasses hung on a string of beads around her neck, and clunky silver rings weighed down her hands. Her shoulders sloped downward, and she seemed to be always squinting in a half-smile. If I'd been leaning over a sewing machine for as long as she had, I'd be frowning by now.

"How was the drive?" I heard Spencer ask Lewis as they settled into lawn chairs. Spencer actually listened when people answered. He was always curious about alternate routes, back roads, speed traps. They'd driven Jane's mother's Cadillac, stuffed with silver platters and family photos, all the way from Los Angeles. I couldn't hear how Lewis answered. He spoke softly and slowly, the opposite of Jane. He had a round face, doughy almost, and fluffy hair. Even his fingers were pudgy and soft. He was younger than Jane. Beneath his round, wire-rimmed glasses his eyes darted about the room, taking in the details.

After I set out the cheese and crackers, I returned inside to marinate the chicken. Jane had brought fresh eggs from the farmer's market, yellow cucumbers, kohlrabi the size of an eggplant, thick green beans, two pints of blueberries, a bottle of rose, sesame crackers, brie, and another stinky cheese. We had more food than we could ever eat in a weekend. I'd made a potato salad, the good kind with chunks of potatoes, pickles, onions, egg whites and full-fat mayo. We threw together a mixed green salad with a light balsamic dressing.

"I keep telling her that the city is no place to raise a kid," Jane said.

"Of course not," I said, but I wasn't sure she wasn't actually bragging, as if she was proud that she had raised her kids in Manhattan or that her daughter had managed to survive this long doing everything the opposite of how it should be done. "But what about you two?" I asked. "How's the house?"

“I have this theory,” Jane said, not answering my question, “that the older they get the more docile they become. They revert and give into childish impulses.”

“I know what you mean,” I said. “Spencer can’t eat red meat anymore. That’s what the doctor says, but he does it anyway. I won’t let him have it at home, but I don’t know what he does when he’s with friends or at the golf course. I can’t watch him every second.”

“Oh,” Jane said. “Your husband.”

“Yes,” I said.

“I was talking about the kids.”

“Same thing,” I said. She always jumped around in conversation, like this. “Spencer’s just like another kid.”

I expected her to laugh, but she didn’t. She looked as though she was going to speak, but then pressed her martini glass to her lips. “Oh, never mind,” she said. “I think,” she went on, “that when men get older, they want us to take care of them.”

“I don’t know,” I said, forking the chicken breast and flipping it. Spencer seemed to be the same as ever. He still worried unnecessarily about the economy, the children, all sorts of things he couldn’t control, and I still worried about him. “Spence is Spence.”

“Well,” she said. She waved her spoon in the air, and I wasn’t sure how to take that. Maybe she was done talking about men. Something was lost between us. We seemed to have grown apart, or maybe it was always awkward at first. Maybe it was the setting. Usually we met her in New York at an expensive restaurant of her choosing. We drank, ate, reminisced and went our separate ways. “And another thing, I’m starting to think we should get out of here.”

“What?”

“I’m serious.”

“Well, the whole country has gone to shit. Pardon my French. The rich keep getting richer, and the poor are dying of diabetes. And we don’t have a democracy. Not anymore. We’re living in something else entirely. Everything is censored and controlled. I’d be surprised if someone isn’t spying on us right now.” She lowered her voice slightly. “We’re being told what to do by a bunch of idiots.”

“Well—”

“Republican or Democrat. Doesn’t matter. And putting my mother in that nursing home was the most disturbing thing ever. It was so dark. Even in California. How is that possible? There’s so much natural light, but they keep the windows covered with these hideous, purple curtains. They wake them at six in the morning and force them into the common area to eat breakfast. Just like cattle. You have to take a bath once a week in this metal thing. I didn’t want to leave her there. It’s frightening. I don’t want to get old. I don’t want to live in this country anymore. There’s got to be another way.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, I don’t know. A way out of this. Some sort of revolt. Secession from the union. Maybe we’ll go and start a nudist colony on an island. I guess we tried all that, but still I feel that something is amiss, entirely wrong, in fact, about the way we’ve been living. We failed. Take global warming, for instance. It’s a very real thing, but nobody pays attention. La de da, another tornado. Oh well.”

Jane went off like this sometimes. She always needed somewhere to dump all her disturbing thoughts. I never had big opinions like that. I didn’t feel so concerned. I guess I had a smaller picture of the world. I saw us fitting in and having very little control over the overall development of mankind. I thought there must be some sort of bigger force, God or technology

or something, that propelled the world forward: people die, medicines are invented, the economy grows, and empires fall. I saw it all as sort of part of the divine order, or maybe that's just what I told myself.

“Oh, Jane,” I said. “I don't know if everything has to be so extreme.”

“It doesn't have to be, but it is. Plutocracy. Think about it. Four hundred people have more of the wealth than all the rest combined. Did you see that Op-ed? I keep telling my kids to move to Canada. They have this point system and depending on your age and your education level and how much money you have you can go. I say go. Don't worry about poor old me who put you through college, really.”

How could she complain? Didn't she enjoy driving that hybrid car Lewis bought or remodeling her kitchen? I didn't think that Jane was judging me. It wasn't that, but I felt the presence of my young self. What would that twenty-three-year-old me think of what I'd become?

“Or France, but that seems harder,” she said. “I don't speak French.”

I held up my Blushing Lady. She clinked her martini glass against mine. Had I made a mistake? Had I lost something? Had I forgotten myself somewhere along the way? Jane had lived her life against the grain, almost purposefully. The suburbs or the city? Could we have tried harder? Had we become too complacent? My life had been relatively simple, and hers had been difficult. But she'd faced tragedies beyond her control. Choices, Spencer liked to say. Good choices and bad choices. Whether her choices were better or worse than ours, I couldn't say. I'd been lucky, but it's easy to be lucky when you don't take risks. I still had both my sons, healthy and whole, knock on wood.

“To the end of life as we know it.” She held up her glass. “Oh, what pretty flowers,” she

said, admiring the flowers in the little blue pitcher.

“Yes,” I said, holding up my glass. I’d lost something somewhere, but I hadn’t noticed, not until she showed up.

When we played bridge, Lewis had this irritating habit of humming to himself, and I couldn’t tell if each time he touched his ear he was sending Jane a message. If he had been, she wasn’t getting it because she was too busy talking, and they were losing. Jane tapped her foot under the table. She was on the topic of love.

"Lucy Lake was his first love," I said. "She killed herself."

"But not because of me," Spencer said. "After my time."

"And who was yours?" Jane asked, elbowing me.

"I was," Spencer said, with a hint of satisfaction.

Spencer and I met when I was twenty-one, and we married when I was twenty-two.

“One love, your whole life, huh?” Jane raised an eyebrow at me, challenging me or teasing me. I couldn’t tell.

In my first year of marriage, while we were in Mexico, I’d fallen in love. David and I were in charge of shoveling the compost. It wasn’t a glamorous job, and so we’d take off on long walks through the mountains. Because we were part of this utopian experiment, we were permitted and encouraged to act on mutual feelings of love. We were told to be honest with our partners. I cheated on Spencer, but I never told him. I couldn’t be around both of them at the same time. Spencer believed we returned to the states because I hated the smell of decaying vegetables. Only Jane knew that what happened with David had scared me away.

“Yours was Benjamin, wasn’t it?” I asked.

“Before Benjamin there was Ronald Hammond,” she said. “But that was when I was fourteen, a crush. Benjamin was real.” Jane began to count the men she had loved before she met Lewis. She trailed off when Lewis’s eyes began to dart around the perimeter of the room. “I know what needs to happen,” she announced. I thought she was going to propose charades. “We need to go back to the mom-and-pop business model. That’s the only thing that will save this form of capitalism. We need to go local, local, local and create a sincere connection between people and the land.”

She had more of her big ideas. I sort of wondered where she had accumulated so many opinions. We all stopped responding after awhile. She didn’t seem to notice.

Around eleven, we went to bed. Spencer snored beside me. Owls called across the highway, and the male crickets sang. I couldn't sleep. I thought of the boys out there sleeping under their makeshift tent. They must have known that the property belonged to someone. They must have wanted to remain hidden behind that boulder. How long had they been there? What were they doing? Were they lovers? Brothers? Friends? They must be criminals. The blond had several tattoos on his arms and legs. I couldn’t make out the shape of the tattoos, but they looked weathered, as if they’d been there for quite some time. They're too young to have faded tattoos, I thought, as I drifted off.

In the morning I made up an excuse to sneak away. When the guys went out golfing, Jane dove into her newspapers and magazines that she’d brought with her. I slipped into my favorite linen jumper. I wore a white cotton shirt under it that made me feel clean and wholesome.

“Be back in a bit,” I called. “Have to check on something.”

Jane grunted, and I left with the knife, a few sandwiches and chips in a cloth bag. I grabbed a pocketknife too, just in case. I wished as soon as I’d left that I’d worn sensible shoes. My flip-flops caught in the long grass, and dirt encrusted my recently pedicured toes. The pirate spotted me when I was more than thirty feet away and waved. I felt conflicted in the way that I often felt when my children used to come home too late: relieved to see them and angry all at once.

“Now tell me your name,” I said, as if we’d just met at a cocktail party.

“I’m Joey,” he said, staring at me with his one bright eye. A fine sandpaper beard peppered his chin and cheeks. He nodded in the direction of the lean-to. “That’s Todd.”

“I’m Angela.”

“So, Angela, you’ve come to visit,” Todd said, as he stepped out from behind the lean-to.

This irritated me. Was it not the other way around? Weren’t they the ones visiting me? “I brought you boys what you asked for, but before I give you these sandwiches, I need to know what you’re doing out here.”

“No harm,” Todd said.

“Well, I should hope not,” I replied.

Todd turned and walked toward the tent. “Unless you’re a squirrel.”

“What?”

He gestured for me to sit on a low rock, and he sat on the ground near the fire so he could tend to it. Above the fire, stretched on a stick, crucified and extended on a pole, a bit of meat sizzled.

“Tastes a lot like chicken,” he said. “Sometimes, I like it better than rabbit.”

“What? Squirrel?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You’re going to eat it?” I wished I hadn’t given them the satisfaction of seeing me surprised.

“Course we are. We wouldn’t kill it just to kill it.” He tied a knot with a piece of thick rope. “We live off the land.”

“You mean other people’s land?”

“Depends how you think about ownership. If you believe what we believe—”

“Which is?”

“Anarcho-primitivism. I don’t usually like to use that term, but when talking with someone who is stuck in a foreign and antiquated belief system, no offense, I do feel the need to place myself within a larger context. But we hate names. Hate labels.”

“A what? What is it called?”

“Anarcho-primitivism.”

“Which means what? You want to live like primitive people?”

“Basically, the world was a better place before civilization, so we’re trying to get back to a more hunter-gatherer society. Personally, I think deindustrialization is unlikely in this lifetime. And we’re not prepared skill-wise as a society to live a free life. That’s why Joey and I are out here. We’re getting skills so we can exist outside of that world,” he said, referencing the trucks roaring past on the distant highway, “so we can teach others to be free.”

“Break free of what?” I felt thirsty and confused. I couldn’t figure him out. He sounded like he was reading straight from a manifesto. Whereas before I was attracted to his rawness, I now wished I’d told Spencer everything. The boy smelled wild, beast-like. His brow wrinkled

during his angry rant. He poked at the meat and scraped his knife at a dirty root. Underneath, its flesh gleamed white and pure.

“How much of your life benefits you?” he continued.

“Well, I don’t know. What does that even mean?”

“I mean. Take that shirt you’re wearing. Why are you wearing it?”

“Because I like it.” I felt satisfied with myself for having chosen my white shirt and for having my answer flow easily with confidence.

“But does it give you satisfaction? Does it make you proud to have consumed that shirt?”

“Consumed? Well, it’s soft. It’s organic cotton actually. So, yes. I’m happy with my purchase. I bought it from a friend, who has a store in Chicago, which I think is a fine way to be a consumer. I’m supporting those cotton farmers, and I’m supporting her.”

He laughed. “You walked right into it. Right into it. They want you to believe that you have a choice. This shirt or that shirt. But your choice is still only perpetuating this ongoing battle of consumption. Why wear a shirt? I mean who says you need a shirt? Don’t you ever just want to take it off? I mean, how old are you, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Sixty-three,” I said.

“Exactly, and in our society, that’s too old to walk around without a shirt. Too old to be free and beautiful. Without inhibition.”

“It has nothing to do with being old or young. People wear shirts. Women do. So do men. It’s what we do.

“But who created that idea? An oppressive force, right? Who does it benefit? Does it benefit you? Does it make you feel good that society tells you that you’re too old to be naked?”

“I’m not,” I said. “I’m not too old.”

He approached slowly and crouched around me, like some sort of Puck. He wasn't wearing a shirt, and I could smell his animal smell upon me, emanating from him. I turned away. I stayed very still, as he unbuttoned the clasp of my jumper on the right side and then on the left. He pulled the neck of my shirt slightly, exposing my bra strap and my pale shoulder.

"There," he said, smiling at me. "How nice."

I felt the urge to laugh but only looked at him and then down at the few freckles along the curve of my collarbone. I suppose I felt more shocked than anything else.

"But, no. You need face cream or high-heels or Botox. Not fair, is it? Now what if you had your own arsenal of tools and skills to live in harmony with the land?"

Joey looked off into the horizon. I wondered what he was thinking about.

"You could make that shirt yourself or throw it aside," Todd continued. "You could live outside of a legal system, which clearly don't deter or prevent crime. Outside of industry, which only benefits some. Outside of formal education, which brainwashes children. Outside of civilization. Civilization has been the problem all along. Don't you see?"

"Yes, but . . ." I began, but my eyes rested on Joey. He looked angry. He scowled. His hands, covered in blood and dirt, seemed to move without connection to the rest of his body. He stretched a limp squirrel against a log.

"The knife," Todd demanded.

I found it for him and handed it over. "Oh, I brought sandwiches," I said.

Todd walked over to where Joey stood and chopped off the squirrel's head with a swift movement. He skinned the fur from its body. "Better. Mine was getting dull."

"I can see you don't need them, sandwiches I mean. I guess I better head back. Thanks for the—"

Joey stepped in front of me.

“Sit.”

He frightened me. I sat.

“What did he tell you?”

I looked over at Todd, but he stared into the meat, twisting the little carcass in the fire in broad daylight, as though we were sitting around grilling hot dogs and discussing the housing boom or some article in the Times.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said. “How squirrel meat tastes like chicken.”

Joey squatted down in front of me. I could see a rash along his neck up to the line of his jaw. He flashed his yellow teeth in an insincere smile as he stabbed his knife into the flesh and held it in front of my face. Blood dripped into the dirt.

“My brother here has a pea for a brain. Don’t listen to a word he says. I’m the one who knows what you need to know.”

“Okay,” I said. Now that I knew they were brothers, I could immediately see the resemblance. They had the same wide jaw and sullen heavy eyelids. One was dark, and one was light, but they must have come from the same European roots.

“You need to be educated,” Joey said. He tied string around one of the little legs and hung it to a tree. Blood drained from the headless thing.

“Come on,” Todd said. “Let her go. She brought us sandwiches.”

Todd glanced up at Joey then to me. Instinctively I stood. Joey caught my wrists, twisted me around and held my hands behind my back in a way that seemed delicate and frightening.

“Would you care to join us for lunch?” he asked.

Being twenty pounds overweight and wearing flip-flops, I could do nothing to defend myself. I almost wanted to laugh at how absolutely feeble I felt. I was armed with pickles and sandwiches in the middle of the woods. The crickets and the trees, the birds and the breathing of the boys grew louder. They tied up my wrists, and I really thought, this is it. This is how I'm going to die. How would they kill me? Where was Spencer? I thought of my children, the silk throw cushions I'd just ordered online, Jane, my friends, my life. All of it seemed so far away. They could scalp and skin me. Nobody would know.

"Please," I said. "Don't hurt me."

"We wouldn't do something like that," Joey said to Todd, laughing. But his laugh didn't make me feel better. "Now, how do you feel about meat? Please don't tell me you're a vegetarian."

I sat again. "No."

"No, you're not a vegetarian? No, you don't eat meat?"

"I eat it."

"Good." I needed to find something to do with my hands. They were shaking. Maybe I could work apart the knot with my pocketknife. I squirmed trying to work one hand closer to my pocket.

"Are you okay?" Joey asked.

Todd glared at him. "She's fine."

When Todd turned away, Joey winked at me or blinked. It was hard to tell since he only had one eye. He untied my wrists and tied my ankle to a log. I felt better. He handed me a potato and a peeler. He could tell, I guess, that I needed something to keep me busy, but this seemed to upset Todd. He called Joey to him, and they crawled into the lean-to, whispering.

As I peeled, I realized that I was holding the potato peeler from my kitchen. Most likely, the boys had stolen the peeler and the potato from my pantry. I tried to remember if I had left the kitchen door open. Maybe they had somehow snuck through the basement. We did have a separate cellar entrance that could be opened from the outside. We rarely used it. We rarely locked it. They could get into our house whenever they pleased. I wondered how long they'd been camping in our woods, hiding, and scrounging around like rats or lost boys.

Or they had the same peeler that we did. But that seemed unlikely. They didn't seem like thieves. Wild and ferocious, yes. Foragers, yes. But thieves? Well, yes. But the peeler seemed like cheating. If they insisted on living off the land, how could they justify stealing my farmer's market potatoes? I sensed they must have a weakness, something in them that could be broken and coddled and called back toward normalcy. They had somewhere in these tough exteriors, a wanting, a need for mothering, a desire to be told what to do, and they were crazier than I'd thought. And I was crazier than I'd thought. Curiosity. I was too curious sometimes. Did they have other siblings? Did their father beat them? Were they initiated into some kind of cult? Did they have a leader? Where were they born? For how long had they been relying on each other in this way? But I said nothing. I thought of Spencer and his golfing. I couldn't picture Lewis golfing. They would be back soon.

Joey and Todd emerged from the lean-to. When I finished peeling the potatoes, I handed them back to Joey, who cut them up and dropped them in a small pot of boiling water. I could tip the pot and burn them with boiling water, but there would be no way for me to scald them both at the same time. I sat. They're just boys, younger than your sons, I told myself. Lost boys, that's what they are.

The heat felt good at first on my face and shoulders, but soon it wore me down. I grew

sleepy. I stretched my legs and watched them cook. The dark, curly hairs on Todd's chest and forearms flattened against his sweaty skin when he slapped away the flies and mosquitoes. Sometimes he caught one and smeared blood on his arm. I pictured Jane reading on the divan in the living room, mining her newspapers for more quotes and facts to bolster her views. I loved her, but she was selfish really, always had been. She did what she wanted whenever she wanted. She had a short attention span. That's why she'd had such a difficult path. I pictured the bedspread in the guest bedroom of our home in Milwaukee and wondered if painting the walls some shade of lilac would brighten up the space or if I would need to buy new blinds.

When I look back on what happened, I wonder that I wasn't more anxious. They made me try their food. I'd lost my appetite, but I ate to please them. Afterwards, they insisted that we all go down to the pond for a swim. "There's a giant snapping turtle in there. You go ahead," I said, but they wouldn't have it. Joey gave his brother a knowing glance. Todd untied me, and we all trekked down to the water.

Our neighbors, real farmers, had advised us to shoot the turtle because he was probably nearly twenty years old by now and could bite off the hands of small children. Even though I was afraid of the turtle, I was also afraid of shooting him. To me he was beautiful and wise and deserving of that entire pond. A murky gunk filled up the shallow areas, but the water cleared up in the center of the lake. The boys slipped off their clothes. I watched their white butts run down the small pier. This would have been the time for me to go. I could have scooped up their clothes and run like hell, but I didn't. I sat there, watching them.

"Come in," Todd called.

Joey swam far out to the middle of the pond where we had a little floating platform.

“Come on,” he said, calling to me.

“I’m fine right here.”

Joey must have realized that I could run away. He swam ferociously toward me, emerging from the water and shaking himself dry like a dog. I was sure his violent strokes had probably aggravated the turtle. I scanned the horizon for a sign of the turtle’s olive shell.

“Take off your dress,” Joey said. “You have to come in.”

“Why?”

“You have to. Take it off.”

I didn’t even resist, which appalls me now. I would think that standing there, naked like that, he would have felt uncomfortable, but he seemed at ease. I could tell that he liked making me undress. I saw his erection. And this encouraged me. I could still turn on a man half my age. There was that. I wondered if someone, Jane or Lewis or the man we paid to mow the lawn and fix the barn, would find us. How could I ever explain that the two boys had forced me into the water? They never held a gun to my head, of course. I feared the turtle, the boys, the water, but I felt compelled to do as they said.

Todd turned the other way. I wondered what was under his eye patch. A glass eye. A good eye. Deformed flesh. He looked out at the vast field, shielding his eye as he stared down the sun. Joey was not so kind. He watched as I peeled off each layer of clothing.

“That’s right,” he said in such a way that I felt quickly reduced to a little thing that didn’t matter. He had me—flabby flesh and all. I looked down as I pulled off everything, almost.

“Please,” I said. He allowed me to keep on my beige bra and faded purplish panties with a high waist. I felt silly. I dove in quickly and swam quickly past the muck out to the middle. I

quickly climbed up on the diving raft to sun myself. One section was covered in goose shit. I scooped up handfuls of water from the pond and washed it away as best I could, making sure to lie with my back and head on the clean part. I pretended to doze off.

When I was a teenager I had spent a summer living with my uncle and his wife at a house in the countryside in France. I couldn't drive, but I rode my yellow bicycle everywhere. I put baguettes in the basket and pedaled through town, enchanted by the romance of the cobbled streets and the stares of the shopkeepers. My youth, my new perky breasts, my tan, my liberation from my parents made me free and hungry. I read all summer, sitting at the pool, soaking up the small stuff. My uncle and his wife, a French woman, fought often. They yelled. She spoke in French, and my uncle answered her in English. He once put his hand through the window.

After they fought, they always disappeared inside to make up and make love. They left the windows open, and I could hear them moaning. The rest of the evening they were sopped in something. Their lust bubbled up and over everything. At night I touched myself silently under the white sheets, unable to stop picturing my aunt's thin lips kissing my uncle, kissing me, just kissing.

When I opened my eyes, both boys had climbed onto the platform. Todd faced the shore, leaning back on his hands. His feet dangled in the water. Joey stretched out on his back, hands behind his head, eyes closed, one hand shielding his cock from the sun. He rolled over and stared at me. The sun and the blue sky stretched out above us.

"I've never had one like you before," he said.

The stubble on his chin and his wet eyelashes disgusted me. I knew by then that I could do as I pleased. He was only a boy. I could leave, dive off and swim away, or say something

that would scare them. Or do something. I could do something. We were playing a game. He was asking permission, in his way.

“Touch it,” he said. “Don’t you want to touch it?”

“No,” I said. “But I will.”

Todd turned toward me when Joey said this, his eyes curious, awed at the way I spoke to his brother. Todd must have been younger, I think, more innocent.

I sat up, and my sagging breasts flapped over the folds of my belly. I couldn’t hide it now. That girl on the bicycle rode away long ago. I took Joey’s penis in my hand and stroked it, as some sort of favor. But my actions felt maternal at first. He closed his eyes. I could hear his breathing. I saw Todd take his right hand and match my rhythm, touching himself, but his back was to me. Let them be boys, I thought, closing my eyes and committing to the task, the same way that I sometimes scoured the kitchen sink with steel wool and a harsh detergent. Joey came quickly. I no longer felt afraid. Todd came soon after.

Later, we swam back to shore, and I put my clothes on. The boys pulled on their boxers and shorts, but not their shirts. Todd looked at me with admiration or maybe it was hope or even shame. The one eye made it hard to tell.

Having glutted themselves with food, sun, and sex, they looked at each other uncertainly. Each waited for the other to speak. I had decided that they likely lived a few miles away and had traipsed away from their dull suburban lives in lieu of attending community college or doing shifts unloading shipments of toilet paper and cereal at the supermarket. Or maybe, they’d read something radical, a zine or a blog and had taken it upon themselves to live out these ideas and

hop trains across the country. I now had confidence in my years, money, and sexual maturity. All they had were hackneyed ideas about liberation. I could feel all of us thinking of something to say. Todd spoke first.

“We were going to kill you,” he said, sucking on a piece of grass.

I didn’t believe him. Maybe they’d discussed killing me, but I couldn’t see them actually doing it. I thought of the sizzling squirrel meat. I wished he’d stop talking so that everything we’d shared, the disgust and our surrender to it, their silly plans, all of it would not be reduced to words, to a cliché, something abstract and explained. “Why?”

“Because people like you are destroying the earth.”

“But now we won’t,” Todd said and gave a nod. “We won’t kill you.”

“As long as you keep quiet,” Joey added.

In the brush, I saw movement. The turtle, I thought, but it was only a sparrow in the low branches of a honeysuckle.

“Now,” I said. Let’s keep this between us is what I wanted to say but didn’t. “Shall I take you home? Where do you live?” I asked.

“We’re not telling,” Joey said. “It’s far.”

“Yeah. We’re on our own. We’ll move on,” Todd added.

“I wouldn’t want anything to happen to you out there. With the wild animals and all.”

“There’s nothing out there but deer,” Joey said.

“We’re done here anyway,” Todd said.

“Now you better not come trying to find us or anything,” Joey said. “Or tell the police or anything stupid like that.”

“I could,” I said. “I could call the police, but what would I say? ‘I found a few

vagabonds on my land.’ I could say that, but they would nod and smile and laugh, and I’d have to tell them what I did to you. They’d search for you, maybe, but nothing happened. Trespassing, that’s all. And aren’t we all always trespassing in one way or another? So, I wouldn’t.”

Joey eyed me suspiciously, not sure if he should believe me. “Vagabonds? Who says vagabonds? Nobody says that anymore.”

A splash from the marsh near the pond’s edge grabbed my attention. The water rippled out in circles, and a current cut across the perimeter of the pond. The turtle.

“Well I know,” I said. “But you know others might react differently.”

“Oh yeah,” Joey said, looking at his brother for confirmation. “Oh we know it.”

“I’m sure they’ll come looking for me, and I wouldn’t want them to find you because they might not understand the way I do.” I held out my hand, the same hand that had jerked him off. “So, goodbye,” I said.

Joey smirked at this, like a teenager would. “Bye, Ma’am,” he said, shaking it.

Todd nodded and held out his hand. “Whatever you think now, it will change,” he said.

“That’s true.” True for me and true for you, I thought. “Take care now.”

“Yes, ma’am,” they said at the same time.

On my way back, I picked through the thicket of wild raspberries, careful not to tear the skirt of my dress on the thorns. I filled my sun hat. I should have been upset, but all I could think about was cooking a pork roast with a white wine reduction, asparagus, and homemade ice cream with raspberries for dessert. As I turned to escape the woods, there she was, a doe. She blocked my path and gazed at me with her pretty black eyes, daring me to move or speak. We held on for a

long while. She stomped: thump, thump, thump. Thirty feet away the buck and the baby looked up and twitched. At once, the three took off, fleeing across the field in great, galloping strides.

Lewis and Spencer still hadn't returned from golf. They'd probably gone to the bar after their game for a beer or two. I wanted to tell Jane about the deer, but she'd fallen asleep under her own lean-to of newspapers. She looked peaceful, for now. I showered off the smell of sweat and pond. The dim lights quieted my mind, as though I'd come in from a rain. I could see Joey's face, contorted in ugly release, as I luxuriated in the hot water, lathering up my legs, shaving them, shampooing my hair, adding conditioner, and washing my face, even behind my ears like a farm kid.

"Howdy, partner," Spencer said. He sat down on the bed to unlace his golf shoes then took my foot in his hands. He massaged the sole. His breathing slowed down.

"Hey," I said, waking up. I'd fallen asleep still in my robe, my hair in a towel.

"Something almost happened today."

"Hmmm?"

"Something strange."

I was sure his afternoon hadn't been as strange as mine.

"I wanted to take Lewis through the back way to show him the walnut trees, so I took him up the road and you know what I saw?"

He couldn't have seen the little fort, but I was nervous just the same.

"Three deer. The mom, the dad, and the little one racing, and I almost hit them. I almost hit all of them at once. But I didn't because I slammed on the brakes, and as I saw them run off,

I saw beside them, but sort of behind them, I swear I saw these two boys, teenagers maybe. They didn't have their shirts on, and for just a second, I thought they were one creature, like, what's it called? A centaur or something. Half man, half beast. And I turned to Lewis, and I said, 'Lewis, did you see that?' And he said no and got all bent out of shape about my driving. I knew the mythical beast part was an illusion because of the shadows from the brambles. 'You didn't see that?' I asked him again, but he didn't know what I was talking about. Just pissed about my driving. I took him back down and hiked up the road. I looked around, went walking through the woods. I guess I thought maybe I'd see tracks or some kind of evidence of the boys or the deer. Something so I would know it was real. I went up a half-mile or so off the path, but I didn't see anything. I don't know. They disappeared into the woods, over where the boulders are. Maybe I'm seeing things. Maybe I'm losing it. Getting old." Spencer stretched out into the bed next to me. "You smell good."

"Thanks."

"I wonder where they were going. Those boys. Running like that, like they were being chased or chasing the deer," he said. "Racing the deer, in stride. I've never seen anything like it."

"I believe you." I believed him, but I didn't understand why the boys would be running alongside the deer. Maybe they planned to spear the deer in its side? Were they racing the deer? The more I thought about the image, the more impossible it seemed.

"You do?"

"I always do."

"You do."

"I do."

I sat up and kissed him. "I saw them, too," I said.

"You didn't."

"I did."

"You're making fun of me."

"I'm not."

"You've been here all afternoon, napping, haven't you?" He picked up my magazine and slapped it against my thigh, flirting. He stretched out beside me.

We never saw the snapping turtle again. Later I found its empty carapace in the remains of the fort. I agreed with Spencer when he surmised that our neighbors must have killed the turtle, or I offered other excuses to explain the turtle's absence. I pushed away that memory of the boys. But in that moment in bed, safe from the future and separated from the burden of the past, we didn't know about the turtle. We didn't understand the deer or the boys or the wildness out there, so we were quiet, lying side by side, holding hands.

A SELF-SUFFICIENT WOMAN

“K-I-S-S-I-N-G,” May belted out. She drummed her little, five-year-old fingers against the dashboard and repeated the letters again.

Shut-up, Colette thought. Do you ever shut up? Don't you see the trees, the mountains, the lush green fields, the swimming pool sky, all these billowing clouds? Do you not grasp that we're no longer sitting in traffic on the Triborough Bridge, but winding our way through the back roads of Vermont? Do you not realize that you're destroying the only truly peaceful moment I've had in the past six months because you won't stop singing that idiotic song?

But no, May kept right on bouncing and singing. Oh, why did I bring her? Colette thought. Children shouldn't go in cars. They shouldn't be in confined spaces for more than an hour. The thought of being stuck with her daughter for the whole entire long weekend, the wedding and the trip to her mother's, overwhelmed her. She shouldn't think of it as stuck. They needed this time together. Andrew needed a break, and May had to learn that there was more to summer than baking in concrete and scootering around heroine addicts. Colette would give her a thorough introduction to nature. The wedding would be lovely. The next morning they'd drive east, and Colette's mother would feed them roast beef sandwiches or tuna salad on rye. They would take a walk in the woods, and though her mother would probably be dying to say, “I told

you being a single mom in that city is no cake walk,” she would never actually say the words aloud. That would be that.

“K-i-s-s-i-n-g.” May bounced up and down in the passenger’s seat and clapped her hands. “Daddy and Derek sitting in a tree. K-i-s-s-i-n-g.”

Did May find it strange that her dad lived four blocks away in an apartment with another man? Did they kiss in front of her? Probably. Of course, they did. And they should. Did the other kids tease her? Not yet, but they would. It was coming. It was all coming. Had they made some terrible mistake in choosing this odd co-parenting arrangement? At the time Colette thought she knew what they were getting into, but now she wasn’t so sure. Were they going to screw May up? Or was she already screwed up?

“K-I-S-S-I-N-G. Mama and . . .”

Colette waited to see what she’d say.

“Mama and . . . Nobody sitting in a tree.”

Yes, Mama and nobody. Did May wish there were somebody? Sometimes Colette wished there were somebody. Sometimes nobody was just fine. Like right now.

“K-i-s-s-i-n-g. Polly and—”

“May!” Colette snapped.

“What?”

“Shhhhhh.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s time to be quiet. Time to look for moose.”

May pressed her face against her window, studying the landscape.

“Polly and David,” she whispered. “Sitting in a tree.”

After they stopped for gas somewhere off Route 100, Colette spotted a coffee shop/book store housed in a little gingerbread cottage where she thought she might be able to get a coffee and a break from May’s incessant singing. Potted plants cluttered its front porch, and vines wrapped around the banisters and railings. How lovely and idyllic, she thought, as she led May up the multi-colored stairs.

Once inside, May escaped to the children’s section, and Colette ordered a latte from the gray-haired, hippie storeowner at the café counter then browsed through the aisles of books: a guide to building outdoor showers, a poetic personal memoir/self-help manual for communicating in a spiritual way with insects, an official-looking dry kiln operator’s manual, the *Fence Bible*—that was its actual name—a sewing guide, and the *Dictionary of the Shroom*. She picked up one about root cellaring. Everything one needed to know about storing all of your food under your feet. She imagined the basements of Manhattan’s tenements filled with rats and potatoes. No thank you. She flipped open the sewing book and fell instantly in love with a darling, little girl’s, pink party dress so precious she had the urge to rip the page out of the book. She restrained herself and glanced over at May, who was looking at pictures and pretending to read. May sat with her legs splayed at almost a one hundred eighty degree angle. She leaned forward and propped her chin up on her elbows.

To be a homemaker, to be domestic, suddenly seemed incredibly necessary. With diligence and trial and error, and one of these books, Colette could become anything—a bread baker, a pickle maker, a honey producer, a knitting, sewing, composting, natural woman! Considering the government was subsidizing oceans of corn syrup and crops of giant, genetically modified salmon were growing in swimming pools, while the oil companies flooded the real oceans black with oil and massive trucks raced through suburban sprawl at an astonishing rate, an apocalyptic, global meltdown was inevitable. And if not that, then perhaps fundamentalist, viral terrorism would destroy them all via text message or Facebook. Virtual annihilation. Knowing how to do things for yourself, how to grow food and hide it in a basement, how to make a dress from scratch, these were the types of skills that would count. Being a self-sufficient woman meant survival.

Maybe they could move to Vermont. Andrew could visit. May would run wild. Colette's mother would be ecstatic.

A woman with tattoos on her face, a pierced lip, pierced nipples poking through her T-shirt, and stretched lobes sat down at a nearby café table across from her pregnant friend. Her very presence confirmed Colette's decision. Not that Colette had anything pierced anymore, but she liked living in a place where other people did. She smiled at the two women. For the first time, Colette could envision a life beyond her tenement building, the shitty, loud streets of Chinatown, the elms and oaks of Central Park, the outer boroughs, beyond New Jersey and the Hamptons; there was so much more. She knew this intellectually, but now she felt it. A glimpse of green through the open window caught her eye, and she sighed a big, Zen sigh.

Then she looked over at May, who was rocking her pelvis forward and backward. She was still sitting upright, but she sort of looked like she was humping the floor. Nobody else seemed to notice. Colette sat down in the café section with her books.

May was now reaching her hand down into her tights. Nice, May. Really appropriate time to discover your sexuality. The hippie storeowner still didn't seem to care, and Miss Tattoo was in the midst of a deep discussion, but Colette wasn't comfortable allowing her daughter to masturbate, if that's what she was actually doing, to *Winnie the Pooh* on the floor of the bookstore, even a wood-burning, incense-smelling recycled books kind of bookstore. Were little girls supposed to do things like that? What was wrong with her daughter? Where had she learned how to do what she was doing?

May had always been an exhibitionist. She hated clothing. Especially underwear. There were a few times in pre-school when Colette had arrived at the end of the day to find May naked. Apparently, as soon as Colette had dropped her off, she stripped down and buried her clothes in the sand box.

Colette wasn't sure if it was worse to call her name and draw attention to her or more irresponsible to let her continue on in front of strangers. She didn't want to scar her for life by reproaching her for her obvious urge to fulfill her sexual desires, nor did she want to encourage this habit, which might lead to problems down the not-so-distant road. May should learn to embrace her sexuality but not here. Not in public.

“May,” Colette finally said. “Want me to read to you?”

Not the right approach. May looked away. She rubbed her hand against her crotch. What

would you choose? Orgasm or story about a pot of honey and a sad, frightened donkey? Colette stood. “Can you come sit with me?”

Miss Tattoo and her friend looked up. Colette smiled apologetically. “You know how it is,” she said. Best to make a joke of it. “A girl’s gotta do what a girl’s gotta do.”

Miss Tattoo waved Colette back and added her two cents. “Let her come.”

“Yeah,” her pregnant friend said, like an echo. “Yeah. Let her come.”

The women both wrapped their hands around their mugs of tea. The teapot was perfect and round, centered on the table between them. They tilted their heads to the side and nodded in agreement, so peaceful and open-minded, like they were watching an educational documentary. Well good for them. Fine. No big deal. If they were okay with it, she was okay with it. She sat back and sipped her latte as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

But then May started with the grunting noises. She set her jaw and ground her teeth. Colette hated when she did that, but she nodded her head in unison with her granola friends. A bald man in a flannel shirt popped his head out from behind one of the bookshelves. He looked over his bifocals to see where the strange, baby-animal-like noises were coming from. “What the hell?” he said, peeling his glasses off his face and wiping the place between his eyebrows with the back of his hand, as if he couldn’t quite believe what he was seeing.

How perverse the whole situation! That’s it, she thought. She wasn’t going to let her daughter make a spectacle in the middle of the bookstore. She just wasn’t that free. Sorry. Besides, there could be hidden video cameras and lurking child molesters. Colette hovered over her daughter. She pulled May’s arm to distract her. She heard the jingle of the bells hanging from

the café door as an older couple entered. They looked like farmers. The knees of his jeans were caked in mud. They stared at May, who, Colette realized, must have been blocking their path to the counter.

“Sorry,” she said. She tried to slide May over. Her daughter wouldn’t budge. “You can’t put your hands in your underwear in public,” Colette said, with more bite in her voice. “It’s not allowed.”

The farmers waited in the same way, she imagined, they might wait for a cow to give birth. May moved rhythmically. When Colette reached for May, she shrugged her off.

“May, Honey. Don’t do that here.”

“No,” May said.

“Please, take your hand out of your underwear.”

“NO!”

May kept right on. Colette yanked May’s arm, and May burst into tears. The storeowner stood up from the register and approached them.

“May, stop that.” Colette pulled May to her feet. May wriggled and cried out in overdramatic agony. She reeled back and flung herself out of Colette’s grasp, knocking her head on the sharp corner of a low bookstand. She bled and howled with her mouth wide and her epiglottis swinging.

“Oh, May,” Colette cried. “I’m so sorry. Please. Shhhhh.”

“What happened here?” the storeowner said. “Oh, poor thing.”

“She’s fine,” Colette said.

“She’s not fine,” the bald guy interrupted, holding his finger out before sighing loudly and folding up those bifocals. “Not with that woman,” he said, referring to Colette, and then he turned to her directly, and she could see rivers of tiny purple veins under his pale skin as he stuck his face in hers. “It’s people like you . . .” He put his bifocals back on, too upset, apparently to finish his sentence.

People like me who what? Colette thought. He must be some sort of sexually starved, angry, religious zealot.

“What kind of message does that send?” Miss Tattoo said to her friend, crossing her arms and shaking her head. “She should have let her come.” She didn’t say it to Colette but loud enough that Colette could hear. Colette didn’t know how to respond. She agreed. She wouldn’t have cared. She stopped her daughter because she thought everyone else cared. Didn’t they realize that she was the type of mother who would probably take May down to Toys in Babeland and buy her a vibrator when she turned thirteen? Didn’t they understand that Colette was all for self-satisfaction of the highest order?

“Yeah,” her friend said. “She was just having a good time,” as if Colette was a horrible monster for denying her daughter pleasure. Now the storeowner thought she was an abusive, demonic tyrant. Maybe she was. The farmer couple scooted around May and Colette. The farmer woman gave Colette a nod that could have meant, “You did the right thing,” or “Let the child touch herself.”

Colette, now sitting on the floor holding her whimpering, bleeding daughter, was, apparently, the worst mother ever. Not fit for Vermont. Or anywhere else, for that matter.

Later she could tell Polly, and they would laugh.

The storeowner disappeared in the back and reappeared with paper towels and ice for May's head. "It's cold," May sputtered. She was still hiccupping. "Too cold."

"Let's go," Colette said.

Snot ran down May's face, and she rubbed her eyes. Her little whimpers almost became big, wracking sobs, and so Colette rubbed her back and removed the ice until May's breathing returned to normal. The storeowner stood over them, with her hands on her hips, eyeing them suspiciously. Judgmental hippie. The tea drinkers shot her looks of pity and disgust. May, still sucking her thumb, had wrapped and hooked her legs around Colette's waist. May held on as Colette tried to push herself, with the extra weight of a child too big to be carried, up off the ground.

"I do think it's better if you take her out to play," the storeowner whispered, in a sort of instructive, condescending way.

"Don't worry. We're leaving," Colette said, finally getting on her feet. She'd had enough of this woman and her little bastion of alternative, open-minded thinking.

"You know, so she can be more free," the storeowner said.

"Yes, I know," Colette snapped. She had ordered her drink in a mug, and now she had to wait awkwardly for the storeowner to transfer it to a paper cup before they could go. So much for being green. "Thank you," Colette said. She pushed aside the stack of books she'd set aside. "I don't think I'm buying these after all." So there. Since when had she become so angry? Was she angry at May? The storeowner? The pierced, nipple lady? Herself?

There goes the do-it-yourself life, she thought, shoving the books across the counter. That dress she had envisioned, that one in the pattern-book with the sash and the little puffy sleeves, would never be. She would never make her own outdoor shower or sew curtains for May's room. She would continue buying tubs of yogurt and jars of grape jelly. Her basil, parsley, rosemary and thyme would be plucked from the supermarket in clean, plastic packages, already cut, already washed. She didn't have the kind of grit it took to be a country woman.

The storeowner hardly acknowledged Colette and instead looked at May eyeing the candy jar by the register. "Go ahead."

May reached out to take a piece of Maple-flavored hard candy from the bowl on the counter next to the tip jar. She unwrapped the plastic and popped the candy in her mouth. Weren't you supposed to ask before you gave someone else's kid a piece of candy? Colette shoved the wrapper in her purse.

"And by the way," Colette whispered. "I wasn't abusing my child."

"I never said you were."

"Good."

May's crying stopped almost as soon as they stepped outside, but Colette felt wretched and sad. She liked that bookstore. Why did it have to go like that? How had they managed to somehow corrupt such a peaceful, quiet little place?

May spotted a bunny hopping through a nearby green pasture, otherwise known as a

public park. May leapt from Colette's arms and ran across a street so desolate May didn't even recognize it as a street.

"Piglet, oh Piglet," May called, chasing after the bunny.

"Piglet is a pig," Colette started to explain. How terrible. May couldn't recognize a bunny from a pig? What was that about? Colette didn't scold May for crossing without looking or running while sucking on candy or mixing up her animals. She'd tormented May enough for one day. The bunny escaped into the shrubbery, and so May twirled instead, making endless circles until she fell into a heap. How easily amused she could be. How funny it must seem to her. Stop. Start. Feel good. Don't. Twirl. Eat. Read. Go. Fall. Get up and do it again.

Colette inhaled deeply. Maybe this town was not right, but perhaps there were others. Maybe she didn't have to give up on Vermont entirely. Wallowing in the scent of fresh-cut grass, Colette watched May spinning with abandon. May's dress lacked fullness. The skirt didn't fly out the way it should. What a feeling when your skirt actually catches in the wind. May should know that sensation.

The dress in the pattern book that Colette almost bought was the kind of dress that twirls, a dress with pleats and folds, a perfect dress for a little girl. Colette thought there was probably an app for it on her phone or maybe another pattern somewhere, but she wanted the dress in the picture. She could start small. She didn't have to plow fields or milk cows or give up their 3rd Street second-floor walk up quite yet; she could start with a dress. She could get her grandmother's sewing machine out of storage and buy fabric—cream with lavender flowers and green leaves or a pastel pink. She could make her daughter a birthday dress. How hard could it

be?

Colette sat in the grass and gazed back at the bookstore. She wished they could have stayed. Could the people inside see her happy daughter playing in the dwindling light of day? May collapsed in the grass and stretched out next to Colette.

“You okay?” Colette asked.

“I’m dizzy,” she said, getting up. “But I’m going do it again.”

“Hey, May, do you like dresses?”

But she was spinning too fast to answer.

Colette stared into the brilliant blue sky as a cloud drifted past. She would make peace. She would swallow her pride and risk disturbing the hippies and farmers and tattoo ladies. She would buy the book and sew a dress. She would become a self-sufficient woman. But she didn’t move, not right away. She watched May spin and thought about the jams she would can and the fresh bread she would bake. May turned and turned, getting high off the world whizzing past. She looked so free.

“K-i-s-s-i-n-g,” May sang softly to herself.

Here we go again, thought Colette. She stood, intending to stop May and drag her back into the bookstore, but instead, she slipped off her sandals and spread open her arms like she too was five years old. Well, she thought, first, I’ll spin. Spinning never hurt anyone. You fall and then you get back up.

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VITA

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