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Lucky Ones

Daniel Goodman
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Lucky Ones

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 and Communication Arts
Creative Writing, Fiction

by

Danny Goodman

B.A. University of Central Florida, 2002
M.A. Lancaster University, 2004

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To TSG & DWG

and

To EKM

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

WE CANNOT HEAR FROM WHERE WE ARE	3
IT'S A LULLABY, FROM A GIANT GOLDEN RADIO	9
DUPLEX	18
FOREST HILLS	21
SUPERMAN COMES TO DINNER	32
BASED ON TRUE EVENTS	36
SOMETIMES WHEN I TALK, IT'S LIKE YOU'RE NOT EVEN THERE	47
IT WAS THE LIGHT	54
THIS IS HOW YOU WILL DIE.....	61
WE'RE GROWNUPS, AFTER ALL	68
DON'T FORGET YOU LOVE ME	76
SUBWAY GIRL.....	86
RIVERBED	88
UNION SQUARE.....	97
SOMEHOW THERE WAS MORE HERE	104
VITA	136

LUCKY ONES

stories

"NO ONE SHOULD COME TO NEW YORK TO LIVE UNLESS HE IS WILLING TO BE LUCKY."
E.B. WHITE, "HERE IS NEW YORK"

WE CANNOT HEAR FROM WHERE WE ARE

The snow came down hard and collected in the thin space between the sidewalk and 20th Street. We stood on the stoop, and I noticed few people walking past us. Elizabeth slid her arm around mine and shivered. The pure white falling onto her dark chocolate hair seemed in perfect contrast. When I moved my hand onto her arm, she pulled back.

“You look cold,” I said.

She glanced up into the snow and said nothing.

An old man sat at the foot of the stairs, taking fast, unnerving breaths. He said something out loud that I couldn’t understand.

The air was sharp and, after only a few moments, I felt hollow.

“So, where to?” Elizabeth asked. She opened her umbrella and made her way down the steps, past the old man, then stared back at me.

A gust of wind turned the umbrella inside out. Elizabeth wrestled with it, proving just stronger, and she seemed, for a moment, like someone else. Not the woman I’d been fighting with for days on end. She used the sleeve of her sweater to wipe dry the lenses of her dark-purple-rimmed glasses.

“I don’t know,” I said, walking down the stairs. “What do you want?”

Elizabeth bit her lip and said nothing. She looked away, at the ground, at the sky, at her distorted reflection in a frozen car window.

“What are we doing?” she asked.

“Where do you want to go?”

“I wanted to stay in the apartment,” Elizabeth said. “You wanted to go out, Jack.” She bit at her nails, teeth mimicking the sound of clippers.

“Are you in the mood for anything?” I asked and pushed her hand away from her mouth. I looked down the street. No cabs, no plows, just snow piling up. The trees seemed to form an arch over everything below. It looked like a Manhattan from another time.

“It was dry in the apartment,” she said. “It was warm.” Her green galoshes smacked in and out of the snow. She seemed tired, worn down.

“Are you too cold?” I asked. “Is it bad if you get too cold?” I began to take off my scarf.

“Please don’t,” she said.

“Thai?” I asked.

“We had Thai yesterday.”

“Yeah, I don’t want Thai.”

“Oh my god,” she said.

“What?” I felt my eyebrows furrow.

“Why are you doing this?” Elizabeth blew into her hands.

I exasperated her, I knew. Her cheeks were rosy red against fair skin. I stared at her and couldn’t answer. I didn’t know why. I wasn’t angry and I was terrified.

“What about Blue Moon?” I said.

“There was a hair in my Moonarito last time,” she said, imitating the motion of pulling something unpleasant from her mouth.

“It was cheese,” I said.

Elizabeth looked at me and begged for something. I could see it. She’d looked at me like that the night before. She needed me to fix things, and I couldn’t.

“I’m going back upstairs,” she said.

“What about sushi?” I asked. “It’s been a while.”

“Two days is a while?” she said, lifting her eyebrow in a way that made me dislike her face.

“That’s a long time for us.”

The wind picked up down the street. A gust cut at my face, and I suddenly felt too young to be standing with Elizabeth. To be married and happy and fighting and miserable. Too young for all of it.

“Just pick,” she yelled, “for the love of god.”

“*Do* you want sushi?” I asked. I couldn’t think anymore. We’d been arguing for days it seemed, since she found out, and I needed it to stop.

“Are you kidding me?” she said. Her voice cracked in the frost.

“Blue Ginger or Daioh Sushi, then?”

Elizabeth sighed. I watched her breath, moving like a ghost when she exhaled. She looked drained of color and patience.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have all that mercury,” I said, but I didn’t really know.

“I swear on all that is holy, Jack. Pick. Now. Please.”

She glared, but I felt like she was looking through me. I imagined something menacing and awful behind me, something to match Elizabeth’s eyes. I hoped it wasn’t me. In that moment, I wanted to apologize. For everything I’d said. For not being a good husband.

“Let’s just get Thai,” I said.

Her jaw ground back and forth beneath her cheeks. “I really hate you,” she said softly.

It felt true. We turned and walked to the corner.

“We didn’t have to go out, you know,” I said.

Elizabeth didn’t look at me.

“I was just restless,” I said.

“You’re always restless.”

“I haven’t been sleeping.”

“You drink too much coffee,” she said. “You can’t have coffee at two in the morning and expect to sleep.”

I scraped my teeth over a stray piece of thumbnail. Elizabeth pulled my hand away from my mouth.

“Were you still up last night?” I asked.

“I fell asleep pretty quickly.”

“*X-Files* was on,” I said. “It was a good episode. The one where Scully sees her dead father and Brad Dourif calls her ‘starbuck.’”

“I remember,” Elizabeth said.

I nodded. “It’s a classic.”

“No, I was up,” she said. “I watched most of it.”

“I talked to you,” I said, confused. “I thought you were asleep. You didn’t say anything.”

She looked up at me, for the first time in days, with gentle eyes.

“I was tired,” she said.

“But you were awake.” My voice cracked, only slightly. “I was awake.”

“You left the TV on, too,” she said. “I woke up at like four and it was still on. You should set the sleep timer.”

“But why didn’t you answer?”

I wanted to lean in and kiss her wet cheek, slide my hand around her and hold her, sense the difference in her body. Would I feel it? How would my skin react against hers? Why wasn't I ready to be a father? There were no answers, and all I wanted was to kiss my wife.

Suddenly, though, she felt unattainable.

"Have you ever seen a vision of your father?" Elizabeth asked.

We moved against a post office box. Elizabeth smiled at an approaching Weimaraner puppy. She bent down and let the puppy bound into her. The owner stood at a distance and tugged hard on the leash.

"Once," I said as the puppy left Elizabeth. "A reflection in the bathroom mirror, like he was standing behind me. He was yelling something that I couldn't hear."

"I wouldn't want to see my father," she said.

"Your father's not dead."

"Exactly," she said and smirked.

Snow slid off the umbrella and collected on Elizabeth's shoulder. I brushed it away and let my hand come to rest on her arm. Her coat was comforting and wool.

"What do you think he was saying?" she asked in a serious, almost professional voice.

"What?"

"Your father," she said. "What was he yelling?"

"I didn't want to know." I moved closer to her, pressed up against her. I looked down, and she did too. I put my hands in her coat pockets and pressed my palms to her stomach.

"I would want to know," she said quietly. "It was probably important."

"He looked horrified," I said. "He frightened me."

Elizabeth looked at me as if I'd ruined something. She pulled back and faced the street, ready to cross.

The snow fell heavier on 8th Avenue. Elizabeth gestured to me, asking if I wanted the umbrella. I shook my head and glanced up at the street signal.

“Please don't run,” I said.

Without a look back, Elizabeth bounded across the street. There were no cars, but the asphalt had become lost beneath a sea of white. I couldn't move. Instead, I watched Elizabeth, who made it across the avenue and kept walking. She was at the restaurant before she turned around. Through the snow, she raised her hands in confusion.

Suddenly, things felt right. Not right, though. Appropriate. Opposite sides of the avenue, separated by cement and snow and parking meters. She threw her hands up again. The sign above Bright Food Shop flickered, and Elizabeth's silhouette flashed and disappeared. I wanted to cross to meet her. My feet melted into the avenue, and I imagined, for a moment, being buried beneath the nor'easter.

I yelled across the avenue. The snowfall seemed to swallow my words. I yelled again, but she couldn't hear me. It was in this way the matter was settled.

IT'S A LULLABY, FROM A GIANT GOLDEN RADIO

Josh and Madeline listened to Nada Surf and made love. Madeline said that Matthew Caws's voice relaxed her, made her wet. The thought made Josh uncomfortable.

She rode him and moaned. Josh tried to focus on her, his new wife. He found her sexier now than in previous years; the weight she had gained over the past months gave her a shape that Josh loved. Curves, he called them, though not to Madeline. He was not allowed to broach that subject.

Josh looked to the ceiling and Madeline came. He was sure her scream escaped through thin walls. He couldn't look away from her then, and he traced a spider vein over her thigh with his fingertips. Madeline trembled and sang softly. Josh slipped his hand from leg to stomach, his two favorite parts of her. Madeline's eyelids opened. She stopped trembling and slapped his hand away.

"Fat," she said. Her voice mimicked a child's, high and whiny.

"You're ridiculous," he said and pressed his palm across her soft, abdominal skin.

Madeline pushed off of Josh. He lay on the bed, flaccid and a bit cold. He looked at her differently than she looked at him.

"Why do you ruin things?" Madeline asked and left the room.

Josh listened to her footsteps and watched her naked body cross the apartment and disappear into the sun-drenched kitchen.

* * *

The overcast afternoon created a blanket of gray over the Manhattan skyline. Josh enjoyed his perch on the Greenpoint apartment building, legs stretched across an Adirondack chair. He sipped coffee and listened to Ben suck at leftover pieces of chicken salad stuck between his teeth.

“She’s still in love with him,” Josh said.

Ben shifted in his chair. “You’re an idiot,” he said.

“He had a huge dick.”

Ben groaned and flicked a remnant of chicken off of the roof.

“She told me. After we had sex for the first time, she said Andre was *big*. I almost cried.” Josh drank too quickly, and the coffee pooled beneath his tongue. He pulled in cold air through pursed lips.

“She’s your wife, man,” Ben said, amused. His Brooklyn accent carried. “You fucking won.”

“I know she thinks about him when I’m inside her.” Josh tongued the small blister forming in his mouth.

“Jesus Christ,” Ben said, bugging out his eyes, “you’re a whiner.”

“How is this whining? I’m talking. I can’t talk to you about this shit?” Josh stood and walked to the edge of the roof deck.

The wall around the roof was lined with cemented-down pots of jasmine. On breezy days, his apartment, one floor below, filled with their scent. Josh fingered a petal and looked towards the city. Clouds sank low, allowing the very tips of buildings to peak into them.

“It’s like he’s still in there, you know? She still feels him in there. It’s why she listens to the music.” Josh let the coffee mug dangle over the edge. He felt his grip slipping, a fraction

every second. He wanted to watch the ceramic pieces impact and scatter. His thumb, though, pressed tight against the handle.

“You’ve got to get past this, Josh. You’re married. Maddie loves you.” Ben gave Josh a firm punch on the shoulder. “You’ve got to get past this.”

The mug flew from Josh’s hand. He watched in horror as it sailed onto the adjacent roof and bounced. The clang seemed to echo for blocks. As it hit again, the handle snapped off, though the rest remained intact. Josh’s hand held its shape, as if the mug remained there. He wondered then if he’d meant to let go. “It didn’t break,” he said.

“Damnedest thing,” Ben said. “Strong coffee.”

Josh stood alone on the crowded platform at Graham Avenue. The crisp morning settled into the dank station. Hands pushed hard into his jacket pockets, Josh watched his own breath against the blackness of the subway tunnel. He resisted the urge to lean forward when the train ripped past.

As his ears popped beneath the East River, Josh thought of Madeline. He knew plainly Madeline had not seen Andre in more than a year and that the encounter had been accidental. It didn’t matter. Josh imagined, in some kind of nightmarish universe, he would run into all of Madeline’s ex-boyfriends in one place at one time. He turned up the volume on his iPod to drown out the thought.

The train left 1st Avenue, and Josh caught the attention of a young woman sitting in front of him. He stood across from her and could see himself reflected in her dark-purple-rimmed glasses. She smiled, and Josh noticed freckles on her Irish-pale skin. She read *The Economist* and tapped her foot against the floor. Josh smiled back. “I don’t think I’ve seen you before,” Josh said. He felt fidgety.

The young woman slid her glasses up her nose. “Do you know all the passengers on the L train?”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he said. “You just get used to the faces.”

“Well, I’m a new face,” she said and leaned a bit closer. “Elizabeth.”

“Hello, Elizabeth.” Josh stopped before saying his own name, leaving his right hand tucked away.

The train stopped. A mass of people shoved their way into the car. There was nowhere left to stand. The doors closed and opened, herding in stragglers. As the door opened for a third time, accompanied by the standard ding, Josh noticed the *Union Square* sign. His stop. He shoved his way out of the car. Standing on the platform, Josh searched for Elizabeth through blurry windows. The train inched to a start, and he saw her. She looked up from the magazine and smiled. Then Josh, for reasons he was unsure of, waved.

Madeline sat on the couch, eating noodles with chopsticks out of a Chinese takeout container. She was already in her pajamas. The apartment smelled of shrimp and soy sauce. Josh’s stomach called out angrily.

“Hi,” Josh said, locking the door and dropping his messenger bag on the loveseat.

“Hey, Sweetie,” Madeline replied, mouth full of lo mein.

“You couldn’t wait?” Josh stood behind the couch and spoke to the back of Madeline’s head.

“I got home a little early. I was hungry. It’s just leftovers.” She changed channels and continued eating.

Josh stared at her. He wondered if she could feel it. He said things to her in his mind that he knew he would never say aloud. He stood and walked into the bedroom. As he undressed, Madeline turned around.

“Whatcha doing?” she asked, sounding sugary.

“Taking a shower. A lot of people touched me on the train today. I feel disgusting.” Josh suddenly felt uncomfortable, Madeline looking at his naked frame.

“Can I come?” Madeline put down the container and leaned over the couch. “Please.”

Josh chided himself for looking at her breasts, which he could see through her tank top. He wanted her, and it made him nauseated. “No,” he said.

As he shut the bedroom door, Josh wanted to scream. No words, just the noise, the release. It felt like something was gnawing on his organs.

Shampoo was running down his forehead when Madeline walked into the shower. She opened the glass door and touched Josh from behind before he realized she was there. He wanted to tell her to leave, to go back to her leftovers, but he didn’t. He couldn’t remember the last time she touched him, unprovoked. It was pity, he knew. Josh kept his eyes closed. She whispered something to him, but he couldn’t hear her. He came quickly before the shampoo burned his eyes. Madeline said, “I’m sorry” before she left.

Ben and Josh jogged along the southern edge of McCarren Park. Ben made unpleasant faces at the women they passed. Josh disliked the effect his friend had on women.

“They’re not smiling, you know,” Josh said. He sucked air and ignored the knifing behind his ribcage.

“Are you kidding me?” Ben asked. “Pick one. I’ll make it happen. Pick one.” He pointed his finger at different women.

Beads of sweat formed in the balding areas of Josh’s scalp, mostly near the front. He kept his brown hair short, shaved down. Madeline said it made him look more bald. Josh, aside from a correction in grammar, declined to respond. He thought, perhaps, they should not broach that subject either.

“Why are you like this?” Josh asked. He looked at Ben’s olive skin, wavy black hair, athletic build. “You can’t fuck your way through New York City.”

“Watch me,” Ben said, speeding up and leaving Josh several yards behind.

Josh caught himself searching the faces; the thought of actually seeing Elizabeth was more frightening than anything. He ran faster.

“How about you move your ass, eh?” Ben yelled. His sneakers kicked up dust as they ran through the softball infield.

Josh coughed and caught up with Ben. “I met someone on the train,” he said. He felt confident, saying it out loud.

“What’s his name?” Ben asked, running his shoulder into Josh.

“She was just someone.”

“Nice rack?”

“I looked at her, this woman. She was stunning. But I didn’t want her.” Josh shook his head. He hadn’t thought of it before. He smiled and wanted to vomit. “It was the fucking music.”

“What?” Ben asked, raising one eyebrow. He said something to a passing female jogger, who didn’t respond.

“On my iPod. I was listening Nada Surf.”

Josh stopped. A moment passed before Ben noticed and walked back to him.

“It’s in my fucking head,” Josh said, “the lullaby. Like *A Clockwork Orange* or something. I think of Madeline.”

Ben laughed. He laughed longer than Josh thought appropriate. When Ben looked up at him, though, he seemed austere.

“You’re unbelievable, man. I don’t fucking get you,” Ben said, breathless.

“I can’t tell you this?”

“You’re the only person I know who gets depressed when he realizes that he’s in love with his wife.” Ben started to run again, then immediately turned back to Josh. “You look at other women, and you want Maddie. I might just fucking kill you right now.”

Josh looked at his friend and laughed. He wasn’t sure where the laugh had come from, but it was there. Flooding out. Ben leaned in and slapped Josh lightly on his face.

“I just want the good, Ben. I want the good.” Josh slumped onto the grass, which was cold as day turned to night.

Ben reached into his knee-high sock and pulled out a pack of American Spirits. He lit one and stared down at Josh.

“The good’s there, man. Right in front of you,” Ben said, taking nicotine into his lungs.

“You’re ridiculous. What is this, 1983? Who the hell smokes after jogging?”

“Hipsters, Josh. Hipsters. Get with it.”

Ben extended his arm to Josh. The two walked back through the park and talked about anything but Madeline. The wind picked up over Brooklyn, and Josh took long, purposeful steps to avoid the chill.

* * *

Madeline kept the music low at first. She gripped Josh's chest. Josh closed his eyes and let go.

Madeline turned up the volume. "That's my favorite part."

"What part?" Josh asked. He leaned into her and exhaled over her jaw line.

"That line. *I know the last page so well, I can't read the first,*" she sang.

Josh realized, for the first time, that Madeline had a pleasant singing voice.

"It's sad, though," he said.

Madeline kept singing and rolled away from Josh. Her naked bottom, Josh thought, still felt wonderful against his skin.

"The next line is *so I just don't start,*" Josh said. "That's sad."

"It's not sad. It's gorgeous." Madeline spoke softer than before and buried her face in the down pillow.

"He doesn't start. He knows how it will end, so he doesn't start. That's awful." Josh's voice cracked, and he cleared his throat.

Madeline pulled on her white tank top without leaving bed. Her leg slipped in between Josh's. He shifted his body closer to her and kissed her back. Goosebumps formed on her skin and Josh, for a moment, felt that Madeline was enjoying him. He leaned down again, but before he reached her, Madeline slid away. She stood next to the bed, wearing only the tank top, with her back to Josh.

"Why can't it just be good?" Josh asked. He couldn't look away from her. He still, after their years and fights, could imagine himself with no one else.

"Because you're so desperate for it to be good that you won't let it be good." Madeline's voice was strong, sure. Josh imagined that she'd practiced the words in her head for some time. She was simply waiting for the question to be asked.

Madeline stood beside the bed. Josh wanted to say something else. Instead, he rolled over and pretended to sleep. There were no words. Madeline walked into the kitchen, and Matthew Caws's voice filled the apartment. He sang about Bob Dylan and Wonder Woman. Josh tried to let the refrain pacify him. Madeline's footsteps mixed with the music. She entered the bedroom, Chinese takeout and chopsticks in hand. She sat beside Josh and handed him a set of sticks.

"It's still cold," she said, taking a bite.

The next song started, and Josh chewed on lo mein. "I like this song," he said.

Madeline nodded and leaned back against the pillow. She fell asleep not long after. Josh watched her before resting his head on her stomach. He touched her fingertips with his own. They awoke in the morning, having slept above the sheets. There was lo mein on the blanket, and Nada Surf still played on shuffle. The room smelled of soy sauce and jasmine.

DUPLEX

The person on my voicemail was a man. His voice was high, higher than most men's voices I'd heard before, and he spoke slowly, as if reading off of cue cards. I didn't know when the call came in. My cell phone never rang. Rather, in that late morning, the phone vibrated, informing me of an awaiting message. A voicemail.

He started: "Hello? I think this is your number. I hope it is."

I was in the kitchen, looking out over my small garden. The weather in Park Slope had turned suddenly cold, with the temperature dropping thirty degrees overnight. It was an unusually bitter autumn. Charlie, my black Labrador, played in the snowy backyard, barking at a neighborhood tabby. My wife Samantha was at work, and I had grown accustomed to having the house to myself during the day. In the evenings I worked as an editor, and I imagined Samantha, too, valued the undisturbed time. I pressed the phone against my ear.

He said: "I've been wanting to call."

A crash came from outside. I opened the backdoor to find earth and terracotta spread from fence to door. Charlie stared up at me, tail wagging and mouth open. He looked like he was smiling. His thin legs trembled in the snow. I turned and pointed into the house; I made my stern face. Charlie ran past, nails clicking against the hardwood floor. I shut the door and began the voicemail again. The second sentence struck me this time: whose number did he think this was? The greeting lacked my voice, telling callers in a robotic, female voice that they had reached this number and to please leave a message. The caller, it seemed, thought the number was correct.

He said: “I’m not really sure what to say, though. It’s been a long time. I hope you’re well.”

The man didn’t say his name. This meant, I assumed, that the intended recipient of the message should recognize his high, almost shrill voice. A pause came, and I heard clanking in the background, repetitive and echoey, like the *ping* of a baseball against an aluminum bat. I didn’t know what this meant. I imagined a college baseball player, tall and sinewy, sneaking away from batting practice long enough to call. Twelve seconds of ambient sound filled the line.

He said: “You should call me sometime. My number hasn’t changed.”

Our small Brooklyn house was a duplex. I walked upstairs, phone still pressed to my ear, to begin my day; my desk was there, mostly due to the unspoiled light that poured in through the large bedroom windows. I spent mornings and afternoons writing and storyboarding and staring out those windows at the South Slope. The neighborhood was middle class and largely Hispanic, a stark contrast to those living in the multi-million dollar brownstones just a few blocks north. The buildings and residents hadn’t changed in years, leaving the area one of the few pockets of the city, at the time, to *remain*. I sat down and turned on my computer. The neighbor’s children, Edgar and Lola, played hide-and-seek on 21st Street. I liked that little had changed over the years.

He said: “I’m going to be in the city next month. So. I don’t know. But I’ll be there.”

For a moment, I wanted to call him back. I wanted to know who he was. Who he wanted on the other end. What would happen when the voice on the voicemail was gone? Would *he* be gone? If I deleted the message, switched off the phone, would the man on the other end cease to exist?

He said: “This—I wish I knew the right things to say, but I don’t. I miss you, Samantha. I still love you and I need to see you. Please.”

The click of the line going dead, of the message ending, rattled in my head, like everything else had been scooped out. I folded the cell phone and placed it on the desk. Suddenly, things that were supposed to be permanent felt inconstant. The children outside laughed and called out words in Spanish I could not understand. I opened a blank document and hoped writing would be a distraction. The screen was white, and I felt sick. Downstairs, at the back door, Charlie scratched to go outside. The tabby meowed. They carried on this way, teasing one another.

FOREST HILLS

Hank's daughter arrived with boxes just before breakfast. He ignored her. As was his morning ritual, he spread all three morning newspapers—*New York Post*, *Daily News*, *New York Times*—across the table and prepared a shake: two bananas, half a cup of vanilla Dannon, one tablespoon of wheat germ, lecithin, glucosamine, Ester C powder, and Metamucil. Hank listened as Ellen tossed boxes into the living room. He let the sound of grinding blades distract him. The kitchen filled with the scent of banana and fiber.

“Dad?” Ellen yelled from outside.

Hank flipped a switch on the blender.

She called out twice more, both times interrupted by the Waring Pro. Hank poured his breakfast and sat at the table. He began with the *Daily News*.

Ellen stormed inside, the last of the boxes tucked under her armpit. Hank looked over the top of his glasses at her then quickly away.

“I was calling you, Dad,” Ellen said, out of breath.

“I was making my breakfast,” Hank said. The crinkling of newspaper echoed in the old house.

“Where should I start?” Ellen already seemed exasperated.

Hank took a drink and let little bits of wheat germ settle on his teeth. He chewed and ignored his daughter.

“I'll start in the guest room.”

* * *

Hank returned from his morning walk feeling full. Ellen had put on music that carried into the street. “That’s not really music for Friday morning, dear,” Hank said, poking his head into the guest room. “Turn it down.”

As a hot shower fogged up the bathroom, Hank rubbed his almost-bald scalp. He hated the spattering of liver spots and, for the life of him, could not remember when they had arrived. He closed his eyes and imagined his hair was still long, too thick for brushing. The shower was hot and just right at the same time.

Ellen stood outside the bathroom as Hank secured his robe. “What do you want me to do with Mom’s magazines?” she asked, wearing a look of annoyance, as if she’d been waiting for hours.

Hank looked back at Ellen. He wanted to look at her and always see not the woman but the girl, the ambitious child who seemed ever anxious for his approval. The dark circles around her eyes all but covered the freckles that once personified her mood.

“Were you just counting the days until your mother died?” Hank asked. He tightened his robe and pushed past Ellen into the living room.

“Now, Dad, stop it!” she yelled. “Stop it right now. There’s no need for that.” Her hands gripped her hips.

“I tell you what,” Hank said, tightening the knot on his robe. “There’s no need for this. For you being here. This is my house. This is all I have left.”

Hank left the room before Ellen could respond. He didn’t want to hear the reasons. Excuses, really. He just wanted, in a life filled with company, to be left alone.

* * *

Hank got dressed only because Ellen asked him to—he had taken to watching the afternoon news naked. The microfiber sofa, which had become his bed in recent months, left him feeling refreshed. He flipped through cable news channels, waiting for something groundbreaking. He settled on the first when James Carville appeared. Hank enjoyed James Carville. Ellen dropped something in the hall closet, and it shattered. The sound of her slamming clothes into boxes reminded Hank of thunder.

“You’re damn right,” Hank said to Carville. “This country *is* dying.”

Politics were all he could process since Mary passed. James Carville laughed at his own joke and said something about Barack Obama. Hank nodded in agreement though he had not heard the statement.

Ellen’s footsteps were heavy in the house and smacked against the hardwood. She passed in front of the television and grabbed more boxes.

“I still can’t get over it,” she said, blocking the screen. “I remember when you voted for Barry Goldwater.”

“People change,” Hank said, and Ellen chuckled. “He was still better than Johnson, though.”

Ellen walked through the living room, and Hank could feel her eyes on him. He shifted and took a sip of iced tea. No longer was their relationship one of parent and child; rather, since Mary died, Hank found himself incapable of seeing his daughter as he once had. And he was sure, as sure as he could be of anything these days, that Ellen felt much the same.

“I’m starting on the bedroom,” Ellen said softly. “That okay?”

Hank kept his lips on the glass and pretended to take a long, satisfying sip. Sweat from the glass slid down his cheek, and bits of ice cube clanked against his teeth. She was pushing him out, he thought, out of his house and his life, and he wouldn't help one bit.

When it came time for lunch, Hank went into the bedroom. He tried desperately not to look at anything. The two double beds were as they had been: separate, sterile, turned down with expertise. Hank had neither the strength nor stomach to rustle the sheets.

Covering the floor, the contents of Hank's dressers and closet had been spread out. Ellen sat in the midst of the piles, arranging clothes by style and season.

"Lunch," Hank said, standing in the doorway. He felt a welling up inside the whole of his face. "I put out cold cuts."

Ellen took a breath and surveyed the room before standing. Her eyes moved around the room as if she had lost something important.

"You have a lot of clothes, Dad," she said.

"I'm an old man." He slid his feet over the hardwood. "There's a lot of years there."

"You should learn to throw things away." She walked past Hank and into the kitchen. "Or else everything piles and piles up until there's no room for anything."

Hank placed ham, turkey, and a slice of provolone on rye bread and sat down at the table. The *Times* was open to the Sports section, so he read, though he wasn't very interested in sports save for tennis. Scanning the pages with his index finger, Hank came to an article about Roger Federer, a name he had heard before. This man from Switzerland, it seemed, was winning everything. There's Federer, the writer said, and then there's everyone else. Hank read the line back, enunciating the words under his breath. He became suddenly regretful of his life, of the

choices he had made. Nothing felt extraordinary: wife, small house, bar, two children, bed and breakfast then no bar, five grandchildren, no bed and breakfast, same small house, no wife. There was nothing left except the house. It, too, was being taken. He was, he feared, everyone else.

“Remember when we used to walk to Forest Hills?” Ellen asked, glancing at the article over Hank’s shoulder.

Hank continued reading and took a sip of iced tea. He hadn’t thought about Forest Hills, the tennis stadium, in years. The walk was short, from house to stadium, and Hank remembered, that first time, it seemed as if all of Queens had come alive.

Ellen laughed off the silence. “What was *the* game we saw? You remember?”

“It was a match, not a game. Tennis is a match.”

“You don’t remember? It was someone famous. I remember people going nuts.”

Hank came to the end of the article but moved his eyes side-to-side, line-to-line. He remembered Mary’s large hat, the one he hated with the iris stapled to the brim. She smiled all day as the sun poured down over the West Side Tennis Club. The grass was manicured and brilliant and smelled of almost-autumn. Ellen begged for popcorn and asked if she would ever play like Margaret Smith Court.

“Arthur Ashe,” Hank said.

“Yes,” Ellen yelled and patted her father’s hand. “He was the black guy, right?”

Hank took a bite and stood up from the table. “He was a tennis player,” he said. “I’ll clean up. Just leave your plate.”

“I’m trying to talk to you, Dad,” Ellen said. “Really trying.”

As Hank walked through the living room, the floor seemed to whimper. The sound was animal, like a dog kicked or mishandled. Hank felt it in his feet and stopped, letting his toes glide.

“Is there tennis in Florida?” he asked, his back turned to Ellen.

“Of course there is,” she said. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“It’s not ridiculous.” Hank moved towards the front door and let in the daylight. “Who will I play against?”

When Ellen looked at Hank then, he could see the heartache they both carried.

“Anyone, Dad. I’m sure a lot of people play tennis.”

Mary was his tennis partner. He thought of her backhand, the way she seemed to carve the air with her racquet; her serve, the way she hopped just slightly before contact; her volley, the way, when she charged the net, she looked like she was playing for The Open. Hank had not played tennis in years, but he had the urge to walk to the stadium, his TA Davis Professional in hand, and carve up the afternoon with Mary. He was sure no one in Florida played tennis, not at his age.

“I’m going out,” Hank said. “If you find my racquet, leave it on the couch.”

“Where are you going? Your feet are still swollen from this morning.” Ellen carried plates into the kitchen and turned on the sink. “Please don’t go far.”

“I said I’d clean up,” he said. “Leave everything. You’re busy enough.”

Ellen stuck her head out of the kitchen. Hank pretended not to see her. He felt weepy and old when she looked at him like a daughter. He didn’t want to leave his home. His and Mary’s home. Ellen’s home. Everyone, though, had moved on, except him. Everyone else, he thought.

“Don’t pack up your mother,” Hank said, stepping outside. “I want her with me on the plane.” He shut the door, firmly, knowing Ellen couldn’t possibly disagree.

The tennis club was too far for Hank to walk, but the subway was close. He needed to visit the stadium one last time, take in all he could. His memory lacked its former sharpness. Somehow going there, though, being in that place of his youth, of his family’s youth, would bring permanence. He wanted to believe in the immortality of tennis.

Hank took the station steps slowly and saw the F train approaching. As the doors slid open and he stepped inside, the bright orange seats seemed right, like an old hat perfectly formed, by sweat and rain and dirt, to his head. Out the window, he could see Shea Stadium. Ellen had told him some months earlier that Shea was being replaced. Maybe, he thought, it *was* time to leave. Queens wasn’t the same anymore—it wasn’t his Queens. Hank didn’t know when the change had occurred, when the town that was his became something young and new, a reincarnated Forest Hills. He’d been left behind.

Hank rode the subway and grew disquieted at the thought of Ellen selling his things. She’d told him to save what he wanted, but some things had to go. He wanted everything; he’d spent nights surveying the house, the *contents* as Ellen’s real estate broker called them, and found nothing could be lost. If he had to go to Florida, his contents had to come, too.

An old black man sat down across from Hank. He smiled, revealing teeth that had been neglected for years. The gesture, nevertheless, was kind.

“Good day,” Hank said, smiling back.

The old man, preoccupied with something in his knapsack, did not respond. He searched his bag, and Hank thought, for a moment, he would ask the man if his tennis racquet was in

there. Finally, the old man pulled out a tattered notebook, which Hank recognized as the kind he had bought his grandchildren for school, and began to write. Hank watched his hand, artful and full of purpose. The old man flipped through page after page, and Hank leaned forward, desperate to see what he was writing. Each pass over the paper produced only scribble, no discernible words or shapes. Just lines. A violent spray of ink that disregarded all rules of geometry and poetry. It went on this way until Hank came to his stop. The old man looked up at him and smiled again. The doors opened, and Hank remained half inside.

“What are you writing, sir?” Hank asked, his voice cracking a bit.

The old man shook his head and put the notebook back into his knapsack. Hank recognized something in the old man’s eyes, something that he felt, too. The world had shifted around them.

“It’s just so noisy up there,” the old man said, rubbing his forehead. “I can’t keep it to myself.”

The doors chimed and closed. Hank stayed on the platform, watching the train push towards Manhattan.

Crossing Austin Street, Hank listened to the Long Island Railroad rattle above him, imagining the scraping of metal against old track came from his own worn frame. In front of him, Hank recognized the familiar lights. Center Court. He could still smell the fresh grass, hear the uproar of the stadium as he approached, the crowds chanting and cheering as that composed amateur, Arthur Ashe, took down Clark Graebner then, a day later, Tom Okker. Hank had never seen the like. Martin Luther King Jr. had just been assassinated, and Hank’s beloved city was engulfed in race riots. And here a black man won the United States Open. Hank was proud to

have seen it, to bear witness to something so important. The country had changed, if only a little, that day in Forest Hills.

Mostly, though, he remembered Mary. They had been fighting in the days leading up to the finals: Mary felt they couldn't afford the tickets, that Hank enjoyed wasting their savings, their retirement money, on frivolous things. Always the worrier, Hank thought. But at the end of that final match, she turned to him and slid her arm around his waist, pulled him close. How perfect was that, she had said. Hank kissed his wife then like they were still kids. Nothing about that moment, that day, seemed frivolous. He recalled the summer as if it had only just gone.

Walking the grounds of the West Side Tennis Club now, he noticed much had changed. Still, the magic remained. Hank looked out over the long rows of grass courts; they'd always reminded him of England. A beacon of elegance and country in a city filled with everything but. Trees surrounding the courts and darting into the night sky. The new courts, something called Har-Tru, lacked the same grace. Hank found the green clay gritty and harsh. He scooped a handful and let the coarse granules fall away between his fingers. The clay left a stain in the deep wrinkles of his palms. Tennis, he thought, was meant for grass.

Making his way back to the entrance, Hank decided to stop, one final time. He took up a spot on the last court, farthest from the lights. In the darkness, though, he could make out the white lines, the taut net, the side-by-side benches. Mary always insisted on her own bench. We smell too bad to share, she'd said with a laugh. Hank slipped off his shoes and moved to the service line. The manicured grass comforted his tired feet. Like a cloud, he thought. In his right hand, Hank gripped his racquet, and with his left, he bounced a ball. He could almost touch the smooth, felt nap. His toss was high, a motion that hadn't changed since his teenage years, and he swung hard. Imagining Mary's return, he shuffled to his right, hitting a forehand up the line.

Mary would track the shot for sure, though, and return a backhand crosscourt. Hank hit a short ball back, hoping to draw Mary to the net. She rushed forward, slicing a drop shot just over the net. Raising his racquet, Hank clapped. Mary bowed and smiled, enjoying the attention. In the empty night, he could hear her critique his serve, that it was too windy for such a high toss, that he knew she would come to the net eventually, her voice as real as it had been all those years ago. She had always been there to return his shots, to keep the rally going. As he left the court, he imagined their back-and-forth, their epic battles, continued on without them, emerging like dew every morning and evaporating, at night, into the lights of Center Court.

Hank put on his shoes and made his way off the grounds. His feet felt like sandbags, but he wanted to walk home, let the pavement remind him. He'd made it for all those years. There was no reason he couldn't do it now. The stadium lights cast his shadow out in front of him. He moved faster, hoping to catch up to it. Eventually, with the lights too far in the distance, he became a silhouette along the street, listening to the cars on Queens Boulevard and Union Turnpike. Hank never felt comfortable behind the wheel. He was a city man, through and through, content to ride the rails, as Mary used to say. She'd called him the handsomest hobo in town.

He walked home slowly, his swollen feet aching, hoping Ellen would have left by the time he arrived. Instead, she sat on the couch, asleep. A cup of green tea on the table released steam into the room. Hank moved quietly and tucked a blanket around Ellen. As he watched her sleep, she looked like the girl he once knew, anxious to become Margaret Smith Court. He leaned in and kissed her forehead.

In the bedroom, pictures had been added beside the piles of clothes. Hank ignored them. He couldn't think about Forest Hills anymore. He sank his hands into the bed sheets and shook

hard. He tossed and tossed and tossed until the beds were unrecognizable. For so long, Hank needed everything to stay the same. He tired of life shifting around him. Now, more than anything, Hank wanted to move in rhythm, like a perfect rally.

The walls, void of art and photos, felt desolate. Hank closed his eyes and listened. There's too much noise, he thought, too much to say. Gripping a marker from atop the boxes, Hank let his hand move, artful and full of purpose, over the wall. The lines said everything. They were geometry and poetry at once. Hank wrote until his hand tired, then settled in the quiet noise of the unmade bed.

SUPERMAN COMES TO DINNER

The smell of brisket and gravy, honey-baked yams, and green bean casserole spreads through the house like the summer heat. Sitting in his grandparents' kitchen, Nathan absorbs the smell, mostly the yams, and his stomach yells: what's the holdup?! Grandma pulls herself away from *Murder, She Wrote* just long enough to open the oven and torture him with swells of crisping honey. Mom and Dad come into the kitchen and Dad steals a piece of brisket. The gravy never makes it to his mouth, though, and hangs from the end of his dark chocolate mustache. Grandpa comes through the kitchen and into the living room, whispering something to Grandma before she shushes him away.

Nathan covers his face and wonders why nobody notices his *suit*: the red and blue fabric, taken from pieces of different pajamas, cut to arms, legs, body and carefully stapled together on the inside for appearances; boots, his black galoshes spray-painted red; the cape he'd fashioned out of Mom's old, satin bed sheet; the S, cut from his pillowcase, affixed by staples. The staples, though, occasionally nick at Nathan's chest. He imagines that chest hair will feel similar when it grows in and immediately dislikes the thought. Grandma again appears in the kitchen, checking the oven, microwave, simmering gravy, then whisking back for Jessica Fletcher's revelation of this week's murderer. Nathan hates both Jessica Fletcher and waiting for dinner, so he runs around the kitchen, making *whoosh* noises with arms outstretched. He flies into the Florida room—though he has no idea what a Florida room is or how one can exist on Long Island—then kitchen, then Florida room again. He lands beside the china cabinet where Grandma hides her jelly beans. Grandma isn't allowed to eat jelly beans on account of her dentures, but Nathan has

caught her on many occasions sneaking into the cabinet and removing the third row of plates from the bottom, behind which lay quite possibly the largest collection of jelly beans in Suffolk County. Nathan does the same, filching the last of the cherry jelly beans and again takes flight.

The *Murder, She Wrote* end-music echoes through the house and lures Nathan into the dining room. Grandma, though, waits for next week's episode preview, so Nathan flies to the table and chooses a seat different from his usual one. He prefers the corner seat, which usually becomes so crowded with food and serving plates that no one can see him, but tonight he wants to be seen. Tonight, he is Superman. Dad brings the brisket to the table, tonguing the rogue drop of gravy caked to his mustache. He and Grandpa squabble over the end pieces before Grandma says Shutup and takes them herself, splitting the portion with Mom, who doesn't even like end pieces. Nathan takes three small slices, along with a spoonful of green-bean casserole and a four-person helping of yams. Neither Mom, Dad, nor Grandpa likes yams; Grandma does, though, and takes some, including the crusted honey on the bottom that Nathan really loves. He asks for a small taste of the honey crust and Dad says Mom, give him some, but Grandma shakes her head as she consumes meat and yams in a single bite. Sorry, Scooter, Dad says.

Nathan, after taking several bites of yams and returning a piece of brisket to the platter, leans back in his chair and flaunts his *S*. He clears his throat and taps under the table but is ignored as the dining room fills with sounds of chewing and swallowing and sipping at lukewarm water. Forks and knives cling-clang against the florally designed plates and Grandma's top dentures slip from her mouth into the gravy boat. Damn brisket, she mutters through naked gums, and Grandpa's fork sludges through gravy in search of teeth. Mom laughs like she might never stop, and Nathan dreams of flying from the table and saving a man who's fallen off the Port Jefferson ferry. Teeth found, Grandma washes them off in her Chardonnay.

Dad forks Nathan's extra brisket and tells the table that his test results have been improving and his new job starts Monday and they are very excited about moving; Grandma interrupts with a cough and says People are morons. Grandpa declares that Florida will be a nice move for Nathan and asks why people are morons. Nathan kneels on his chair, making the cape and *S* clearly visible above the dinner plates. Grandma says People are morons who watch *Murder, She Wrote* and don't see that Jessica Fletcher is obviously murdering all of those people to get book ideas and then cleverly framing innocent people. Grandpa asks Then why do innocent people confess to the crime at the end, and Grandma argues that Jessica Fletcher most certainly offers them royalties from the book sales based on the crime.

Nathan slides his arms under the table and tries to lift it up over his head, to show everyone that he is Superman. The table rattles, but everyone is distracted by Grandma's theory. Dad again attempts to talk about his new job, getting as far as *The Palm Beach Post* is a great paper to write for you know, before Grandpa wonders out loud Why wouldn't anybody catch on if she were killing everyone. Grandma gets huffy and tells him he will never understand without watching for himself. Just then, the small tremors of the table knock over Mom's lukewarm water. The tablecloth absorbs most of the spill, but everyone throws in their napkins anyway. Nathan wants to scream to everyone—Look at me please I am Superman!—but instead asks for the green bean casserole.

Grandpa argues with Grandma. Mom stares at her glass of wine like it's a crystal ball. Dad's hands are full, biscuit in one, fork-full of brisket/yams/green beans in the other. Nobody motions towards the green bean casserole for Nathan, so he reaches across the vast expanse of table, his yam-sticky fingers coming up just short. He shifts his legs to make himself taller, but before he grasps the casserole, a loose staple from his suit catches on the tablecloth and tears the

S from his chest. The ripping of fabric captures everyone and Grandma asks What the hell was that, while Nathan stares at the piece of fabric in front of him. Mom rubs Nathan's shoulder and says Honey did you make that, and Nathan nods. Grandma asks What are you wearing, and despite losing his insignia, Nathan smiles, validated, and tells everyone that he made this suit because he is Superman, or at least he wants to be Superman. Mom continues rubbing his shoulder and Dad winks. Grandpa mumbles to himself about Jessica Fletcher and her impetus for such slaughter. Grandma, through a mouthful of food, asks Who is Superman. Nathan explains Krypton and Smallville and Clark Kent before Grandma laughs hysterically, nearly losing her dentures for a second time. She says that the story is just a story and the truth must be that the only Superman around is Alan Superman, their seventy-year-old Certified Public Accountant living in Commack with his third wife, Alberta, and who recently had triple-bypass surgery.

Nathan shakes his head and says Grandma, you don't understand, but Grandma argues that she does understand that Alan Superman is a man but Superman is a fantasy and that is okay with her if it is okay with him. Nathan quiets, letting the statement settle, and realizes that it is not okay with him, that Superman is not a fantasy. He feels a pain in his chest and wonders if his heart is broken. It's then he sees a large staple anchored into his flesh. He pulls out the staple and asks for any remaining yams and their honey-crusting complements, as well as begging Grandma to never again speak about Superman being their accountant. Grandma agrees, and while Nathan dreams of flying through clouds and infinite sky, Grandpa stands and decrees that there is no possible way for Jessica Fletcher to have murdered all of those people without getting caught, and that Grandma is most definitely losing her mind.

The ice on the window left the world outside looking distorted and lucent. The thick stink of rotten beef banh hoi filled Andre's apartment. I sat on his cigarette-burned couch and did another line. Andre followed.

After a few minutes of frantic breathing filling the room, Andre stared at me.

"I get dizzy when I look at things right side up," he said. He said it fast and without pause so that it sounded like one long, incomprehensible word.

"What does that mean?" I asked and licked my fingertips.

"It's true," Andre said.

I watched his pupils darken and envelop iris and sclera. It looked like a Kubrick film. Andre bit his nails and walked to the refrigerator, opening it to release even more pungency. Most likely hard-boiled eggs, Andre's favorite, left too long. He grabbed a Diet Coke and began singing a made-up song about the taste of unleaded gasoline.² I watched as he sang and danced and laughed at his own lyrics. He seemed, at that moment, distant from the man he had been.

"You know what the problem was with Maddie," Andre said, trying to make eye contact with me. "She loved me."

He sat down on the couch, his ass sliding closer to the edge. He closed his eyes. An odd grin, almost baleful, crossed his face. He repeated those last words again, softly, like an exhale.

¹The names, places, and events have been changed to better serve both story and author. All other details remain historically and emotionally accurate.

² While the song itself escapes me, its title never has: "Super Premium from Shell Gives Me Gas."

Andre was dead by morning.³

He was a good-looking man. Not too tall, light-skinned,⁴ with a muscular build that he rarely worked for. He ran once a week along the Hudson, usually with me trailing behind, wheezing, and he played tennis two or three times a month. His appetite, though, was fit for a Roman emperor. He often enjoyed entire pizzas by himself. *Insatiable*, an ex had called him. Not many people can be summed up in one word, but it seemed to fit Andre perfectly. He was wholly unsatisfied with life.⁵

That changed, though, when he met Maddie.⁶ She was unlike any woman he had met before. She enjoyed, and understood, his sense of humor, which few did. She shared his love of silent movies and Humphrey Bogart and the Angelika. Her appetite rivaled his own, and he

³ The time of death was around 3:30am. Andre's dog, Gary Carter, barked incessantly until a neighbor came to the door. The door had been open since I'd left hours before, and in went the neighbor. Andre, she said, had fallen through his glass-top coffee table. *There was blood*, she said, over and over in her Croatian accent.

⁴ Andre's mother, a black, Irish woman from Massapequa, was vocally grateful, on several occasions, to have married such a pallid man. She hated the darkness of her arms and frequently wore long sleeves in the summertime. Her worst fear, she once told me, was that Andre would have inherited her skin tone. I told her then that it seemed like a silly, silly fear.

⁵ Date: 10/8/00; Location: Stuyvesant Town; Re: National League Division Series, Game Four, Mets versus Giants. New New York versus Old New York. Andre hadn't slept all week. We'd only been friends for about a year, having met in our Introduction to World Literature class, but I knew Andre to be a rabid New York Mets fan. He called me before Game Four, beside himself. *Bobby J. Jones*, he kept saying with no further explanation. I didn't know who that was, so I repeated *uh huh* back to him. In fact, Bobby J. Jones was the starting pitcher for the Mets in Game Four, a pitcher who had previously been sent to the minor leagues due to his inability to get batters out (an integral part of being a pitcher). Andre thought it an abomination that this man was allowed to start Game Four. He enunciated *Game* and *Four* separately so that I would know their importance. In the end, though, Bobby J. Jones pitched the game of his life—a one-hit shutout—and the Mets moved on to the NLCS. There were celebrations around New York, different from those that I'd witnessed for the Yankees. These were different people, Mets fans, and the celebrations were louder yet, most definitely, sadder. Mets fans maintained, simultaneously, airs of arrogance and grumble. Andre was no different. Despite the one-hit shutout, despite the Mets moving through the playoffs, Andre could not be satisfied. *Bobby J. Jones*, he said to me after the game, *should be in the minors. He's a bum. A bum*. Afterwards, Andre put his hands behind his head, slid back on his couch, and shook his head at the television.

⁶ For both of us, really. We became fast friends, the three of us. I'd never been a part of something like that, a two-sided friendship. Andre talked about Maddie, Maddie about Andre. I became necessary, the relationship confidant. I liked being in the middle of things.

loved her curves.⁷ Most notably, though, and probably most important, was Maddie's ability, when necessary, to tell Andre to shut the fuck up. He needed that often, and no one in his life had ever given it to him. Until Maddie.

It was a Friday when they first met, Andre and Maddie.⁸ The Staten Island Ferry nudged into dock, and a little girl in front of Andre reached instinctively for her mother's open palm. Andre felt like doing the same, as he had never been on the ferry before. He typically disliked boats—something about drowning—but couldn't hold back his wonder, after years of living in Manhattan, for the Fresh Kills landfill. *I just need to smell it*, he said. I told him he should, that it'd be good for him, even for a few hours, to leave Manhattan.⁹

People shoved onto the ferry and took their seats. Many looked like they sat in the same seat every day. Andre stood against the railing, watching as the ferry pulled away from Manhattan. It was morning, and the gulls circled in swarms as tourists tossed pieces of popcorn and bread and rocks into the air. Andre wasn't sure, at that moment, how anyone could live anywhere else. He flared his nostrils and sucked in the air of the Upper New York Bay. It made him think of Joseph Mitchell, who had said the water was oily and dirty and germ. Pulling out

⁷ Maddie didn't share Andre's love of them. In fact, her self-consciousness created constant conflict. If he touched her stomach, even during sex, she would yell at him. And, he was never to mention the curves in front of her. Never. So, he told me. *Mad curves*, he called them, and he would wink at me afterwards as if to imply that I, too, must acknowledge the legend of the mad curves. Maddie was gorgeous, no matter what you called it; in the end, I think Andre just wanted her to see herself the way he saw her.

⁸ I wasn't there when they met, but I've heard the story so many times I feel as if I orchestrated the entire thing. In my head, these years later, it plays out like a short film: long, sweeping shots of Manhattan, soft indie music rising and falling throughout the scenes, and difficult, unexpected dialogue.

⁹ Andre and I were friends for some time before I actually saw him leave the island of Manhattan. There were tales, rumors really, of a trip to Coney Island, but those could never be substantiated. No, the first time was something different entirely: he showed up at my house, demanded that we rent a car for the day, and drove to the Roosevelt Field Mall on Long Island. To this day, I have no idea why. *I'm just dying*, he said, *for some food court*.

his camera, Andre steadied himself and leaned on the top rail. He snapped few pictures, as it took him time to settle on exactly the right shots, but focused intensely on small details: a strange ripple in the harbor, an inscription carved into the metal post beside him,¹⁰ a collection of barges and tugboats seemingly adrift between two states. His finger depressed the release and, as the shutter clicked, a hard shove came from behind. The camera smacked against the rail before the strap caught the tip of Andre's pinky finger and hung above the foaming waves.

“What the fuck,” Andre yelled without turning around. “Seriously. What the fuck, man?” He took the strap with his free hand and gripped. He thought that, if he'd had another camera, he could take a picture of this camera caught in purgatory between boat and bay. Something about it seemed peaceful.

“Oh, God. I'm sorry. Is it lost?” A hand came to rest on Andre's shoulder.

“No, no, it's fine,” Andre said. “Just watch where you're going.”

He heard commotion behind him and the voices of several young women. One voice grew loud, and the word *douchebag*¹¹ droned in Andre's ear. He turned and found a young woman standing before him. She mouthed something to him, but it didn't register. Her eyebrows furrowed. Andre thought of those scenes in movies when two people yelled and screamed and released their anger in quick breaths; then, almost as suddenly, they would kiss, hard and violent, and their rage would change into something new. He thought of his parents, how they used to

¹⁰ The inscription, which Andre later had made into his favorite T-shirt, read: *I Want to be Naked in Public*.

¹¹ Despite my somewhat tempered and subjective view of Andre, he was quite possibly the smartest person I'd ever known. His life seemed devoted to the collection of useless knowledge, but knowledge nonetheless. He knew more about nothing and everything than I thought possible. For some reason, though, despite his love of all things *New Yorker* and *National Geographic*, Andre found a kinship, a marriage, with the word *douchebag*. I don't really know why or when it started, but there was never a time when the two entities—Andre and *douchebag*—were not one in my mind.

berate each other and, as if a breaker had been switched, could hold each other like lovers. There was something about this woman.

“I said I was sorry, okay,” the young woman said. “Don’t be a cock.” Her hair swirled in the gusts coming across from Bayonne.

“I said it was fine.” Andre pulled the camera back over the rail. There was a scratch across the lens, probably from the fall. “Godammit,” he said, running his finger over the cut.

“That just happen?” the young woman asked. Her voice sounded softer now.

“Yeah it did,” he said then put the strap across his shoulder. “No worries, though. It’s just a lens.”

“Well, sorry anyway.” The young woman turned to walk back to her friends.

“Did you call me a douchebag?” Andre asked and took a step closer to the young woman.

When she turned around, abruptly and with a look of surprise, Andre took a picture.¹²

“What was that?” she asked.

“It’s something.” Andre smiled at the young woman and waited, for several moments, before she smiled back.

We started doing coke together in the winter before Andre died. Well, Andre started using; I’d been using for some time. He took to it immediately. Routine followed quickly—three times a

¹² That picture of Maddie is still around. The scratch in the lens fractured her face. The effect left Maddie with two faces: one, the top face, seemed vibrant and intense; the other, bottom face, looked indifferent, aloof. Andre, in his own way, came to love both. Until he died, he kept the picture framed on his nightstand. I thought it strange, almost masochistic. Once, not long before his death, I found Andre asleep on his bedroom floor holding the picture, the corners of the frame digging into his chest.

day, like vitamins.¹³ The routine, though, seemed unable to mix with Andre's normal life. He lost his job in spring after he was found unconscious and bloody-nosed in the faculty lounge, a copy of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* in his lap.¹⁴

We grew close during those months. He shared things that surprised me, stories of failure and fear and terrible embarrassment.¹⁵ And he tried, desperately, to avoid speaking about Maddie. This, of course, never worked. No matter where the conversation began, we somehow always came to Maddie. Andre knew the relationship was over, knew that she had moved on and he should do the same. He knew that they were, in the end, awful for each other. None of this, though, ever really mattered. He loved her blindly, without hesitation. I gave him coke hoping his vision would change. He used because he needed to forget her. I got the impression, though, that Andre saw everything through a snowy haze of blissful dissidence.

* * *

¹³ In the morning, *frosted flakes* are the way to go. Afternoons vary depending on mood: if it's a good day at the office, I take a quick post-lunch break; if my editor is riding me or a pitch has flopped, there may be two breaks. The late edition accompanies the news; it's the only way I can tolerate the world. Yet, I cannot stop watching the news. There's a certain comfort in all of it.

¹⁴ Afterwards, Andre did a line and reenacted the scene for me in my living room. He sat on the leather loveseat, slouched down a bit. The *Living* section of the newspaper supplanted the book of stories on his lap. I played the part of Adjunct Instructor Lilly Bailey, whose glasses slid down the bridge of her nose when she spoke, and I jostled Andre awake. *You're disgusting*, I said, after some coaching. Andre, eyes more red than white, looked up at me and said: *I can't hear a thing with so much water going*. I just looked at him, sure that he wanted me to respond.

¹⁵ *Big*. It's the word that sticks with me, even now. Andre was *big*. We were coked out one night and he just blurted it out. I almost threw up from laughing so hard.

"It's not a good thing, man," he said.

"Fuck you. Let's trade then."

"No, I'm serious. Maddie says that, sometimes, it's *too* big. It's distracting." He said the last word as if it tasted bitter.

"Fuck you," I said.

"So you know what she does?" He slid forward in his chair and got close to my face. "She listens to Nada Surf."

I stared back at him. I am embarrassed to say, now, that I pictured Maddie, naked and beautiful, singing *I'll get swept back out* as she came.

"Well," I said, "Matthew Caws's voice *is* delightful."

Andre wanted to laugh but held it under his breath. His chest bumped up and down. He just shook his head, back and forth, and said nothing.

Maddie surprised Andre with tickets to the Brooklyn Cyclones for their anniversary. He'd never been to Coney Island, and the prospect of spending an entire day on rides, in an aquarium, and at a baseball game sounded like perfection. He remembered what she wore that day, a sleeveless white sundress, which showed off her amazing breasts.¹⁶

As soon as they arrived, Maddie challenged Andre to a Skee-Ball tournament. Rows of tickets poured out of the machine as she, over and over, hit the grand prize. Andre took a picture of her holding the lot of tickets, the smile on her face like a giddy child.

“What if a time comes,” Andre said as they walked down the boardwalk, each with a Nathan’s hotdog in hand, “when there’s no more of this. What would I do?”

Maddie made a face then, skeptical and clenched. “You’d wake up, like every other day, and live.” She kissed him with sauerkraut breath. “Don’t be dumb.”

“You don’t think about it?” Andre asked.

“Not unless you make me,” she said.

At the aquarium, Andre relished the chance to teach Maddie about sharks.¹⁷ He explained how they did little other than eat and swim, eat and swim. Even sleeping was off limits. Most sharks, Andre said, pointing at a hammerhead, would die if they stopped swimming. Maddie found the notion sad. With all that water and beauty around them, she said, it didn’t seem right that a shark, not even once, couldn’t take a moment to appreciate all its surroundings, its universe. None of that mattered, Andre said, because, in the end, they would outlive us all.

As night rolled in and the sun set over Gravesend Bay, the lights at KeySpan Park flashed on and lit the sky. Andre cheered as they found their seats in the small stadium.

¹⁶ They were a constant theme of Andre’s storytelling. Unlike the mad curves, however, Maddie’s breasts were a fully authorized topic.

¹⁷ Yet another installment of *Andre’s Encyclopedia of Useless Knowledge*.

“You know, my father,” he said, “used to write for the Mets.¹⁸”

“No, I didn’t know that.” Maddie turned Andre’s face to her and kissed him. “Don’t ever stop telling me things.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Andre said and smiled.

When he told me about that day, that night, he always smiled. He couldn’t help it. My best day, he’d said, it was our best day.

“Have you ever loved someone, but not known why?” Maddie asked, months later.

A wave of panic crested over me. There was no correct answer to the question. She’d asked me to come over, spend some friend-time together, and I relished the chance to be what she needed, to keep her confidence and make her better. But I felt lost. I bit the skin around my nails and pretended I was watching television.

“Seriously?” she asked and stared at me. She shifted on the couch and sat on her crossed legs. “Nothing?” She wore Andre’s favorite T-shirt and boxers, and the television light reflected off her skin.

“No,” I said.

She wrapped her arms around her stomach.

“No what?” she asked.

There was a softness in her eyes. As she looked at me, I began to worry. She seemed distant.

“I’ve never been in love,” I said. I bit down on my thumbnail but got flesh instead. “So, no.”

¹⁸ It’s the only time that I know of in which Andre spoke about his father with Maddie. Andre and his father were practically strangers, though I always suspected that the two men, in many ways, were much the same.

Maddie nodded. She looked to the television, though she didn't seem to be watching. The opening to *Law & Order: SVU* filled the living room. Neither of us spoke until a suspect tossed Detective Stabler out a window.

"Jesus," Maddie said.

"Indeed."

After more silence, Maddie flexed her fingers in and out, in and out, in and out. Her face flushed. "I'm freaking out," she said.

Before I could answer, she threw her arms around me. The warmth of her tears ran down my neck and gave me goosebumps.

"I don't know if I love him anymore."

The statement somehow took me by surprise and, at the same time, didn't.

"Does he know that?" I asked.

Maddie's grip was tight on my neck. I sat stiff. Detective Benson's angry monologue disappeared beneath Maddie's unsteady breathing.

"I don't think he's capable of knowing that," she said.

It was the most truthful statement either of us made that night. I took Maddie's arms from around my neck and held her hands. She squeezed.¹⁹

"He loves you. More than he loves himself," I said. A car horn outside the building honked in a rhythm that mimicked my heartbeat. "He will never understand."

¹⁹ When I think of that moment, of Maddie gripping my hands, I remember that I was crying. But I wasn't. I cannot decipher between my memory of that night and what I remember of that night. The two have never been the same. I know I didn't cry, because I never cry. The morning Andre died, I found his camera strap in my closet. No camera, just the strap. The edges were frayed. The sight of it made me very, very sad.

Maddie turned back to the television. The tears formed shadows on her cheeks. She shook her head, back and forth, back and forth, and said nothing. She grabbed my hand. I could feel her pulse in my fingertips.

After months of nothing, Andre finally seemed to be moving. Forward. Having dried up his savings, he was hard at work looking for a job. He hadn't used all week. I was, frankly, lonely. But pleased. Old Andre was making room for New Andre.

When he called me, he sounded beaten. *You, here, now. Bring me a present.* He hung up. I did a line before I left my apartment. On the subway to Andre's, everyone looked miserable and moved in slow motion. The ding of the doors at 1st Avenue felt like it touched my vertebrae.

Andre's eyes were swollen and bloodshot. He wore pajama pants and a Green Lantern²⁰ T-shirt with holes torn in the shoulders.

We didn't speak before doing a line. His apartment was cold and reeked of Vietnamese food. He did another line almost immediately. I rubbed his head. As soon as I touched him, Andre began to wail. It sounded raw. For what seemed like hours, I just watched him. There were no words.

"You know," I said, "the blue whale's heart weighs as much as a VW Beetle."

Andre looked at me, his hazel eyes full of something broken. He laughed, and continued to laugh, so hard he fell to the ground. He stared at me, then the ceiling and kept laughing.

"See," he said. "From here, everything looks right."

"It's true." I reached down and patted his stomach. "It's true, my friend."

²⁰ I still remember, because Andre made me learn it: "In brightest day, in blackest night, no evil shall escape my sight. Let those who worship evil's might beware my power, Green Lantern's light!"

He pointed at an envelope on the table. His eyes filled again as his eyelids slid shut. It was a handwritten letter. I read quickly. In the moment, I could retain very little. The word *hope* appeared several times, as did *miss*. Then, nearly hidden in the middle: *I'm getting married. His name is Josh.*²¹ I looked down at Andre. He was hysterical behind his closed eyes. Maddie was getting married. We knew this was coming eventually. But he, most certainly, would never understand.

Andre took my hand and squeezed. He gripped hard, and I could feel his heart beating faster, faster, faster. I was sure, watching my friend disappear, that he wanted me to say something.

²¹ There was more, but nothing I remember.

SOMETIMES WHEN I TALK, IT'S LIKE YOU'RE NOT EVEN THERE

You'd been gone two years, to the day, when I put the first sledgehammer through the kitchen wall of our Park Slope duplex. Japanese knives, the only gift I kept from the wedding, leapt onto the tile floor, their clanking reverberating through my toes. An old Calphalon, riddled with scars probably inflicted during your college days, snuck out from behind the cookbooks and landed on my foot. I closed my eyes, sucked in the fusty morning air, and took another crack at the wall.

The smell of bedrock and plaster filled the kitchen. As I reared back, a flash came over me, and I imagined you, body fractured and wet, dripping through a newly created hole. A heat wave had swept through the city in recent days, and I pictured my mind slipping. I swung hard and felt the mist of wall innards on my face like a sunshower.

As my arms rose again, I swear I could hear Charlie barking in the back yard, chasing the neighborhood tabby. The sound shot through my legs and made them unsteady. It would have driven you mad, the barking. I heard it vividly, as if I were standing beside the black Labrador once more. You denied for days, weeks, that you left the front door open. I simply wanted you to say *on purpose*.

When the barking, real or imagined, subsided, I gripped the splintered wood handle of the sledgehammer and sped its iron head through a stud. The old porcelain sink trembled like skin against cold rain. Scanning the kitchen shelves, I remembered our first day in the house. You, balanced on the stove and countertop, sliding those wicker baskets into place on the shelves: three per wall, evenly spaced, each matching the other. *Symmetry*, you demanded, made a room pleasant. I moved into the room slowly, hands outstretched, prepared to slide my fingers into the

ball of your foot and tickle. But instead, you fell, landing in my outstretched arms. I'd never seen you so frightened. Your pulse raced as you said my name, *Peter*, like it was the first time. I put you down, waiting for your feet to take hold and said, *they look good*.

The ghosts of those baskets hovered over the shelves, their silhouettes outlining the kitchen despite their absence. I climbed up, balancing my feet on stove and countertop. I swung hard and fast, the first shelf collapsing like a piece of cardboard. The catharsis was overwhelming. I felt stronger, the sledgehammer weightless in my cracked hands. The second shelf became a pile of confetti on the kitchen floor, and I began to feel as if I were breaking you. Turning to the third shelf behind me, I slipped. I heard, rather than felt, my back hit the floor. The radio above the sink crackled in and out before settling on a song—words battled static and echoed through the hollowed kitchen—*three a.m. cellophane, suffocates my favorite things*—and I closed my eyes to the taste of iron swimming over my gums.

I awoke—hours later I had presumed—but in reality, only moments. The top of my T-shirt had turned crimson; I hovered over the sink, spitting goblets of blood until my mouth was dry. My lower lip throbbed and was split in two. I fought the urge to take a shot of bourbon. As I surveyed the havoc that I'd created, plaster and wood and metal coloring every square inch of space, I remembered, in perfect detail, the moment I found you on this floor: there was leftover pasta on the counter. A half-empty can of Diet Coke in the sink. The refrigerator door left slightly open. The way the morning light, through the kitchen window, reflected off of your sweating, naked back as he came inside of you. The aging wood floor trembled with you.

I thought there'd be music of some kind, rhythmic and sad, when I walked into the house that day, a pivotal moment in the low budget, poorly-lit indie film of my life. The camera would dolly with me walking into the house, looking oblivious and euphoric. Perhaps I smell something

perfumed in the living room; I might lean down to pet Charlie before realizing that he's no longer there. The music would be strong and difficult; I hear the song from the radio as I reflect on it. Edits, though, would make the moment, cutting back and forth from my ignorance to your bliss as the music grew louder and more profound. I would open the kitchen door, slow and precise, as the song climaxed with you—*now my lover smells like rain*—and the camera would jib around, catching my eyes in mid-blink, closer and closer as the pupils filled in the white and shattered.

But there was no music, no camera angles to consider. Only the reality of what you had done. I saw it every night, as I tried to sleep and hoped that something, anything, would turn it off.

David knocked loudly on the front door, the reverberations reaching into the living room where I had found solace on the plastic-covered sofa. *You alive?* he yelled through the door. The thickness of his Scottish accent dripped like marmalade. His daily attempt to rescue me from myself. He was a professor and, therefore, mostly drunk at any given moment. I thought of leaving him there for a while, as a test of our friendship. He yelled once more and pounded the door with added mania. He was all that I had left after you, a point I fear he was always aware of. I could never shake the feeling that, despite how close David and I were since college, the friendship was now more charity than anything else.

“Are you kidding me?” he said as I opened the door.

His mouth only a few inches from my face, the stink of morning breath and McEwan's overwhelmed me. He stormed past me, my hand still resting on the open door, and he caught sight of the kitchen.

“Dear God, man. Have you gone mad?”

“Perhaps, a little,” I said, smirking.

“What the fuck did you do, Peter?”

He looked at me, lost as ever and a bit drunk, and I hugged him. I pulled him close and held on.

“It’s begun, then, has it?” he asked.

I let go and met his eyes. “It has.”

David pulled a flask from his back pocket. I drank first, then him; the sting of warm whiskey stuck to the insides of my cheeks as David lifted the sledgehammer and left a hole above the stained sink. “Well done, eh?” he asked.

I wish you could have seen the look on his face, eyes glazed and skin sunburned. He never said your name out loud to me, not even once.

We took turns over the next few hours, each destroying another piece of the kitchen that you had so meticulously worked to decorate. My arms throbbed and burned as the afternoon progressed, unaffected by the shots David dispensed every few minutes. He handed me the sledgehammer after taking down the cabinets, in which, we discovered, remained the two beer steins you and I brought back from Hamburg. David stumbled off to the bathroom as I stared at the ceramic shards. The words *Du bist frei und deshalb bist du verloren* were scattered in pieces across the chipping hardwood. Alcohol rushed to my head like a traffic jam finally unclogged, and my worn legs found comfort and gave way. I spread across the kitchen floor and felt myself melting into it.

Night had come and gone before I awoke on that floor. Something about the room, humid and syrup-sticky, made me think of the first time that we made love. You put on that awful Dan

Hill song; I thought, until you were riding me, that it was a joke. But his voice seemed to push you, as if *he* was the one doing the touching and kissing and fingering; the higher he sang, the louder you screamed. Your nails left scars on my chest. I was distracted by your breasts and didn't notice till later. They were perfect: milky white, like something from Italian renaissance, though petite and firm; sweat slid onto your nipples and tasted of apricot. I could have come then, tongue to skin. You were too good for me, I knew. It was all I could think when I felt you around me, your naked body lithe and shivering as you sucked in the damp, Brooklyn air.

David's arm was draped across my chest as I tried to stir myself from the floor. It was a sight that no one had witnessed, thank God. He wore a smile that cracked into his fatty cheeks. He looked like a pig in shit lying on that floor, and I was jealous.

In the living room, I could hear the echo, every so faintly, of the walls shifting. Taking deep, must-filled breaths. The duplex felt like a symbiont, that kitchen and me feeding off one another. It, too, felt the change, starting with your kitchen, making it my kitchen. The rest would follow.

The upstairs, though, was unchanged. I couldn't bear our bedroom. The room still looked the same; there were probably clothes folded in piles on the bed, forgotten crumbs atop the sheets. You were supposed to be home with me. You said we would be fine. But you didn't mean we.

The first signs of morning broke through the window and woke David, who gargled like an old man. Drool and alcohol had crusted to the lines around his lips.

"Sleep well then?" he asked from a room away.

"It's a good floor," I said, wiping the last remnants of a shower from my chest.

"Ah, she is," he said. "I think we made love last night."

“Me and you?”

David laughed. “Me and the floor. She’s a gentle mistress.”

I snickered as I tossed him a fresh towel and demanded he shower. The smell, I said, had crossed from uncomfortable to ungodly overnight. He took in a sample of armpit and agreed. While he showered, I found myself staring at the kitchen, or rather, what I had done to the kitchen. What would you feel if you walked in right now, I wondered. I hoped you would be a stranger here.

With David no longer reeking, we left the house in search of food. Park Slope was stagnant and hot, and we walked quietly until David broke the silence.

“You all right today?” He avoided looking at me. “I know you’ve been in a rough way.”

“I’ll get there,” I said, “no worries.”

“Aye, but I do worry. Constantly, brother. You’re not well, you know that, right?”

There was no right answer to the question. “I’m better than I was.”

“That much is true,” he said and slapped my back. “You haven’t been Peter in a long time. I miss that sonofabitch.”

“I’ll get there,” I said, hoping. “I will.”

“We bloodied that kitchen well enough, eh?” He grabbed my shoulder and gave it a shake. “Fucked it up good.”

I laughed in agreement and pointed to a coffee shop just up the street. The heat had nearly drained us both already. We made our place in the corner, equipped with iced caffeine and pastries, and tried to avoid the subject of you.

“Did you see the Arsenal match yesterday,” David asked, knowing full well that I didn’t watch soccer. “van Persie looked fantastic.”

“They’ll miss Henry,” I said, regurgitating information David had given me weeks before.

“Damn right they will. Damn shame.” He made gulping sounds as he drank his coffee.

I thought of you then, of seeing you at the concert in Prospect Park. You didn’t know I was there. We were so close to one another. Maybe only a few feet. You were with him, his arms wrapped around your waist. It felt like nothing we had done, or said, or promised, had ever been real. In the indie film of my mind, the camera would stay on my face for an uncomfortable amount of time, making the audience shift in their seats. Then, slowly, it would lift away, perhaps on a crane or helicopter, pulling back farther and farther until I was nothing but a fleck in an unrecognizable sea of concertgoers. The band on stage would begin to play as the picture faded to black.

David and I walked back to the house, incapable of further banter. The sun beat down on my neck and shoulders, but it felt good, right somehow. The sound of the front door opening and closing echoed through the house and sounded, so much, like Charlie baiting the tabby. I grabbed David a beer then sat with my back against refrigerator, in the middle of the kitchen. With dry wall clinging to my legs, I stared at the holes. The place looked beautiful. David called to me: the time had come to move on. *Living room*, he said. I was ready. I stood in the doorway and told him to take the first swing. He smiled and choked up on the handle. I kept my hands on the doorframe as he buried the sledgehammer into the wall, the collision of metal and bedrock resonating through my bones.

IT WAS THE LIGHT

Ben slid inside of Ashley, and she moaned. Ben hated when they moaned. He knew it wasn't real. He didn't need the reassurance. Ben wanted to come, and he did. The sweat on Ashley's back, Ben thought, was also fabricated somehow. She looked down at him and said something, but he didn't understand her. She mumbled, something about touching and finishing, and she rolled off of Ben and lay beside him. Ben lit an American Spirit and watched as Ashley finished what he had started. Or maybe she had started. And finished. She nearly knocked the cigarette from Ben's hand, and she called out someone's name. Not Ben's. Ben sucked in the last drag of perfect smoke and turned over, feeling the satin sheet slip off his bare ass. A fast breeze, along with laughter from a group of teenagers in St. Mark's Place, filled the bedroom. Ashley's hand slid over Ben's back, and he felt like shrinking away into the old king-sized mattress.

Mrs. Aguilera woke Ben around four in the morning. He was hungover and smelled of sex, and Mrs. Aguilera's wailing filled the building like a crazed alarm. Over and over, she called out the same words: *Como puedo salvarle?* Ben didn't know what the words meant, but the anxiety of them stirred him out of bed.

Mrs. Aguilera lived alone in their building on 3rd Avenue and answered the door only for those she knew. She had been attacked many years before and, as the story went, she called her attacker *tiburón* and smacked at his lifeless eyes until he retreated. The three locks on her aging door were the only visible scars.

Ben knocked hard enough to compete with the cries from inside the small apartment. The unlocked door opened, slowly.

“Mrs. Aguilera?”

There was blood on the floor. Not a lot, but a thin trickle leading into the kitchen. Mrs. Aguilera’s shadow moved in a panicked back-and-forth against the linoleum.

“Carlos!” she screamed. There was a terror in her voice that was foreign to Ben.

“Mrs. Aguilera?” he asked again. “It’s Ben. Are you all right?”

The living room seemed messier than normal, with pillows strewn about and the dining room table left uncleared. Mrs. Aguilera had made paella, the remnants of which scattered the table, and the smell of fresh shrimp and saffron and something burnt permeated the living room.

“Mrs. Aguilera?”

Her head poked out of the kitchen. She sobbed, and her face looked to Ben like an overripe cherry. He could barely see her hazel eyes, which were swollen almost shut.

“*Mi hijo!*” she yelled, running from the kitchen and smacking her head into Ben’s chest.

She beat her fists against his shoulders. Ben let her use his shirt to soak up the tears, let her huff and wheeze until she could speak. He liked that she called him *hijo*.

“What’s happening?” he asked, confusion in his voice.

“It’s Carlos,” she said.

Mrs. Aguilera grabbed Ben by the shirt and pulled him into the kitchen. There, on the table, was Carlos. The eight-year-old Siberian husky rested motionless, tongue hanging from his mouth and touching the tabletop. A small pool of saliva formed beneath his mouth. The kitchen smelled as if Carlos’s gray and black fur had been lit on fire. Mrs. Aguilera yelled something in Spanish.

“What the hell happened?” Ben asked, contemplating whether to approach the dog.

“He no sleep,” she said, breaking down between words. “He scratched the door. It was early, but I hate him to wait when he wants to go.”

Ben approached Carlos and put his hand on the dog’s bloated abdomen. Carlos’s coat felt soft and wintry.

“I don’t understand,” Ben said.

Mrs. Aguilera stood beside Ben and placed her hand on Carlos. “It was the light, hijo. It was the light.” She cried and bunched Carlos’s hair between her fingers. “I want to fix him.”

“What does that mean?” Ben asked. He walked around the table to get a better look at Carlos’s face. His eyes looked as they always did, a soft blue, almost translucent. Ben thought, for a moment, that Carlos seemed to be smiling.

“It was the light,” Mrs. Aguilera said. “Outside the streetlight. Carlos went to smell. He’s so big. I couldn’t pull him away.” She rested her head beside Carlos’s and slid her arm around his body. “He screamed and shaking. My little baby. Then he was gone.”

“Jesus Christ,” Ben said. He brushed his hand over Carlos’s eyelids, closing them, and scratched behind the dog’s ears. Carlos, he remembered, would lick the air and moan when his ears were scratched.

“*Como puedo salvarle?*” Mrs. Aguilera asked. She repeated it and looked up at Ben.

Ben stared down at Carlos, wondering what to do with the body. He felt like crying with Mrs. Aguilera. “I don’t know,” he said.

Ashley shifted when Ben opened the apartment door. He let his bare feet press against the hardwood. Standing in the living room, looking in on the woman in his bed, Ben felt nauseated.

He grabbed a cigarette and hung his head out the fire escape. Neon from the comic store and pizza place and tattoo parlor took turns flashing in Ben's eyes. He blinked after each flash, the world outside his window growing cloudier until all he could see was one indistinguishable, artificial light. As Ben exhaled, the smoke hung in the morning humidity like a phantom.

"What are you doing?" Ashley asked, walking into the living room wearing only a pair of Ben's boxer shorts. Her naked chest shone in the lights sneaking in from St. Mark's Place.

Ben returned to the smoke before answering. "Go back to bed," he said. "It's too early."

"I heard yelling," she said and stretched out on the sofa.

Ben finished the cigarette and flicked it onto the street below. He imagined the butt smacking against the asphalt and quieting the street. "It was nothing," he said.

Ben watched Ashley fall asleep on the sofa, her dirty blonde hair contrasted against the black leather. Josh would be angry with him, he thought, treating Ashley like this. Josh didn't know Ashley, but he knew Ben. He knew how Ben treated women. Josh would like Ashley, Ben thought. She had a dimple that twitched while she slept, and Ben felt a moment of calm as he watched. He took his Superman blanket from the bedroom and placed it over Ashley. With each breath, Ben could see the blanket rise and fall, rise and fall, rise and fall.

Carlos was still on the kitchen table when Ben returned with satin sheets stripped from his bed in hand. Resting on the couch, Mrs. Aguilera, neither asleep nor awake, spoke out loud to nobody. He moved quietly into the kitchen and sat beside Carlos. Ben wasn't good at death. He didn't feel particularly good at life, either. Running his fingers over the dry, rough patches of Carlos's paws, though, Ben was at ease.

“So, I know there’s nothing we can do now,” Ben said to Carlos, “but about three months ago, I found a little poop by my door. Now, I’m not saying it was you. But, well, you’re the only dog in the building. I’ve already asked Mr. Jenkins upstairs, and he assured me that he did not poop by my door.” Ben heard Mrs. Aguilera rouse in the living room. “That just leaves you, my friend.”

Ben stood and slid his arms under Carlos. Holding him close, Ben hoped to feel a breath or a shiver. When none came, he wrapped Carlos in the satin sheets.

“But I forgive you, my dear Carlos,” he said and carried Carlos into the living room.

“*Hijo?*” Mrs. Aguilera asked, groggy. “What’s that?”

“It’s Carlos, love. Come. It’s time to go.”

The two walked downstairs. It was a few minutes before a taxi passed, and Ben felt the weight of Carlos in his arms.

“What I tell them?” Mrs. Aguilera asked.

“Tell them what happened to Carlos,” Ben said. “Tell them about the light.”

“You come, too?” she asked, looking up at Ben.

“No. No, I’m going to stay,” Ben said. “I need to stay.”

“What they do with him?” There was a naiveté in her voice.

“They can cremate him for you.”

“He can be with me, then,” she said. “Close to me.” She clenched her face as a taxi pulled up. Ben could finally see the hazel in her eyes. He kissed her forehead and laid Carlos across her lap.

“Can you take them to the vet hospital on 18th, please?” he asked the driver, who nodded. Ben held Mrs. Aguilera’s hand tight with his own. “It will be okay.”

Mrs. Aguilera touched her palm to Ben's cheek. "You're a good boy," she said.

Ben closed the taxi door and watched them drive up the avenue. As he turned to go back inside, Ben caught a glimpse of something luminous across the street. The light moved, like something ethereal. It was a loose wire, sparking at the base of a streetlight. The light that killed Carlos Aguilera. Ben watched, mesmerized. He wondered, just for a moment, what it would be like to let the light course through him.

"I think you should go," Ben said, sitting on the sofa beside Ashley.

"What?" she said, half-asleep. "What time is it?"

"Still early. But you should go." Ben went into the bedroom and returned with Ashley's clothes and messenger bag.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, a look of confusion on her face as she dressed.

"Hey, it's me," Ben said. "Of course."

Ashley moved close and kissed Ben. He tasted her morning breath.

"Call me," she said.

"Yeah," he said and returned the kiss.

Ben sat on the sofa and lit a cigarette. Ashley took her bag and left the apartment. The sound of her closing the door reverberated through the hardwood floor. Ben sucked the nicotine into his lungs.

The apartment was empty. Quiet. Ben thought of calling Josh, running across the bridge to meet him. No, Maddie would kill me, he thought, waking them up at this hour. He felt stir-crazy, his skin like a caterpillar inching slowly off his bones. Ben stood in the living room,

hardwood creaking beneath him, and stared into his bedroom. Without the sheets, the mattress looked vacant and old. Cumbersome.

Ben dressed in his jogging clothes and slipped a pack of American Spirits into his knee-high sock. The bedroom stunk of latex and booze. Ben grabbed the mattress and dragged it through the living room and into the building hallway. It slid down the stairs almost on its own, and Ben balanced between door and mattress to get it outside.

It was still early. Ben propped the mattress against a row of trashcans. Someone would take it, he thought, someone who wanted to share his or her sleep. Ben wanted something small. Something solitary.

The morning felt sticky, and Ben ran towards 18th Street. He would say goodbye to Carlos, touch his thick fur and scratch behind his ears. He couldn't get Mrs. Aguilera out of his head: *Como puedo salvarle?* Ben still didn't know what she meant, what she was asking. And he had no answer to the question. Instead, Ben ran. He ran up 2nd Avenue and let the rhythm of his footfalls overtake the discomfort of the morning.

THIS IS HOW YOU WILL DIE

In the morning, Karen found the note on the floor just outside the apartment door. She had only been gone for a couple of hours and looked around for some sign of who had left the note, as only tenants of the building had access to the hallway. There was nothing, save for the snow tracked inside by her boots. She wondered if anyone had seen her leave, watched her walk across the avenue. Karen took the note inside, closing the door slowly and with care. She slid the lock into place without exhaling. She stared at the note, at the detail taken with each stroke of black ballpoint: THIS IS HOW YOU WILL DIE. The only sound in the apartment came from the bedroom as Richard took swift, shallow breaths. Karen walked to the couch and sat down, the note gripped tightly between thumb and forefinger. The tips of her fingernails became white from the pressure.

Karen remained that way for some time. Her heartbeats grew erratic as she stared at the small square of yellow paper. Richard stirred in the bedroom. He called out to Karen, but she didn't respond. Again. Again. The force of his feet planting on the hardwood shook the apartment. She wondered how long he'd been awake.

"Goddammit, Richard," Karen whispered loudly.

"Did you hear me?" Richard asked, walking into the living room. "I was calling you." He tucked his hands into the pockets of his sweatshirt.

"Stop moving. Please." Karen looked at him and tried to be stern.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Richard ran a hand over his bald head.

Karen took his hand and pulled him onto the couch. She pointed at the note and mouthed *What is this?* as Richard grabbed a blanket from the back of the couch.

“It’s cold in here,” he said. “Why are you dressed?”

“Do you see what this says?” Karen asked, letting her voice rise above a whisper.

“Just somebody’s idea of a joke, Karen.” He seemed, to her, uninterested.

“How the hell do you know that? It was in front of our door. Who could’ve gotten into the building?”

“People get in. It’s not rocket science.” Richard’s voice was deep and full of sarcasm. Karen wanted to smack him. Of course, though, she knew she couldn’t. He bruised so easily now.

“Why do you have to make me feel stupid?” Karen asked, sliding away from Richard. There was room between them. “Someone left a death threat on our door. I can’t be a little concerned?”

Richard stood and walked into the kitchen, which was small and well manicured. He licked his thumb and rubbed at a spot on the stainless steel refrigerator.

“How do these get here?” he asked, wiping the saliva away with his blanket.

“We have to touch the refrigerator, Richard.”

“There’s no need for marks,” he said.

“Please come sit down,” Karen said. “We need to figure this out.”

Richard opened the refrigerator, pulled out egg whites, soymilk, shredded cheese, bread. He lined each item up one by one on the countertop. He shivered and closed the door.

“I’m making an omelet. Want one?” Richard used a mixing bowl and scrambled together egg and soymilk and cheese. The sound of wire whisk meeting porcelain tinged in Karen’s ears. It grew louder before Richard was finished.

“Richard, please.” She stared at him and hoped her eyes matched her concern.

“What do you want from me? I’m making an omelet. Give me a break.”

The moment consumed Karen, and she ran over to Richard, gripping his hand and pulling it away from the stove. She pushed his fingers apart and placed her own in the created space.

“Please don’t do that.” She squeezed his hand and felt his slow, rhythmic heartbeat.

“What?” he asked, his cheeks wrinkling in confusion. Karen couldn’t remember the last time the two of them, in unison, smiled.

“What if the apartment blows up?” she said.

“Are you serious?” Richard asked and grinned.

Karen let go of Richard and walked back to the couch. She picked up the note and held it out in front of her. She pointed at the words. Richard left the ingredients on the counter, came to her and kissed her forehead. She nestled her head against his neck. His skin felt cold and stretched.

“I think we should call the police,” she said.

“Oh Jesus, Karen. Are you kidding me?” He pushed her head off of his shoulder and took a step back. “Some asshole’s playing a prank. End of story.”

“You don’t know that.” Karen shook her head. “Maybe, but you don’t.”

Richard stared at her, and she felt herself growing shaky and hot.

“I’m turning the heat off,” she said, banging her hand against the thermostat. “It’s awful in here.”

“You know I’m cold.” Richard sat on the couch and hugged his blanket.

“It’s too much,” she said, clicking the switch to *off*.

A clang of metal rang in from outside. Karen went to the window and looked out at 9th Avenue. There was activity below as people set up for a street fair. Smoke poured from a long grill covered in unshucked corncobs. She could still see her footprints at the crosswalk, leading somewhere inappropriate. She thought of opening the window to let in the smells but immediately dismissed the notion. The window, she thought, might trigger something. She leaned her forehead against the glass and felt the cold seep through her pores.

Across the avenue, in the building above Le Grainne Café, she could see his window. It was closed now, curtained, but she pretended he was there, looking back at her. She felt her body tighten, excited. Her breath clouded the glass.

Then, suddenly, Richard’s body pressed up against her. His hands were icy, like the window. Karen felt him harden as he wrapped his arms around her waist. His fingers tickled her skin. He took her hand and guided it down the front of his sweatpants.

“You have goosebumps,” he said softly.

Karen pulled her hand back and shook her head. “We can’t,” she said. She shifted her eyes and spoke, as if she could see him. “The note, Richard.” She turned and faced him, her hands on his shoulders.

They were smaller than they used to be, fragile. His muscles, too, had nearly melted away. She looked at him and wondered if he would make it through the winter.

“Doesn’t the possibility of death make it all the more exciting?” he said. He smiled from the corner of his mouth.

“Please don’t say that, please.” Karen took a step back and Richard followed. “What’s gotten into you?”

Richard adjusted his sweatpants and blanket and returned to the couch. When he looked at her, his eyes glassy and a bit sunken in, Karen felt muted. There was guilt, resting on her chest and head and eyes like a heavy coat.

“It would just be nice to be with my wife once in a while,” Richard said. “None of this is easy.” His voice cracked.

He sounded to Karen, at that moment, like he was a teenager again. She thought she might tell him, then, about the affair. It was his right, after all, to know. After twelve years of marriage, she had forfeited her right to that type of secret.

“I’m trying, Richard,” she said, taking a seat beside him, letting her leg drape over his. “I really am. It’s just difficult.” Karen kissed his cheek. “I hate that you’re sick.”

He tasted different, smelled different, and she tried, every day, to ignore it. She couldn’t leave him, not like this, not now. He was dying, after all. Whatever she felt, whatever impulses pushed at her insides, she knew, at the center, remained her responsibility to Richard, to keeping him comfortable. In the end, though, she feared that was all she was capable of.

“What would you have me do, Karen?” He stared at the note when he spoke.

In the space between his breaths, Karen wanted to say something to fix her husband.

“We should call the police,” she said. “There’s nothing else to do.”

Richard found his cell phone and walked into the bedroom, leaving the note on the table with Karen. She picked up the table then smacked it against the floor. Her hand throbbed.

Outside, on the street below, she could hear voices growing. The curtains she longed to hide

behind across the avenue remained still and undisturbed. Karen wished the window and glass were not so clear. She could hear the wind howl down 9th Avenue.

“They said not to worry,” Richard said, coming out of the bedroom. “They’ll look into it, they said.”

“What does that mean, look into it?” Karen slammed the note down onto the table. The table shook. “What happens to us in the meantime?” Her voice pulled tight, she hit the tabletop again. Then again. The old legs of the table teetered and wavered and finally gave way. Afterwards, almost instantly, the apartment was still. Karen could hear Richard’s breathing, fast and fitful. He pulled his blanket tight around his body.

“I’m putting the heat back on,” he said, moving to the thermostat. “It’s too damn cold.”

Karen stared at the broken table on the floor and scooped up the note. She read the words over and over in her mind and noticed how pronounced and familiar the black words seemed against such a bright background. Each time she read, she focused on a different word: THIS, HOW, YOU. Suddenly, she found that Richard was standing in the kitchen, watching her. He looked petrified. There was something else, too, something new. Karen felt it, almost immediately, as her husband held her gaze. He knew. She had broken him and the cancer had broken him and soon, so soon, he would be dead. She crumpled the note in her hand and wished the words had never existed. Richard, though, she knew, needed them to. He shivered as the heat flowed back into the apartment. There was a distinct smell to the heat, Karen noticed, and she wondered if it had always been there. It reminded her of winter, of the wind and snow and iciness just outside the window.

Tossing the note back onto the oak, Karen went to Richard. She settled her body into his, pulled him close as tightly as she could. Richard opened his blanket and covered her shoulders.

There was warmth there. Karen thought to ask if he wanted to finish making breakfast, but she couldn't speak. Instead, she leaned into her husband and believed, for a moment, that he was holding her up.

Dennis saw her picture in the morning paper. He knew it was Maggie—she still had her dark red curls and the freckles along her cheekbones. Maggie's new bakery had opened in Soho, the article said, a sister location to the flagship on the Upper West Side. Dennis jotted down the contact information and tossed the newspaper onto the kitchen counter. The obituaries, he left untouched. He poured a cup of coffee and rubbed at his knuckles. *Osteophytes*, the doctor had said. Dennis referred to the bone spurs as nubs. He blamed typewriters, the constant poke and impact of finger against metal key, and he took any opportunity to inform people of his theory. Once, his niece asked how long it had been since he last used a typewriter. Dennis took a moment, touching the nubs to her cheek. *Twenty years*, he said. *It's all computers, now.*

Dennis called the bakery and found he was nervous. A young girl answered the phone. She identified herself as Angela, and Dennis asked if he could speak with Maggie. *Margaret Oliver?* she asked. *Ms. Oliver will be in later today, but she's very busy.* Dennis paused for a moment, unsure of what to say. Angela sounded like a sweet girl, sweet but curt. He asked her to pass on a message to Maggie. There was little he could say after so many years. *Dennis Seaver would like to have coffee*, he said. He left his phone number. Angela thanked him for calling, and the line went dead.

Dennis grabbed the Sports section and sat on the couch. He hadn't been retired long—about with cancer pushing him there faster than he would have liked—but he already didn't care for the new writers the *News* had hired. They were children, Dennis thought, who knew nothing beyond Bonds and A-Rod and steroids. Dennis remembered when the Mets, in the 1981 draft,

took a junior college pitcher in the twelfth round who wanted an extra \$10,000, but they gave the bonus to Steve Phillips, a fifth round pick, instead. Dennis called the Mets for comment, but few paid attention to the move, at the time; Dennis knew, in his heart, that the Mets had made a mistake. Like they always do, he had thought: Phillips was a *bum*, but this kid, this Roger Clemens, man he was going to be something. Dennis floated the story to his editor, who quickly shot down the piece. *Nobody cares*, his editor had said. Moments like that were burned in Dennis's memory. He loved sports writing above all else. He was a damn good writer, the best the *News* had for years. He was sure, though, that nobody would remember in the end.

Dennis returned from a bike ride along the Hudson to a voicemail from Angela: *Hello Mr. Seaver*, she said. *Ms. Oliver can meet you later today, at the shop. Two o'clock. If this doesn't work for you, call me back.* Dennis thought perhaps Angela wasn't curt but, rather, direct. He liked that. Dennis pulled a hard-boiled egg from the refrigerator and walked into the bathroom, started the shower. He chewed and let steam fill the room. The heat helped soothe the nubs. Dennis stepped in cautiously. The beating water felt good against his sore thighs. He remained in the shower longer than normal, finding solace in the rhythm of the beads falling on his pallid skin.

Dennis read the sign above the bakery, *Oliver's Twist*, and chuckled. He wasn't a man prone to a private laugh, but the irony of the name was too much. He had tried, he remembered, to get Maggie to read Dickens several times in college. She preferred Bukowski and Kerouac. *Dickens*, she had said, *is dead. Let his books die.* It was around that time, near the end of college, that Dennis considered proposing to Maggie. He picked out the ring during his summer semester in Galway; he made a date at their favorite restaurant, one along the water that Joseph Mitchell had

written about; he ordered her favorite wine, a semi-dry Sauvignon Blanc; there was a rose on her plate when they arrived. Then, Dennis left the ring in his pocket. The choice didn't feel, at the time, like a conscious one. The ring simply remained in his pocket. They had a lovely dinner, and Dennis believed that was all he deserved. Maggie, as far as he knew, was none the wiser. Dennis remembered the feeling in his stomach that night, like the wine was acid, searing away at his insides. As he opened the door to the bakery, a small bell ringing, Dennis felt much the same.

Maggie stood behind the counter wearing a green apron, her red hair pulled back in a ponytail. Dennis thought little had changed. She still smiled that bright smile, the one that could pull a person in from across the room. Dennis chose a table in the corner and sat down. He ran his fingers through his hair and took long, deep breaths. His hair had gone silver in recent years, and Dennis was self-conscious that he looked older. He caught Maggie's eye and waved. She held up one finger and walked into the back of the bakery. She emerged a few minutes later, a brown sweater supplanting her apron and her hair no longer pulled back. Dennis thought she looked like autumn. She stopped at the table and grinned.

"Dennis Seaver," she said. "My god."

"Hello, Maggie." Dennis stood and nodded. He wanted to hug her, but he wasn't sure how.

"Please, sit." Maggie turned and raised two fingers to a young girl behind the counter. "Still drink coffee?" she asked.

"I do," Dennis said. "By the gallon. Doctor keeps telling me to cut back."

"He obviously doesn't know who he's talking to," Maggie said. She smiled from the side of her mouth.

The young girl approached the table holding two mugs of coffee. She smiled at Dennis but kept her eyes down. Dennis noticed her freckles.

“Thanks, honey,” Maggie said. “Hold down the fort for a bit.”

As the young girl walked away, Dennis smirked.

“Angela?” he asked.

Maggie nodded, sipped her coffee.

“I knew I liked her. A real firecracker on the phone.” Dennis took a drink and tensed his eyebrows. “Yours?”

Maggie sat up straight in her chair. “My one and only.”

Dennis nodded and kept the mug on his lips.

“She’s sixteen. Thinks I’m the devil.”

Dennis rubbed his nubs and leaned forward, as if to say something. He wanted to say something clever, but he wasn’t that sort of man. “As she should,” he finally said. “It’s her right as the daughter.”

Maggie and Dennis smiled, simultaneously. For Dennis, it was an uneasy, nervous motion. He was suddenly unsure why he had called, why he wanted to see Maggie. So many years had passed.

“How about you?” Maggie asked, interrupting a dialogue Dennis was having only in his mind. “Any kids for the insatiable Dennis Seaver?”

The question sat on the table. Dennis drank his coffee, enough to see the grinds floating at the bottom like bits of earth. He wanted to talk to Maggie. Dennis felt a warmth in his stomach before he spoke.

“A son,” he said.

Maggie's eyes were large and comforting. She sipped her coffee. Dennis knew she was waiting for him to say more. He slid the coffee mug from hand to hand across the table. Angela appeared and refilled the cup. Dennis winked and thanked her.

"Ever get married?" Maggie asked.

"Briefly," he said, grinning. His failed marriage, comparatively, left him less apprehensive. "You?"

"Angela's father died a few years back." Her voice was very matter-of-fact, as if she'd answered the question countless times before.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Dennis said.

He hated death, which felt like a silly thought. Didn't everyone? He remembered a ballplayer, a spunky kid in the Mets farm system, who used to say, after every game: *It's a good time to die*. Every time Dennis heard him say the words, he was confused. They kept him awake some nights. Finally, after his last assignment with the farm team, Dennis asked the ballplayer why. The kid looked at Dennis, pulled off his cap, and put both hands on his shaved head.

'Cause Denny, without my cleats on that field, I ain't got nothin'.

Maggie leaned forward and held her mug with two hands. Steam from the coffee drifted up and created a hazy screen between her and Dennis.

"What are you doing here, Dennis?" she asked, her voice suddenly stern. "Why did you call me?"

"I don't know," he said, unable to fabricate a response. "I saw your picture in the paper. We're all grown up now. But you, you look the same. I wanted to see you."

"Why?" She put down her mug, the ceramic clanking against tabletop. "It's been thirty-three years."

Dennis took a deep breath and tried, unsuccessfully, to filter his thoughts. “My son, Andre,” Dennis said. “He died.” He closed his eyes. Saying the words out loud, it seemed, made them real.

“I’m so sorry.” Maggie held Dennis’s hand. “When?”

“Not long ago,” he said. He kept his voice steady. “His friend called me. It was an overdose.”

“Oh, Jesus,” Maggie said. Her eyes were again large, but Dennis found no comfort in them.

“I didn’t know he was using drugs.”

“How old was he?”

Angela walked towards the table, but Maggie flipped her hand to keep her away.

“Twenty-nine.”

“Such a baby,” Maggie said. She put her hand on Dennis’s cheek.

The touch felt incredible. Dennis wanted to laugh and cry and scream all at once, but he wasn’t a man prone to such things. He could feel Maggie’s fingers causing goosebumps across his wrinkled neckline. He was, suddenly, twenty-five again.

“He wrote me a letter a few months back,” Dennis said. His voiced cracked. “We didn’t know each other very well. Spent most of his life with his mother on Long Island.”

“Like his father,” Maggie said. She smiled, and it pulled Dennis in.

“He told me about this girl he loved,” Dennis said. “*She’s it*, he kept writing. Then he lost her. I think that was everything for him.”

“Did you visit him?” she asked.

“No. I got the sense he didn’t want to. He just needed to let me know that he was still there.”

Maggie nodded but said nothing. Dennis stared at her. He wanted to lean over the table and kiss her. He had countless questions to ask her, probably countless more to answer. Things had never really *ended*, at least not in any way that could be explained. Maggie, their life together, his feelings—everything had become too much and not enough and beyond reach. Dennis wasn’t the kind of man, ever, to demand. Instead, he just let her go. But none of that mattered. He hadn’t seen her in three decades yet, at that moment, she was his closest friend.

“It’s a good way to think of him,” Maggie said. “Still there.”

Dennis allowed himself to smile, really smile, and become caught up in the woman sitting in front of him.

“At the end of the letter, Andre asked if I remembered a particular baseball game—game four of the division series, when the Mets played the Giants. It was years ago, but of course I remembered. *That Bobby Jones*, he wrote. *What a bum*. It made me laugh out loud.”

Maggie was smiling when Dennis looked up at her. “That’s your word.”

“Yeah. That’s my word.”

The bakery had grown quiet in the late afternoon. Dennis found he had little left to say. There was so much still unsaid, but today wasn’t the day. Dennis wanted another day with Maggie. He pulled a business card from his pocket. The matted paper rubbed against Dennis’s rough skin. He stared at Maggie, whose freckles seemed more vibrant than when they were young.

“I want you to call me,” he said. “I want to see you again.”

Maggie grinned and ran her fingers over Dennis's knuckles. He allowed himself, for a moment, to imagine a life with Maggie, one they hadn't, but perhaps should've, lived. They'd both had children, made the best of their choices. It didn't seem like enough now, not to Dennis. Somehow, he missed the son he barely knew, wished he'd been a better father. He wanted more than settling. For his whole life, he feared not being good enough, not being the sort of man capable of greatness. But there, in front of him, Maggie sat. She always made him stronger, he thought.

Dennis's stomach began to settle a bit. He wanted Maggie to know there were regrets in need of disclosure. Decisions that should've been made differently. He thought of that young ballplayer, his cleats on the field. Some things weren't worth living without. He turned the card over, and he wrote.

DON'T FORGET YOU LOVE ME

Hannah took a long lunch and drove through the falling snow towards home. The expressway was clear of traffic but as yet unsalted, and Hannah felt the car, every few moments, gliding just above the road. She ignored the static that had replaced Joan Baez on the radio. It was a song she adored, but one that caused disagreement between her and Ethan, who could never agree on whether the song originated with Baez or Bob Dylan. At this point, nearly ten years on, Hannah no longer cared who was right. The arguing, it seemed, brought her closer to Ethan.

The blinker ticked like an old clock as she exited, and Hannah pressed heavy on the gas. The BMW was nearing its final miles, but Hannah could not imagine getting rid of it, despite the chipping paint and sharp coughs. She enjoyed the way her body settled into the worn leather, the smell of dark roast soaked into the canvas top, the way the shifter would stick between third and fourth gear. Hannah felt her muscles stretch as she depressed the clutch and turned into the driveway. Ethan had shoveled and made a snow angel in the front yard. Alicia had made a small, imperfect angel beside Ethan's. The two angels connected, just slightly, in the middle.

Hannah's heels caught in the wet grass under the snow and brought bits of earth with them into the house. She left them by the front door and sucked in the heat. Everything was still, and Hannah found it unnerving. She called out for her husband and daughter, but neither answered. The hardwood floor held in the cold and made Hannah's toes curl. Both Ethan and Alicia's winter coats had been tossed on the floor at the back door. Hannah heard laughing in the yard and watched Ethan and Alicia trade snowballs. Alicia landed one smack in Ethan's face, which produced a laughing fit so strong it knocked Alicia to the ground. Ethan ran across the

yard and tickled his daughter until she swore she'd pee on him. Hannah stepped outside and tiptoed into the grass, the soft snow soaking through the feet of her tights. She packed a small snowball and tossed it at Ethan. The flakes came apart and trickled over Ethan and Alicia, who both looked up.

“Hey,” Ethan asked, “what are you doing home?”

“Hi, Mommy,” Alicia said then mushed a handful of snow into Ethan's cheek.

“Thought I'd take a long lunch today,” Hannah said. “Why isn't her coat on?”

Ethan stood and picked up Alicia. As he walked towards her, Hannah felt the urge to slap him. Instead, she put her hand on Ethan's cheek, wiping away remnants of the snow. He hadn't shaved in days, and she liked the way his bristled skin felt on her fingers. He handed her Alicia, and Hannah slid her fingers in between Alicia's.

“She's freezing, Ethan.”

“It was just a minute, honey,” Ethan said, opening the back door. “Nothing to worry over. She's fine.”

“You're so irresponsible.” Hannah kicked the moisture from her feet and walked past Ethan. “I'm tired of being the bad guy.”

Hannah put Alicia down and told her to wash her hands with warm water. The sound of Alicia's footsteps bounding up the stairs shook through the house. Hannah went to the kitchen and rifled through a week's worth of leftovers. A plate of roasted eggplant appeared close to rotten, but Hannah left it alone. The spaghetti was all that looked edible.

“Hey, don't do that in front of her,” Ethan said, stepping up to the refrigerator. “You make her feel bad, like it's her fault.”

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Hannah whispered. “Don’t you martyr yourself.” She slammed shut the refrigerator door.

“Martyr—what are you talking about?” he asked, pointing a finger at Hannah. “If you have a problem with the way I interact with our daughter, just tell me when she’s not around, okay? Until then, do not critique my parenting.”

Hannah kept her back to him and placed a bowl of spaghetti in the microwave. The hum of machine and constant click of rotating glass temporarily calmed her. She could feel Ethan standing across the kitchen, staring at her. This was what he did, she thought. He delivered a “close,” something he felt ended their argument, and then stood. Stoic and silent. It was maddening. *Just talk*, she thought, *you smug bastard. Have the decency to argue with me.* The microwave beeped and Hannah removed the bowl, which burned her fingers. The pasta, however, was cold. Hannah ignored that fact and twirled a forkful. She took a bite, then another, then another. Her back remained to Ethan as she ate and, when she finished the pasta, she turned around to the sink. Ethan, at some point, had walked away.

Hannah stood at the base of the stairs and called for Alicia, who came down with a book in hand.

“Want to read, Mommy?” she asked, holding the book up for Hannah to take.

“That would be lovely,” Hannah said, smiling, and took the book from Alicia. “On the couch. I’ll be right there.”

Alicia skipped into the living room and hopped onto the couch. She giggled and Hannah fought the urge to cry. She went up the first few steps, hoping to face Ethan and continue the argument, but she stopped. Standing in the stairwell, Hannah gripped her daughter’s book and wondered why she did this, why she bothered with the long lunches and extra vacation days.

None of it seemed to matter anymore. She was jealous of Ethan, of the time he spent at home with Alicia. But that wasn't it. No, it was Ethan. Their marriage. The silences that now supplanted their conversations. He leaned over every night before falling asleep and kissed her shoulder and said, *Don't forget you love me*. The words meant something once, long ago she thought, when they were young and naive and perfect. When she couldn't imagine, even for a moment, forgetting how much she loved him. Now, she could barely look at him. He knew, she thought, but he didn't care. Perhaps he had forgotten. She had tried, for some time, to remind him, but everything seemed to end in futility. Something new interrupted them, something unfamiliar and broken. She was at a loss as to what to do next. Leaning against the wall of the stairwell, she watched her daughter. Hannah took quick, unsatisfying breaths. Her marriage was worn, stuck between gears. It seemed the final miles had already come.

Ethan called Hannah just before five on Friday and asked her to pick up wine on her way home. Stephen and Kathryn, their neighbors and dearest friends, were coming over for dinner. He assured her that he would cook everything, that she wouldn't have to lift a finger. *Just the wine*, he said. Hannah wasn't much of a cook, but Ethan had spent several years as a line chef during graduate school and still enjoyed entertaining guests. That was another difference between them—Ethan loved people around, the hustle and bustle of a cocktail party or neighborhood barbecue; Hannah preferred quiet. She enjoyed the three of them, side by side on the living room couch, eating off TV trays and watching *Jeopardy!*.

She stopped at a wine shop near the house and bought bottles of Chenin blanc and Zinfandel. Days of snow had turned to a black slush along the streets, and the evening felt unseasonably warm. Hannah opened the window and turned off the heat, letting the car fill with

the Locust Valley air. She took a deep breath and thought about the last time Ethan had made love to her. It was weeks ago. The act itself ended quickly, with very little buildup. Hannah had come home for lunch unexpectedly, and Ethan stood in the living room, as if he'd been waiting for her. He kissed her, severe and direct, biting her ear and leaving marks on her neck. Hannah could feel he was already hard, and he slipped off her underwear and took her on the dining room table. Alicia, he said, had gone to a friend's house. He was assertive as he pushed into her. When he came, he dug his rough fingers into her thighs. She had bruises in those spots for days, and she traced them into the shape of Ethan's hand. Afterwards, he smiled and kissed her and went upstairs. Hannah stayed on the dining room table for several minutes before driving back to work. She replayed the moment over in her mind as she pulled into the driveway, wine bottles clicking across the floor. The car refused to shift into first gear, grinding and whining with each attempt, and Hannah jerked and shoved until, finally, she left the car in neutral.

Kathryn was already on the couch when Hannah arrived, watching television alongside Alicia. Kathryn smiled and waved at Hannah, who closed the door hard, her presence reverberating through the house. Alicia turned and poked her head over the couch. She wore her *Dora the Explorer* pajamas, and her fire red hair was brushed and straight. Hannah could note each freckle on her face.

"You're late," Alicia said, then turned back to the television.

"Well hello to you, too," Hannah said, leaning down and kissing Alicia's head. "Is that any way to greet your mother?"

Alicia ignored the question and cooed at the television. A group of small, rodent-like creatures were gathered around a mound of dirt; the narrator, who sounded like Stockard

Channing, referred to each by name and included bits of dialogue. Hannah looked at Kathryn, who sipped at a cloudy martini and grinned much like Alicia.

“What is this?” Hannah asked, confused.

“*Meerkat Manor*,” Alicia yelled, then shushed her mother.

“It’s a great show,” Kathryn said. “Alicia really likes it.”

Hannah pretended not to hear the last part. She walked into the kitchen and let the wine bottles clang onto the marble countertop. A variety of cheeses was spread atop the dining room table, and Hannah noted how little she liked the blue, veiny ones. They should be thrown out, she thought, not eaten.

“Have any yet?” Hannah asked Kathryn, pointing to the assortment.

“No,” Kathryn said then stood and walked towards Hannah. “We were waiting for you.”

“Where are our boys?” Hannah asked. She used one of Ethan’s paring knives to cut the foil from the Zinfandel, leaving the edges frayed and sharp. The corkscrew slid in with ease, and Hannah pulled back gently until a pop of air escaping released the cork. The Zinfandel smelled sweet and spicy and reminded Hannah of winter.

“Upstairs. Ethan’s showing off his final draft. Stephen was practically drooling.” Kathryn finished her martini, and Hannah poured them both a glass of Zinfandel.

“So it begins,” Hannah said. The two clinked glasses and sipped. Hannah let the wine soak through her lips and tongue. She smiled at Kathryn, the best she could.

Alicia jumped into the kitchen and startled Hannah.

“Over!” Alicia yelled, her arms spread in the air as wide as they could go. She ran to Hannah and wrapped them around her leg.

“Yeah?” Hannah said. “What now, little muffin?”

“Movie!” Alicia said, smiling large at her mother.

Hannah laughed and ran her fingers through Alicia’s hair. There was a comfort in that, in her daughter, in the only thing, perhaps, that was still wholly her own. Ethan, she knew, had been shared for some time.

“How about we put one on in your room and you get into bed?”

Alicia seemed to consider the proposition for a moment before bouncing up and down and agreeing. “Can I have juice?” she asked.

“Of course,” Hannah said, handing Alicia a small cup with a top. “Want to pour it yourself?”

“Yes yes,” Alicia said and opened the refrigerator door.

As she slowly filled her cup with orange juice, a bitter smell filled the kitchen. Hannah closed the door and hoped no one, especially Kathryn, would notice.

Alicia finished and grabbed Hannah’s hand. “Come, Mommy.”

She pulled Hannah into the living room, found *Lilo & Stitch*, and ran upstairs. Hannah turned on the movie and tucked her daughter into bed. The comforter was tight around Alicia’s thin frame, and Hannah kissed her on the tip of her nose. She raised her forefinger and used it to softly trace the invisible lines connecting her daughter’s freckles. Hannah stood and turned off the light.

“Goodnight, booger,” Hannah said, making Alicia giggle.

“Tell Daddy to come in,” Alicia said and took a sip of juice.

Hannah said okay and watched the television light dance over Alicia’s face. She left the bedroom door open just enough to remain there, unnoticed.

Upon coming downstairs, Hannah found everyone at the dining room table.

“Your daughter wants you to say goodnight,” Hannah said.

Ethan turned to her, kissed her on the cheek. “Hello, young lady,” he said.

“You should go now before she falls asleep.”

“I’ll go up in a minute,” Ethan said, moving in and out of the kitchen with various dishes.

“Everything smells brilliant,” Kathryn said.

Hannah hated when Kathryn said *brilliant*. It was one of many words that she had adopted while living in London some years before. Hannah was unsure how anything could *smell* brilliant.

“Do you mind?” Stephen asked, reaching for the bottle of Chenin blanc.

“No,” Hannah said, “by all means.”

No one spoke as each of them filled their plates with food and their glasses with wine. There was a familiarity between the four of them, having been close for so many years, and often Hannah found that the long bits of silence were the most satisfying of their dinners.

“There’s something rotten in your fridge,” Kathryn said, interrupting the sound of silverware against porcelain.

“You don’t say,” Hannah said, annoyed and embarrassed. She tried to make it sound polite.

Ethan sipped his wine and held the glass to his mouth for a long moment. Hannah watched him, his eyes, as he stared at Kathryn. It was only for a few seconds, but Hannah felt as if hours had passed. The dinner continued this way, with Ethan and Kathryn exchanging hasty, unassuming glances. Hannah could not remember the last time Ethan really looked at her. Stephen seemed unfazed, concerned instead with complimenting various elements of Ethan’s new novel.

“How long did it take to write the ending?” Stephen asked.

“Not long,” Ethan said. “I knew from the start how things would end.”

“Isn’t it hard to write that way?” Kathryn said, finishing her wine. “Kind of takes all the mystery out of it.”

“It’s the only way I know,” Ethan said.

Hannah kept her gaze on her plate and separated each item so that none was touching. She hadn’t done that since she was a child, and she felt unsure as to why. Everything needed its own place, she thought. The table filled with the ting of silverware against plate. Someone needed to say something.

“Do you ever think about how weird it is,” Stephen asked, “that we’re still so close?”

Hannah knew Stephen became terribly uncomfortable in silences.

“What does that mean?” Ethan said. He turned and crossed his legs, as if to give Stephen his full attention.

“I don’t know,” Stephen said. “There aren’t a lot of people who stay friends this long, are there? It should make us grateful that the people we’re surrounded by are the people most precious to us.”

Kathryn reached over and took Stephen’s hand. She gripped it for a moment then released.

“Well those are the only people here,” Hannah said.

Ethan finished his wine and rubbed at his beard.

Kathryn raised her glass. “We’re very lucky.”

Just then, Stephen looked up at Hannah. His eyes, filled with resignation, were different than Hannah had ever seen them. He knew, she thought, about Kathryn and Ethan. He knew as

well as she did. Had he always known? Hannah thought back to previous dinners, nights out between the four of them. She couldn't remember Stephen looking that way before. Perhaps the look had been there, though, buried all along beneath a pile of naiveté and old friendship. In any case, something had changed, and she stared back at Stephen, who looked, to Hannah, like he might fall to pieces.

Hannah stood and began clearing the table. She announced that, afterwards, she would empty the contents of the refrigerator.

"That seems a bit much," Kathryn said. "Just throw away what's rotten."

"Maybe," Hannah said. "Maybe. But it's the only way I know."

Hannah went into the kitchen and turned on the faucet. She let the water become hot and run over her hands and wrists. She drizzled soap over the dirty dishes and scrubbed. She scrubbed well beyond when necessary. The conversation continued in the dining room, more talk about Ethan's novel, Kathryn's latest sale, Stephen's new softball league. It was the same conversation they'd had for years. Nothing had changed. Hannah hated it all, the silence and banter. Everything had become rotten. And yet, she found herself incapable of movement, incapable of forgetting the worn, familiar ridges of their friendship.

That night, Ethan climbed into bed long after Hannah. He leaned into her, pushed his chest into her back, and gently kissed her shoulder. *Don't forget*, he said. Hannah leaned back into him, letting his beard press against her skin. She imagined that, if she could only stay like that, things would be okay. She closed her eyes and pretended to sleep, listening to Ethan breathe in and out, in and out. There was comfort in the sound.

SUBWAY GIRL

I told her I'd have to tell her mother if she killed herself. I didn't know the girl, and I certainly didn't know her mother, but she wasn't in any position to recognize that fact. Her mascara ran into the cracks beneath her eyes. She seemed so, so lost. I told her my name was Joshua. She believed we knew one another.

When she fell to her knees, I sat down on the floor next to her. She said that I had betrayed her, that I had found someone else to make love to. I told her there was no chance of that, that she was gorgeous and funny and serious in all the right ways. After that, she smiled. Her teeth were stained but perfectly aligned. The tile floor was icy and trembling. She stood up and, as if she'd known all along this was the end of our time together, waved. Headlights lit the station and, when she stepped in front of the subway train, it didn't happen like I thought it would. In the movies, you always have that moment when the person turns around and everything is slow motion and there's some larger truth learned in those milliseconds. Nothing was learned here. Her body went from platform to train. She didn't make any sound, but the train did. The horn screamed and the brakes screamed and the driver screamed. A little blood made its way onto the concrete pillars in the middle of the tracks.

Due to an emergency investigation, a thick voice said through the station speakers, the F train would be delayed. A few people were yelling and pointing now, but I was still on the ground. I felt I should stay there. A man in uniform asked if I was okay, said I had some blood on my shirt. A man and woman in business suits were the first off the train: they didn't look at

me but avoided me just the same. The woman told the man she hated when the subway was delayed, that there was no need for it. The man nodded and repeated the words, there was no need for it.

RIVERBED

It was snowing and December. I was in New York, on Long Island, at my grandparents'. The house on Oakland Avenue felt warm inside, like an electric blanket. At times, it became too much. In those moments, I ran out the front door into the snow-covered yard. Tiny bits of frozen crystal tingled over my skin. Christmas was coming, and my birthday had just passed. I was twelve, more than a decade ago, and the thought of Christmas without my father left me hollow. My mother flew me there, back to Long Island, to spend the holidays with my father's family. Their presence reminded me, constantly, that he died.

He had died in summer, when I was eleven, in a hospital bed in West Palm Beach, away from all I knew of home. My mother sat beside him and ran her fingers through his thinning, russet hair; I stayed at our new house, surrounded by relatives, eating lunch and watching the Florida Marlins play an afternoon game. I didn't see my father die.

Instead, the phone rang, and I heard my grandmother, my mother's mother, make a noise in the kitchen, like nothing I'd ever heard, something guttural. I knew, from that sound, that my father was dead. That moment felt far away: the winter on Long Island helped me forget Florida. Mosquitoes were there, even in the cold. I hated mosquitoes; they bit and left marks that seemed to never go away. But not here, not on Oakland Avenue in the winter.

It was humid and August. I landed in West Palm Beach, and my mother picked me up at the airport. The gold minivan appeared rusty, and the brakes squealed and made a terrible clattering sound. I was eleven, and my father was dying. He rested in a hospital bed, skinny and eyes losing

emotion. Not *hospital* bed, Nathan, my mother said, *hospice* bed. There is a difference, she told me. I had been gone all summer; when I left, my father was sick. Sick, but alive. He was sick, but alive, and made jokes about how jealous he was that I would go to Shea. It would be my first visit to Shea Stadium without him.

Spending the summer on Long Island had been my mother's idea, her reaction to my homesickness since we'd moved to Florida. Another week remained on my trip when she called. I need you to come home, she'd said. I asked why three times before she answered. Your dad needs you here, she said. He keeps asking for you.

I didn't understand how my father could need me. That night, I packed my things, clothes smushed into balls; my Mets ticket, I kept in my pocket. So now, back in Florida, my mother and I drove to the hospital. Not a *hospital*, my mother reminded me, a *hospice*. I showed her the ticket. She smiled but looked hurt. I asked her why. She said nothing. I wanted, more than anything, to understand why.

Uncle Gerry pulled into the driveway. His Jeep plowed canals into the snowy driveway. I ran outside to meet him, and I could see the tracks of his tires all the way down Oakland Avenue. At some point, the tracks became part of the sky and all I saw was white. I hugged him hard and rubbed my hands over his thick, auburn beard, which was legendary for not having been shaved in almost twenty years. He called me *Scooter* and asked if I was packed and ready to go. Of course, I told him; I'd been looking forward to this for months. Uncle Gerry owned a cabin in Fleischmanns, a tiny town in upstate New York. I'd been going there since, well, forever, with my family. This year marked my first without my father. I put my bags in the Jeep while Uncle Gerry drank a cup of coffee with my grandfather, his father.

When I came back inside, the warmth of the house felt suffocating. I observed the two men at the table; they looked alike, each licking the bottoms of their mustaches to clear excess coffee. Soon after, we were in the car, and I turned around to watch the house disappear.

The Jeep moved quickly on the highway. In the distance, I saw the city, buildings cutting into the clouds. We passed signs for towns whose names I knew but had never seen: Paramus, Mahwah, Central Valley, Plattekill, New Paltz, Phoenicia, Big Indian, Pine Hill. Then, finally, Fleischmanns. The ride felt longer than usual, and Uncle Gerry and I said very little. He told me, though, when we passed Plattekill, that the *kill* in the name didn't mean *kill*, like I knew it; no, that *kill* meant *riverbed*, not *kill*, like I knew it. He repeated this, several times, to make sure I understood.

When we pulled up to the building where my father was, I still grasped my Mets ticket between bony fingers. My mother asked if I was ready, and I wasn't sure why. The doors of the building slid open automatically, and immediately I smelled something foreign and ugly; it pinched at the inside of my nose. The smell lingered as we passed room after room, some full of people, others holding only a single person, resting still on a tall bed. We reached a half-closed door, and my mother put her hand up like we had stopped short. I heard my grandmother's cackle from inside the room. Give me a second, my mother said, and she went into the room.

I stood in the hallway and became fixated on an old man sitting alone at a table in a TV room across from me. He wore a hospital gown, and his right arm was lined with plastic bracelets, writing on each of them. In his left hand, he held a can of Coca-Cola; he lifted the can and brought it to his mouth. His lips puckered, and his eyes widened. He placed the can back on the table without drinking. He repeated the motions again, not drinking. I watched him as he

continued this for what seemed like many minutes. It looked like he was performing a play for an audience I couldn't see.

My mother's hand on my shoulder made me jump. Her grin, uncomfortable and forced, pulled me into the room. A man in the bed behind her, attached to tubes and wires, made a sad sound when he breathed. He looked like a skeleton. My mother stepped to the side, and the man smiled at me. There was something comforting about his eyes. I didn't recognize him.

The Jeep pulled up to the cabin, which was small from the outside. I had my own room in the cabin, just off the kitchen. In the morning, when Uncle Gerry made bacon, the smell consumed my room and stuck to the blanket. There was a Sega Genesis in the living room, but I never played. I preferred being outside, especially when it was icy, and the yard had snow up to my waist, and my breath looked like a phantom. Evening had already arrived, so Uncle Gerry put on a pot of beans and some steaks. The bubbling and sizzling from the stove ricocheted off every wall and filled the cabin. We sat at the table and played poker; he taught me because I wasn't very good. He asked if I remember the first time I came to the cabin, with my father. I told him I didn't, but I'd been told about it enough times that it felt like I did. After a moment of quiet, Uncle Gerry laughed. He laughed and smiled then jumped up from the table and went to the stove. Steak's burning, he said. I said that it smelled that way, but I didn't mind, because burnt steak was still steak. He told me to never forget that first trip. I asked him to always talk about it, so that I didn't forget. I knew, even then, that I already forgot things.

The hospice room felt like something out of a movie. My father slept, as he had for days since I returned. We spoke very little, mostly because I didn't know what to say. When he snored, I told

him about Shea and how Gregg Jefferies, my favorite player, hit a home run off Greg Maddux, but David Cone gave up six runs in two innings and the Mets lost. I told him that the stadium smelled like Sabretts. My mother disliked being in the room when I talked to him.

On Tuesday, she brought my baby sister to visit. She was barely a year old and sat on my lap, playing with my father's fingers. When he woke up, my father asked me to lay her on his chest. I did, and my mother left the room. She sat outside while he fell back to sleep with his daughter spread out on his almost concave chest. I listened to them both breathe, and eventually, the two noises became one rhythmic sound.

It was morning but still dark. Christmas felt so close. Uncle Gerry made bacon and scrambled eggs in the kitchen, but I stayed in bed and held the blanket to my face. He yelled for me to get up and called me *Lazy Scooter*. The floor remained cold even when the cabin was not, so I tiptoed quickly from my bed to the couch. Uncle Gerry poured me a cup of coffee, and I pretended to drink. He had no children of his own and sometimes forgot that someone my age wouldn't drink coffee. Or maybe they would, but I didn't. The taste was just too bitter. Steam from breakfast fogged the windows overlooking the yard, and I watched little beads of condensation race down the glass. Uncle Gerry asked me what I saw, and I told him nothing. He said that was impossible, because everything out the window was not nothing. I nodded and took a bite of my eggs. He told me to hurry up and eat because we had a big day ahead of us. I asked if we were going hiking or sledding or maybe even skiing—a sport I'd learned only the winter before. He put a whole piece of bacon in his mouth, and a bit of grease caught in his beard. He sipped a mouthful of coffee then stood and walked into his bedroom.

When he emerged, after some banging and rustling, he wore a camouflage coat, which looked soft and thick, and a green-and-red-plaid cap that had flaps over his ears. In each hand, Uncle Gerry held a gun: in his left, a shotgun, and in his right, a hunting rifle. Both guns seemed old, mostly because the wood parts were chipped and the metal parts scratched. I asked if one was for me. He handed me the rifle and asked if I remembered how to use it. Of course I do, I said; after all, it had only been a few months, the summer, since we last went shooting. Within a few minutes, I got dressed in multiple layers and went outside on the patio. I kicked snow off the wood planks and waited for Uncle Gerry. When he stepped outside, rifle and new cup of coffee in hand, he smiled. He said we were going to the Firemen's Property. The rifle felt good in my hand as I trudged to the Jeep through waist-deep snow.

It was evening but still light. As the sun dipped lower in the sky, everything outside the window looked bright green and blooming. My father snored, and I sat beside him, reading a book: *Islandia*, by Austin Tappan Wright. The book, my father once explained, was about a utopian future and was his favorite. I couldn't understand most of what I read, but I made the attempt; I tried to read about utopia. Outside the room, I heard my mother speaking to people. Then they were all in the room: my mother, sister, grandparents. Suddenly everything felt pressed. I asked them all to be quiet because my father needed his sleep, but he woke up and put his hand on my forearm and said, It's okay. He looked happy to see everyone in his room, as if he could harness their energy.

He tried to sit up but couldn't. I arranged pillows so that his head and chest were at a forty-five degree angle. My mother handed me my sister and turned on the television. My sister's fingers wrapped around my earlobes, and she squeezed and made a sort-of laughing sound. Her

smile could fill the room. When I held her like that, I felt important, like I wasn't just a brother but something more necessary. My father asked for her, so I put her down beside him, placing her head at the same angle next to his. My family talked and joked, and the conversation grew loud and syrupy. I couldn't hear any single discussion, but the mixing of words made the room shrink. My father poked my shoulder and pointed at the television; there was a baseball game on, but the screen sat too far away for me to see who was playing. Braves and Mets, my father told me. I nodded and asked him if he heard me, those days before, talking about the game at Shea. He looked at me but didn't answer. My sister smacked him, and the tube attached to his nose shifted and nearly fell out. Grab your sister, my mother said, but my father held down my arm and fixed his tube. It's okay, he assured me. Just watch the game. As if something long-ignored inside of me had been switched on, I felt sad. Looking at my baby sister nestled into my father, so weightless, I couldn't shake the feeling that something had changed. I was afraid.

My father tapped my arm. Sprinklers, he said. I stared at him but said nothing; I didn't know what that meant. Sprinklers, he repeated. He looked at me, the dark caramel of his eyes moving fast back and forth. My sister grabbed my finger. Sprinklers! he yelled.

The room became immediately quiet. My mother asked him what he meant, and he repeated the word. I turned to look outside, as did my mother, but I only saw the setting sun and the green, green grass. What do you mean? my mother asked him. Looking tired and old, my father said the word once more and pointed to the television. He was sweating, and I wiped his forehead with my shirt.

When I saw the baseball game on television, I understood: in the middle of an inning, as a slow-hit ball rolled down the third base line, the sprinklers in the stadium, all of them, had come on at once. The field resembled a Disney movie, with players running through the

fountain water, to the cheers of the stadium crowd. My father took a deep breath and put his arm tighter around his daughter. That's something, he said and angled his head to look at me. He shifted in the tall bed and grimaced before settling on a spot. I rubbed the callus on his thumb that had been there since, well, forever. He asked me if I still had the ticket from Shea. I told him that I did. He didn't ask to see it, but he winked. I asked if we could go to a game next summer, or maybe even a spring training game. He said he would love that. My father would die in two days. I was eleven but would never feel so again.

Uncle Gerry said I was a hunter. Taking my first steps onto the Firemen's Property, I felt excited at the thought of going on a real hunt. Uncle Gerry assured me that shooting a game bird was the same as shooting a beer can, which was all I'd ever done. We practiced on cans that morning, but that wasn't why we were out here. No, he said, we're here for dinner. It wasn't until the first bird flew into the air, a quail I thought, and Uncle Gerry cocked and fired, that I understood what we were really doing. I got the sense this might feel different from a beer can. We pushed deeper into the woods, and the snow rose to my waist. I was short and skinny, so the cold and moisture seeped in quickly. I didn't mind, though, because I loved the winter.

Uncle Gerry pointed to a spot on a small hill, overlooking the valley below, where we could set up camp. I wasn't sure what that meant, because we lacked any supplies other than our shotgun and rifle. In a short time, I found that camp simply meant we sat and waited for a bird to fly by, and then we shot at it. This happened only a few times over the next two hours. Mostly, we just sat. Uncle Gerry told fart jokes, a lot of them. He asked if I was excited about spending Christmas on Long Island and then immediately pretended he'd said nothing. I fired at a group of birds that seemed collectively spooked out of a small pine. I missed, on purpose. I asked Uncle

Gerry why *kill* meant something different in the town names, and he replied that it was because the Dutch settled the towns and had named them. The Dutch needed the *kills*, he said, because they provided life for the town. He repeated this to make sure I understood. I almost responded, but Uncle Gerry put his finger over his mouth and whispered for me to turn around. He pointed, and I saw nothing. A fox, he said, by the small pine. Must have been chasing the quail. Then silence.

We don't shoot foxes, I said.

He said that we certainly did, that foxes were a trophy of the hunt. I waited for him to take aim, to fire, to hear the bark of his shotgun. But none of that came. Instead, I turned and looked at Uncle Gerry. He waited for something and stared at me. I shrugged, and he pointed. I did nothing, and he pointed. I was confused.

He's your fox, he said.

I wanted to throw up. I felt sick and cold, and I didn't want to shoot a fox. But I took off my gloves. I pulled the rifle to my shoulder. My hands shook so much that I almost dropped the gun. My forefinger wrapped around the trigger, but I didn't pull. Instead, I started to cry. I cried as I saw the fox move slowly under the pine. The metal trigger felt like an icicle against my skin. I wasn't even sure I'd pulled the trigger when I heard the crack. I thought I should close my eyes, but I didn't. I watched. I was twelve and a good shot. There was red all over the snow under the small pine. I heard the fox screaming, something guttural. I watched him panic and bawl, and then, suddenly, everything stopped. All I could see was the red on the snow under the pine. There was no sound. The fox fell there, but I couldn't see him. I didn't want to see him. The rifle sat heavy, like a ghost, on my shoulder.

UNION SQUARE

Elizabeth watched the old man in Union Square. He was tall, she could tell, although he sat on a makeshift stool only a foot or so off the ground. His silver hair, connected to a beard, rounded the circumference of his mostly bald head and reminded Elizabeth of Jean-Luc Picard. So did his accent, which seemed British and cracked slightly at the ends of his sentences. He called to passersby and demanded that they stop and give him a moment of attention. A crowd formed around his workstation, which consisted of several clear tubs and a long, white plastic cutting board. The board was propped up on old copies of *The Village Voice*.

The old man gripped a vegetable peeler in his right hand and slid it quickly over a carrot. Remnants of other vegetables colored his clear gloves. He rested his elbows on his knees as he worked. The shiny brown leather of his shoes appeared brand new, though Elizabeth noticed the bottoms were abraded and worn thin. She smiled at the old man, and he grinned back. His teeth were in good shape, and he was well dressed; Elizabeth thought his suit European and expensive. Pieces of peeled carrot stuck to his sweater.

“When you peel a potato,” the old man said, “it doesn’t matter if you’re right-handed or left-handed. Like a politician.” He chuckled and members of the crowd followed.

With his arm outstretched, the old man called to Elizabeth. She was hesitant and smiled nervously. She draped her arm over her belly and stepped forward.

“Take the peeler,” he said, “and see how easy it is.”

With ease, Elizabeth slid the peeler down the potato, watching as the skin separated from flesh and curled slightly. The old man asked the audience for a round of applause.

“If this lady, in her condition, can do this, so can you!”

Elizabeth took a step back and let the crowd tighten in front of her. She didn't like being near a lot of people these days; when people bumped into her, banged shoulders or hips, it made her uncomfortable. The old man began his sales pitch, explaining that the Swiss-made utensil supplanted an array of kitchen items: mandolin, peeler, slicer, even a wife's nagging demands. He sucked in through the gap in his front teeth when he said “s.” Looking between two teenaged boys, the old man made eye contact with Elizabeth. She disliked the attention.

“Three years ago,” he yelled, “I was in *Vanity Fair*. Julia Roberts was on the cover.” His face lit up, and he laughed and laughed and sold peelers. Elizabeth couldn't imagine him in a magazine. He encouraged everyone to buy several peelers and give them out as gifts. Elizabeth thought the cost reasonable at five dollars and handed the old man a bill.

“You only want one?” he asked. “You've got no friends, like me.”

Elizabeth simply smirked and left with her peeler. She used the sleeve of her cardigan to clean the smudged lenses of her dark-purple-rimmed glasses. The old man, along with his audience, laughed louder and louder, and the clang of stainless steel changing hands rang through the square.

It was almost Labor Day. Elizabeth rubbed her hand across her belly and remembered the last night she and Jack made love. She carried the reminder with her. Remembered the last day they spent together, arguing over where to eat. There was snow everywhere. Now, though, it was autumn. She took a deep breath and reminded herself, over and over: it was almost Labor Day.

When Elizabeth entered the bookstore, she could still hear the conversations and see the commotion pouring in from Union Square. A group of teenagers, standing close to the old man,

hollered things to each other that Elizabeth could discern neither as friendly nor hostile. The words sounded harsh, though, and primitive. The loudest boy, a lanky black boy, sang a song into the face of a young girl with a nose ring. She seemed tickled.

The bookstore was packed with people. As a college student, Elizabeth had spent long days in the bookstore, sitting in the cafe with her laptop and stacks of books, as if the place were a library. She didn't care much for the taste of coffee, so instead she ordered cup after cup of hot chocolate. She hadn't craved the drink for some time, but being in the bookstore again, she could taste the bittersweet chocolate on her tongue.

The escalator moved quickly. Elizabeth loved watching the steps in front of her disappear beneath the floor, only to reappear at the bottom. There was a synergy to the whole process, one that went largely ignored by everyone, which she found fascinating. Jack had appreciated this, the synergy and the fascination; she thought he hadn't held on to much in their relationship, but escalator obsession was something.

Elizabeth stepped off on the third floor, and the sensation of going from involuntary movement to state of rest made her lightheaded. She closed her eyes for a moment and took a breath, something Jack had taught her as a way of calming down. It seemed she was always on tenterhooks and never knew why. Jack had made her happy. He did. That much she knew. Then, suddenly, he didn't, and it was over. She felt as if it had all happened outside of her, like a projection. If the choice was theirs, to stay together and be a family or live lives as strangers, why did they choose to let go? She couldn't answer the question, even now. Jack didn't want to be a father. She wasn't sure she wanted to be a mother. Then the surprise. Jack walked one way, because he felt he had to; Elizabeth, hurt and angry, decided then to walk the other way.

Now she was in a bookstore. Her mother had demanded she find a book called *Mother Shock*. The title alone made Elizabeth uneasy. She imagined the shock would be substantial without having read any books. It'll help calm those bratty, little nerves of yours, her mother had said. Elizabeth thought that, if she were a brat, her mother was certainly to blame. And Jack. They spoiled her, first her mother, then Jack. She didn't realize how much so until Jack was gone. Then, almost instinctually, her mother took over. She begged Elizabeth to move back home to Long Island. A woman in her condition, her mother said, shouldn't live alone. Elizabeth refused, of course.

Jack had always called her a Manhattan girl, but she was never sure exactly what that entailed. She did think, though, that he meant it derisively. She thought of that as she walked up and down the aisle of mothering books and had the urge to call him. He wouldn't answer, she knew. There was little to say between them. Their marriage had ended with very few words. You're so young, her mother would say. You'll bounce back. Elizabeth pressed her hand on the right side of her belly. There was movement. She knew she could bounce back, that she probably would. No part of her wanted to be a single mother. Or alone.

She found the book, opened it. Already, she felt alienated: the introduction was littered with words like "spouse" and "partner" and "traveling companion." All of those things were gone, and it was her fault. She knew that now. Jack had been afraid, and he tried, he did, to tell her. She just couldn't hear him then. The pages of the book felt coarse and new, and she bent the spine, creased it, to make it look worn. She turned the book over and read the back cover: "where life is no longer neatly divided," it said; that was motherhood, nothing she could control. Elizabeth felt flushed suddenly and closed her eyes. In all the uncertainty, she knew one thing:

she didn't want to be a mother without Jack. A sense of hysteria filled her, and her head again grew light. After eight months, Elizabeth could still feel Jack, bittersweet, on her tongue.

She decided to buy the book. The gesture, she thought, would appease her mother. As she rode down the escalator, Elizabeth took in the smells, the way aromas shifted and converged between each level. Level two smelled like board games and chai tea. The first floor, in addition to being loud and obnoxious, was like a perfume of sweat and coffee and rain. The bookstore had filled with people, mostly teenagers, in the short time Elizabeth was upstairs. She clutched the book to her chest and zigzagged through the crowds. Various people knocked into her, some softly and others not so much, each time causing her to cringe. Her feet felt heavy and bloated and full of water. An employee smiled at her and asked if she needed any help.

“No, no,” Elizabeth said, holding up the book. “I have *Mother Shock*.”

The employee nodded and moved on to another person. Elizabeth expected more, maybe a friendly hand to guide her through the maze of bodies. Instead, she was left wedged between people making their way to the register. A book signing in the back of the store had just ended, and those people funneled to the cashiers as well; Elizabeth turned around and walked to the front corner of the store. She had avoided that section for several weeks, but nothing kept her away now: New Fiction. Even from afar, with two tables between her and the wall shelves, she could see the book. *His* book. It was old fiction to her. She wondered who Jack celebrated with when the book was released, who he reviewed the galley with, who he criticized the publisher's poor cover choice with. A sunset graced the jacket, and Jack hated sunsets. He found them melodramatic. The title had been Elizabeth's idea—she and Jack had finished a bottle of Trockenbeerenauslese and argued over the writing of Chris Carter and Joss Whedon before

making love. They hadn't been married long, and the sex was still young. Elizabeth awoke the next morning placid and hungover; she turned to Jack and kissed him hard on the lips. You taste like honey, he said. I know the name of your book, Elizabeth said: *Things Sound Different Sometimes*. She remembered Jack's reaction like it was yesterday. He smiled. He smiled so that his teeth were showing. It was the happiest he'd ever looked. Elizabeth opened the book to the back inside cover. There was Jack. He wore the same smile. She hoped, above all else, that he meant it.

Elizabeth held onto the book. Outside, an argument between a few of the teenagers grew loud and carried across 17th Street. Most of the words were indistinguishable, and the noise built to a growl. The old man stood up and pointed away from himself and yelled; his face looked distorted. Elizabeth took a step back and gripped her books. Suddenly, the nose ring girl ran from the group towards the store. She cried and yelled for someone to help her. Nobody seemed to notice, save for Elizabeth.

As the girl entered the store, she stopped. She looked around, eyes darting from person to person, and found Elizabeth staring at her. The nose ring girl bit her lip and mouthed: Help me. There was no sound. Elizabeth felt as she had those months before, watching something unified break apart, that it was all a projection. A figure came barreling across the street; it was the lanky boy. He called out something, words Elizabeth didn't understand. He plowed through the doors and tackled the nose ring girl. Now they both screamed, at each other. The lanky boy sat on top of the girl and pushed on her head with his left hand. With his right, he pulled something steel and shiny from his pocket. He raised it up and called the girl a cunt. He spit on her face and then, like it was nothing, pressed down the steel and slid it over her cheek. Then again. Again. Then her nose. Elizabeth thought she would vomit. Why wasn't anybody doing anything? She dropped

her books and knelt. She pleaded for the lanky boy to stop. When he turned and looked at her, she felt like he was looking through her. His eyes, she thought, were lifeless. Like a doll's eyes. She held her arms over her belly and took a deep, deep breath.

Police officers poured in from Union Square through the double doors and filled the bookstore. The first few went for the lanky boy, tackling him and sending the peeler sliding across the floor. It stopped in front of Elizabeth. A trail of red stretched over the tile. The lanky boy shouted obscenities and kicked wildly. Several officers tried to control him. Elizabeth's hands were pallid and cold. The nose ring girl cried and screamed and covered her face with her hands. There was blood running between her fingers and down onto the floor.

Elizabeth could no longer control her breathing, her heart rate, anything. A wave of pain hit her, then another, a tightness. Her lungs burned. A man beside her asked if she was okay, but she didn't respond. She tried to hear Jack's voice; it was always in her head. He calmed her. He would say: This isn't it, Elizabeth, not yet. She would believe him, she had to, in every manner possible, in every way he'd mean the words. It was almost Labor Day, she thought. She tried to steady her hands. She held them to her belly. There was movement.

I took a sip of Pabst and told Josh he was a pussy. The cold of the can made my bottom lip numb. The wind picked up, tossing all manner of garbage and particles into the air. The softball field became a swirl of infield dirt, a perfect tornado of summer. I was sweating, and I could smell myself, something fierce. Josh didn't seem to notice. He went on about Maddie and how he'd lost her and what a fucking idiot he'd been: it was there, and then it was gone. That's what he kept saying. He said it, over and over, like a fucking mantra, as if saying the words made the sentiment real. It's all in your head, I told him. He shook his head and repeated the words. He was wrong about some things. I nodded and finished the beer.

"Thanks, douchebag," Josh said. He grabbed the can and tossed it into a trashcan. "Why do I even bother?"

"Because, rock star," I said, slipping an American Spirit between my lips, "nobody else gives two shits." I cracked a smile and slapped him on the back.

"You're a real fuck, Ben," Josh said. He picked up a Louisville Slugger, which belonged to our teammate, Canadian Jay, whose wife had recently used it to bash in somebody's windshield at the A&P, and smacked the aluminum against the bench. The vibrations settled at the tips of my fingers. Josh walked towards home plate and shielded his eyes.

"Oh, come on," I yelled. "You know you love me." I blew him a kiss, and he gave me the finger. Cigarette smoke filled my lungs and numbed everything.

The ping of softball against bat echoed through McCarren Park. I imagined, somewhere in Manhattan, Josh's wife Maddie could hear the sound and missed her husband. I hoped,

anyway. She'd been staying at her sister's, Hannah's, in Locust Valley, but that situation proved worse than her own home. I got a call from her a few weeks back, asking if I knew of any places she could stay in the city; it was curious, her calling me. She had friends, plenty. She never asked about Josh, but I could tell she wanted to. When she asked what I'd been up to, I simply said, "Work. And fucking. You know." There was the faint sound of a laugh on her end. I wanted to comfort her, bridge whatever canyon had formed between her and Josh. It didn't feel like my place, though. I promised to call my cousin, a night manager at the Chelsea Lodge, and arrange for an extended-stay room. Maddie thanked me. I thought she would hang up then, but she didn't. Instead, there was silence, breathing, then, "Don't tell him where I am, okay. Not yet." The line went dead before I could respond.

Josh and Maddie gave me hope. This was nothing I could tell him, though, being as emotionally stunted as he was. Sure, they fought. Unendingly, it seemed. And they never said the things that people should say when what they say means something. But when they looked at each other, when I caught them in the kitchen cooking dinner and thinking I wasn't looking, they were incredible. Josh would touch Maddie's fingers, right at the tips, with his own. She would look back at him and kiss the edge of his nose. There was more there than either would ever say aloud. This was nothing I could tell Josh.

Instead, we played softball. I listened until the ball settled into leather and the field cleared and all that was left was Josh, alone at home plate, and a swirl of burgundy earth mixed with scraps left by those who'd only just passed through. It was a hot Brooklyn summer. There seemed to be no end in sight.

* * *

Canadian Jay demanded that we all go to a pub in Manhattan after the game. We usually obliged, because nobody told a drunken story like Canadian Jay. He was a stout guy, typically unkempt, though he took particular care in washing his hands repeatedly after a game. He ran a greyhound adoption center in Queens, finding homes for retired and abused racers, one of the most prominent in the state; the man I saw play softball seemed at odds with this vocation, and I had trouble, admittedly, picturing him performing such a philanthropic job. His wife, Elliot, was something of a legend. None of the team had ever actually met Elliot, but from Canadian Jay's description of her, she was certainly too hot for him, and a doctor. I took much of what he said with a grain of really-finely-processed salt. Josh thought Canadian Jay was full of shit.

"I can't deal with people," Josh said, "not right now." He walked with a slight limp, which I imagined was fabricated and helped him feel more like a ballplayer.

"One drink," I said. "That's all."

Josh tucked his glove under his arm and took off his hat. His hairline was receding a little, a fact he'd become sensitive about in recent months, especially since Maddie left. She had never mentioned noticing it, as far as I knew, which meant something very particular. Maddie was not a woman who minced words.

"If you could, too," I said, "please clean the sand out of your vagina. Thanks." I patted Josh on the back, and he almost smiled.

We took the L then walked to the pub. I made Josh do a shot of Jameson's when we arrived. He was, surprisingly, unfazed. My tongue caught fire a bit and the insides of my cheeks tingled. I ordered a Brooklyn, Josh a Blanton's on the rocks. We sat at the bar. The team sat behind us, pushing together two large tables. The pub smelled like grass and salt.

Josh sipped the bourbon, and we said nothing. The beer tasted more bitter than usual, and I wondered if it had gone bad. I must have made a face.

“You doing okay?” Josh asked. He nudged me with his shoulder. His breath was toffee.

“Hey, it’s me,” I said. “Of course.” I made my Han Solo face so he knew I was serious.

“Right,” he said and bit down on a shard of ice. “Who you fucking these days?”

I let the glass bottle clink against my front teeth. “Been a slow few months, cocksucker. Since Jen, anyway.” I tried not to smile when I said her name.

Josh swiveled his chair and stared at me. His eyelids drooped, and he clenched his lips together and some kind of sucking noise happened. “Do not,” he said, “talk about my sister. Do not. I don’t care what actually happened.”

I opened my mouth to speak.

“No,” Josh said, putting a finger in the air. “No.” He turned back to face the bar, ordered another bourbon. “No.”

A joke, on my end anyway. His sister had been in town for a weekend. We were old friends. I was a lot of things, this I knew, but I would never have fucked Josh’s sister. It had been a while, though, much longer than normal. Since Ashley, I think. Jesus Christ.

“What the hell is going on with this world,” I said, ordering another Jameson’s and beer back. “I need to get laid. Soon.”

Josh smiled, finally. “Even Ben is human.”

“Fuck that,” I said, quite serious, and took my shot. “If I don’t have regular sex, and I’m talking at least four days a week, the fabric of the whole goddamn universe is going to unravel.”

“You’re such a pain in the ass.”

I nearly spit out my beer. “Hello, Pot, this is Kettle calling.”

“Just for one minute,” Josh said, “let me focus on someone else’s misery.”

A commotion grew at the tables behind us. I smacked Josh on the shoulder, a sort of gentlemanly display of comfort, and we turned around. Canadian Jay, it seemed, was holding court. He held a liter mug of beer and drank as if it were a breath.

“But that’s the problem, don’t you see.” He held up the mug so everyone at the tables could see. “This is the only bar in all of New York City that carries Keith’s. The only one! This is a travesty, I tell you. Keith’s is the greatest beer ever.” His eyes darted from person to person. “Ever.”

“Can that be true?” I asked. “There’s got to be a bar in Williamsburg or Greenpoint or somewhere that carries it. Somewhere closer to the fields. They have everything out there.” I looked to Josh, a Greenpoint resident, to confirm this, but he offered no assistance.

“Williamsburg!” Canadian Jay yelled. “Is that supposed to be a joke?” He stood up and addressed the table as one. “The only thing Williamsburg has is hipsters. Annoying, sweaty, rich, whiny, skinny, snotty little pricks. Hipsters. They should be eradicated. I, here and now,” he said and slammed the table, “call for a hipster holocaust.”

My laughter interrupted his rant, and I choked a little on the beer.

“You know,” Josh said, “Ben’s a hipster.”

Canadian Jay stared up at me as if someone had outed me as a terrorist. He drank his Keith’s and held the gaze.

“The worst fucking part, though,” he continued, “is when they wear their scarfs inside. In summer. With T-shirts! Why do they need a goddamn scarf on if it’s warm enough for short sleeves? Why I ask?” In the end, Canadian Jay sounded more like Medieval England Jay.

By that point, I'd nearly lost it. My sides hurt from holding in laughter, and my beer disappeared. I wanted a cigarette, too. In honor of the rant, I ordered a Keith's. It wasn't bad. Canadian Jay moved on to something new, something about mesh shorts and getting a boner and why not let his flag fly. He was a proud man, after all.

Taking out a cigarette, I moved to the door. The taste of an unlit American Spirit on the tip of my tongue was epic.

"Come on," Josh said, "no more of that."

"Go fuck yourself, bud," I said with teeth holding cigarette. "Come outside and talk to me, pussy."

The door shut behind me. The late afternoon was still hot. I lit the cigarette and took a satisfying breath. Coughed a bit. Josh poked his head out and, in the sunlight, squinted.

"I'm just going to wait until you come inside," he said.

"You better get your ass out here." I aimed the smoke away from him.

He stood in front of me, shoulders sagging and wearing a look of self-pity.

"Come on," I said. "Talk to me."

"What is there to say?"

"I think there's more to say than you're willing to admit."

Josh nodded and took a drink, played with an ice cube. Manhattan smelled different from Brooklyn. So much combined here, restaurants on top of cabs on top of fresh bagels and always, always the garbage. It was perfect. In Brooklyn, away from the madness, things could be separated, catalogued, tied down. But not here. Somehow there was more here.

"She hates me," Josh said. "She hates me and she loves me."

The cigarette smoke was dense. "They're one emotion, I think."

“What does that mean?” He paced out in front of me, taking up the sidewalk.

“She loves you, rock star, like a fucking maniac. You can’t have the hate without the love.”

“No.” He shook his head. “It was there, man, it was. Now it’s gone.”

“Stop saying that,” I said. “It doesn’t make any sense. Look. She hates you because she loves you. Don’t you get that?”

“I get that she did love me. At least I think she did.”

“You’re so fucking fatalistic,” I said and stopped his pacing, gave him a light slap to the cheek. “You guys aren’t perfect. You never were. Stop glory-holing your relationship.”

Josh tried not to laugh; he smacked the cigarette from my mouth and finished his drink. “I’m going inside.”

After stepping on the still-lit American Spirit, I put my arm around Josh and pulled him tight. “This is a blip, man. A moment of static. It’ll be straight soon.”

When the door closed, the dimness of the pub seemed to comfort us both. Canadian Jay continued a story about Elliot and their last trip to Oakville, his hometown, and how hot the sex was despite all the cold. I ordered another drink and watched Josh fight the urge to cry. I hated melancholy, the way it could fester in a room and turn everything pale. There was nothing left to say, I thought, not today. It was then Canadian Jay once again stood up, this time on a chair, and declared back bacon the greatest Canadian export since Alan Thicke.

When I arrived back at my apartment, a small parade was forming on St. Mark’s Place. Most of the people crowding the square were East Indian. A young girl ran past me, adorned with long,

colorful earrings and a dress that sparkled bright blue. Flag-bearers pushed their way across 3rd Avenue, and the dark greens and whites and saffrons snapped in the wind.

I sat on the steps of my building and smoked a cigarette. Whatever Mrs. Aguilera was cooking upstairs—paella, probably—combined with the smell of street vendor masala and tandoori and samosas. I wasn't hungry, but the aromas were unbelievable. In the middle of the gathering, I spotted a young woman I knew from college. Banhi, I think. She was gorgeous in an atypical way, with a nose that didn't quite fit her face and a forehead that stole too much room. Her long, black hair, though, caught slivers of sunlight. I tried my best not to stare. As the parade moved forward, Banhi looked over. She waved and danced away up the avenue.

Mrs. Aguilera poked her head out the window.

"I smell your *hedor* up here, *hijo*," she yelled. She laughed loudly and pulled her head inside.

She was a lonely woman, Mrs. Aguilera, and I did my best to keep her company. Her son had died as a child—some kind of leukemia—and not long ago, her Siberian Husky, Carlos, was electrocuted. It was fucking horrible. Right out on the street. Mrs. Aguilera dragged Carlos upstairs alone, and she was a small woman. I still remember the look of him on her kitchen table, the stink of burning fur that, even now, hung in her apartment. Lately, though, she had been in good spirits. Something about the summer brought her to life.

I finished my cigarette and lit another. I felt anxious, constantly, though I didn't know why. My iPhone vibrated, a text from Josh: *Sorry about today. Just missing Maddie. Thanks for playing ball. Put down the cigarette.* This had become the habitual closing of all correspondences I received from him. And Maddie, for that matter. They had made it their mission—I always hated those couples who took on joint projects, whether social or secular, in

an effort to find common ground—just before Maddie left, to get me to quit smoking. I told Josh I'd sooner quit masturbating. We both knew, certainly, that neither would happen. I watched ash break from the tip of the cigarette and float into the early evening. I wished, sometimes, that I had the power to do that, to separate and disconnect and whiffle through the Manhattan air. Then, without design or regret, I would disappear. I sent a text back to Josh—*No worries, fuckface. Keep hope alive.*—and walked into my building. The weight of the heavy door slamming shut shook the foundation, ever so slightly.

Three in the morning. I knew because the numbers on my clock shined brighter than the streetlights, those beacons keeping the city awake. I barely slept. It didn't matter how hushed things were, how still; in fact, the quiet seemed to worsen my restlessness. I'd been sleeping on a twin-sized bed for a while now, but I still wasn't used to it. A few nights back, I rolled right off and ended up with my head shoved in the closet door. Good times. It was a choice I'd made, though, the bed. Josh thought it was ridiculous, going as far as to sermonize me on the benefits of a proper mattress. He seemed inordinately preoccupied with my back health. I had tossed my old, king-sized mattress out during a Jerry Maguire-esque breakthrough. Or breakdown. Not sure which. There was just too much room in that bed.

In the living room, I opened a window and smoked a cigarette. The summer heat was unforgiving, sticky, even in the middle of the night, and the cool apartment air escaped alongside the smoke. Without provocation, I thought of Ashley. These nights occasionally brought me back to her, and it drove me mad. No explanation. She was just a good fuck. I took a long drag and repeated the sentiment in my head. That's all she was. Then she was gone. I turned on music in

an effort to stop thinking. I flicked the finished cigarette out the window and imagined its smack against the quiet street.

This scar is a fleck on my porcelain skin, the woman said. It poured then, changing the cerulean sky into something slate, as if someone had called “Action.” *Live through this*, she said, *and you won’t look back*. She looked familiar, the woman, but was more like a creation, a mixture of all the women I’d fucked and loved and hated combined into one irresistible being. I opened my mouth to speak but she put up her finger, shook her head. My skin seemed to crawl, like I was wearing somebody else’s body and it no longer wanted my bones. I touched her hair, blonde and curly, and imagined a perfume left on my fingers. *There’s one thing I want to say*, she said, her eyelids blinking in the rain like a hummingbird, *so I’ll be brave*. She took my hand in hers and we walked. We were in a park then, something like Central Park but maybe a hundred years ago, and the water rose. First ankles, then knees. Waist. It was icy, I could tell by the bumps on my skin, but I didn’t feel cold. She squeezed my hand, in-out-in-out, like a drum beat. This warmed me. Her eyes were sad and incredibly strong. *You were what I wanted*, she said, and the words hung for a moment. She rubbed her thumb across my cheek and wiped away a raindrop or tear or both. The water came just above my chest, and everything around me—trees, far away skyscrapers, the darkened sky—seemed to drown. *I’m not sorry I met you*, she said softly, *I’m not sorry it’s over*. I was, though, almost immediately. I kept asking myself who this woman was, why she had this power over me, how I could have let her go. She released my hand, and her face changed to something hard, rigid, and I no longer recognized her. The water consumed everything, lapping over my head, and I stared out over the park, now a subaqueous forest. The woman still stood in front of me, unbothered by all that surrounded us. Her smile refracted and

disappeared. *I'm not sorry there's nothing to save*, she said. The sound of her voice hung in the water, like a whale song, and echoed. Then, she was gone. A weight grew and grew on my chest until I screamed but there was no sound and my eyes were wide open and pushing against my skull and the absence of sound in this deluge was the loudest sound I could have imagined.

It was morning, and a man's voice woke me. I hadn't slept long. My head leaned against the wall beside the fire escape, and my temples throbbed. The man's voice called out. He was in the street and screaming my name. I counted to five, and he shouted again. Rubbing my eyes, which felt cracked and burned, I peered out the window. Josh was at the foot of my building. He yelled again despite our eye contact. There was blood on his shirt.

I buzzed him inside. He was out of breath when he came through the door; he had been crying, too. I picked sleep from my eye and stared at him. He said nothing. I shrugged my shoulders. He collapsed into the chair by the window and began to cry again.

"Make you some coffee?" I asked, unsure of what the hell to say. I was, for a moment, truly afraid to ask about the blood.

He nodded but didn't look up. The morning brew splashed and bubbled and filled the otherwise silent room. In these moments—when I knew I should fucking say something that mattered—I was just no good. Instead, I poured us both a cup of coffee, put Josh's down on the table beside him, and sat at the open window. I lit a cigarette and listened to the paper slowly burn. Mrs. Aguilera was making breakfast down the hall. It made my stomach jealous. I remembered then that Ashley made this incredible breakfast once, which I could smell in my apartment for days after. Some kind of baked egg and ham concoction and a sauce that I was sure God had touched. *Huevos de Ashley*. Looking at Josh, I felt awful for craving such a thing.

“She just jumped,” Josh said, finally pulling his hands off of his face. “She waved, and that was it.”

I put out the cigarette and sat beside him. He was sweating and smelled of a sleepless night. I rubbed his shoulder and could feel his heart beating, fast.

“Come on, bud,” I said. “Spit it out.”

“The girl.” He took a mouthful of coffee, which I imagined was still quite warm.

“What girl?”

“She just jumped,” he said. He looked at me then, and I could follow the crimson lines running across his milky irises. “She was there, standing on the platform with me. Then, she waved. That was it.”

“*What* was it?” I said, panicked. “Jesus Christ, Josh.”

“She was pretty, too,” Josh said, visibly holding back more tears. “I really hate this city sometimes.”

He said nothing else about it, just stared at his hands. Then, suddenly, he shot up and went into the bathroom. I could hear him throwing up and asked if he was okay. No response, so I opened the door, slowly. Josh scrubbed his hands violently. I waited until he was finished and stood with my arms apart, spread in the air. He looked at me like I was crazy, then took a few steps forward, buried his head into my chest. We remained this way. Josh cried. The reason lacked importance, it seemed, only that he needed it.

When he was finished, he wiped his face on my shirt and backed away.

“You look like shit, man,” he said and almost laughed. “What the hell you been doing?”

“Fuck if I know,” I said, moving to the window and lighting a cigarette. “Woke up out here.”

“I saw, almost hanging out the window,” he said, making a throat-cutting motion at my cigarette. “Big night?”

“Wonky dream, man. Some broad letting me drown in Central Park.” I wanted to press him but didn’t.

“What does that mean?”

“That I need more sleep,” I said and tossed the unfinished cigarette. “I’m not sleeping well these days.”

“Why’s that?” Josh seemed to enjoy his coffee.

I pointed to the kitchen, offering him another cup. “It’s a hipster thing. Like vampires.”

Josh got a refill and leaned against the counter. “Talk to Madeline lately?”

I shook my head, grinned out of the side of my mouth. He was the only person I knew who called her Madeline.

“Have you?” I felt bad keeping things from him.

“No,” he said, banging his mug on the granite countertop. “I wouldn’t know what to say.”

“Start small,” I said. “Hello works.”

“Fuck you,” he said, walking towards the window.

“It has been awhile,” I said, trying to lighten things. “I’d take a tugjob if you’re offering.”

We shared a laugh, the real deep down kind. Our friendship was built around moments like this, had been since college, times when neither one of us knew what to say but what did it matter anyway; all that counted was being there. At least that’s what I told myself when I didn’t know how to help him.

Out of nowhere, as if picking up an unfinished conversation, Josh recounted the events of his early morning: a troubled young girl, not quite twenty, took comfort in his presence on the

subway platform. They shared a moment, Josh said, where she was sure she knew him and had been intimate. Josh tried to calm her. He admitted that she was certainly crazy, schizophrenic or something. Then she stood, just as he had described earlier, waved, and threw herself in front of the oncoming train. He could still feel the violence and intensity of the action, he said, in every vein in his body. His hands trembled before he finished.

A knock startled us both. Josh opened the door to find Mrs. Aguilera standing with her hands on her hips, tapping her right foot. Framed by the long hallway, she looked like I could put her in my pocket and carry her away.

“Boys,” she said sternly, “what’s doing?”

Josh looked at me, and I looked back to Mrs. Aguilera. She seemed troubled by our lack of reaction.

“Do you no smell this,” she asked, wafting air into the apartment. “It’s breakfast. It’s for you.” She turned and walked back to her apartment, leaving our door and the invitation open.

“Homemade breakfast,” Josh said, nodding.

“Sounds pretty fucking perfect.”

“It’s a new day, brother.”

As we walked to the door, Josh gave me a firm punch in the shoulder. My coffee mug jumped from my hand, and we watched as it bounced, all in one piece, down the linoleum hallway. The sound echoed through the building, like an old bell.

“I can’t believe it didn’t break,” I said.

“Damnedest thing,” Josh said. “Strong coffee.”

* * *

Josh went home after breakfast. I stayed to help Mrs. Aguilera clean up; her apartment carried a solace, made it feel like home, despite being only doors from my own. She was all the mother I had these days, and I her *hijo*. The situation worked out well, I thought, for both of us. As I dried dishes, she tousled my thick hair. I hadn't showered in days, and she made a face, flicked her fingers in the air.

"*Graso*," she said.

I smiled and finished drying. "I know, love. I'm a little gross."

"There are no ladies for you," she said, "like this."

"I think I'm doing okay," I said, unsure of what brought on the sudden interest in my social life.

"No," she said. She sat at the kitchen table and sipped dark roast. "So many come in and out. You never keep one." She shook her head. "You not okay."

I finished the dishes and joined Mrs. Aguilera at the table. Her coffee was stronger than mine, richer. I felt it on my tongue, coating my itchy throat.

"Maybe they don't keep me," I said.

She put down her coffee and grabbed my hands. She squeezed them, and I could feel her wrinkles in the grooves of my palm. Her grip was tight, and I waited for her to say something. She didn't, though, just held me like that across the table. There was a sincerity in her eyes, a hope, the way a mother sees something singular in a child, no matter how misguided.

Eventually, Mrs. Aguilera stood from the table and scooped up my mug. She leaned down and kissed my forehead, rested her hand on my cheek.

"You're a good boy," she said.

I wondered if she was right, if the women I'd been with felt the same way. How many had I been with; how many had I cheated on. I hoped the actual number was less than my memory. I'd broken hearts, I knew this, and I'd been broken. Out loud, I would never admit it, not even to Josh. But it was there, buried beneath the cynic and the sarcasm. Mrs. Aguilera could see it, somehow. It was there. All I feared, in the sleepless nights and casual fucks, was the day it would be gone.

"Go," Mrs. Aguilera said playfully, "get out of here. Do something. I see you tomorrow."

I stood and kissed her cheek. "Yes, ma'am," I said.

She let the water run in the sink as I left, the sound of water on water like a purr in the small apartment.

It was time for a run. Yes. It had been days, softball notwithstanding, and my lethargy was nearly unbearable. I put on running clothes, slipping a pack of American Spirits into my knee-high socks, and stretched on the staircase outside the building. Remnants of the parade littered St. Mark's Place.

I ran across town, which was new. My legs seemed stronger despite the lay-off, and I moved quickly, down Waverly and through Washington Square Park; a line of tourists decorated the street outside Jekyll & Hyde, and I nearly stopped at Little Owl for lunch. I found myself on Barrow Street, still thinking about the restaurant, when I realized where I'd gone. Over a mile, clear across town. In front of Ashley's building. I slipped the pack from my socks and lit a cigarette. The smoke traveled up past her window and into the summer sky. I sat on the stoop and smoked and waited. For what, I wasn't sure. After a second cigarette, I stood and buzzed her

apartment. My fingers felt as if they moved independently of thought. All I could think of was Mrs. Aguilera and her cathartic hands.

“Hello?” Ashley’s voice held equal parts confusion and gravel.

“Hey,” I said, “it’s me.” My foot tapped against the top step.

“Ben?” Suddenly, Ashley’s window opened, and there she was. “What are you doing here?” she called down.

“Smoking?”

“I’m buzzing you,” she said and disappeared.

With a shrill electricity, the front door opened. Each step seemed less certain than the one before. In a manner I’d never been, I felt self-conscious. Nervous, even. It was queer feeling. I’d had sex here, after all.

Ashley answered the door in only a T-shirt and underwear. She looked like she hadn’t been awake long, a bit disheveled but fucking gorgeous. The shirt had a drawing of Barack Obama above the word *PILF*. I resisted the urge to giggle. She was smiling, which I wasn’t sure how to take. I expected her to slap me, or slam the door, or give me some sense, anything, of how she felt. Instead, she smiled, looked at me for a moment, then walked to the couch and plopped down. She covered herself in a Superman blanket that looked familiar. I, too, sat on the couch, leaving space between us.

There was a show on television about airline hijacking, about what to do when and if someone took your plane by force. Ashley appeared engrossed. The host of the show took a woman’s hand and held it tightly in his own. He looked at her, intensely, and asked her to be strong. It was clear she had been broken down. Look, the host said, pointing to a stainless steel coffee pot, look. Anything, he said, can be a weapon.

The show made me itchy, so I stared at Ashley. The next commercial break was all that snapped her back to the room.

“Jesus Christ,” she said, removing the blanket and walking into the kitchen. “What the fuck would you do on that plane?”

Her ass looked fantastic. Legs, too, long and athletic, the kind men dream about.

“What do you mean?”

She pulled an Odwalla from the refrigerator and returned to the couch. “There’s terrorists on your plane!” she yelled. “For God’s sake. What the hell do you do?”

“I guess what that guy said, right? Coffee-pot his ass.” I made a swinging motion.

Ashley stood and bent her knees as if she were hitting a baseball. “That’s right, bitch, your head’s my t-ball.” She swung through and used her hand to shield the imaginary sun.

“Nice distance,” I said.

“Damn straight,” she said. “Hope it lands on Ahmadinejad while he’s taking a shit.”

“How long have you been watching this?” I asked, amused by how fired-up Ashley was.

“It’s a four-part special.” She sat down and took a drink. A line of protein shake remained on her upper lip.

“You’ve got a little mustache there,” I said. “I can get rid of that for you, if you want.”

Ashley smirked and leaned forward. I wasn’t sure if she wanted me to kiss her. She looked serious. I slid closer.

“Who are you, Ben Parker?” she asked.

I stopped moving, and our faces remained close but far, far away.

“Where did you come from?” she asked.

There was a smartass response ready to go. Before I could speak, though, she kissed me, hard and sure.

“Shut up,” she said.

She took my shirt, and hers, and made a pile on the living room floor. Then my shorts. I slid off my shoes. Knee-high socks, though, remained. We kissed until I could barely breathe. Ashley got on top of me, and I realized all the windows were open. She didn't seem to mind. She guided me inside her, and we kept kissing and her breath was syrup and heavy and she moaned and I believed her and she pushed and pushed and pushed and whispered my name, looked me right in eyes, as she came. Of all the times we'd had sex, Ashley and I, nothing had felt like this. I wondered if she knew it, too. She smiled and touched my face. She felt amazing, her body, her smile, everything. There was more here now, something new and paralyzing. Afraid to move or think or speak, I ran my finger over her cheek, through her hair, down her side. My hand came to rest beside hers, and the tips of our fingers grazed. I used the Superman blanket to cover us both. We smelled of sweat and sex.

Ashley's lips parted and held there; she looked like she might say something. Instead, though, she grabbed a throw pillow and put it to her face and exhaled as if she hadn't taken a breath in days. She screamed into it, and I felt her muscles, all over, tighten. Afterwards, she looked at me, expectantly. She gave me goosebumps.

“I know,” I said. “I feel the same way.”

We fell asleep on the couch, wrapped in that small blanket. I awoke to find evening had arrived. I slipped into my clothes and kissed Ashley on the forehead. She didn't stir but snored a little. The hardwood floor called out as I left.

* * *

I spent the night at McSorley's, alone. Well, not alone, if you count the hundreds of people who poured in and out until evening was nearly gone. I drank nine lights and five darks before losing count. My forearms were sticky from the bar. I remembered stumbling down 7th Street and waiting in line at Pommes Frites. The large paper cone soaked through with grease, my lips sweet and sticky from the pomegranate teriyaki mayonnaise. As I stuffed down the potatoes, hoping they would soak up some of the hops and barley and alcohol slushing in my stomach, a guy next to me regaled his buddies with the tale of his current affair. Her husband has no idea, the guy said, and frankly, fuck him. He doesn't really know her anyway. The group of men hollered and gave high-fives, as if an affair amounted to a late-second touchdown. Ryan, one of the buddies said, you're my hero. Going after what you want, he said, no matter what. The compliment, followed by more high-fiving, pissed me off. I wasn't sure why—I'd undoubtedly slept with married, or otherwise unavailable, women—but I wanted to strangle this guy. He bragged with such flippancy. He used her name, Aimee, out loud for all to hear.

More than halfway through my Belgian fries, I sat on a bench near the men; I couldn't stop listening. He went on, and his friends grew ever more interested with each detail. Soon enough, sexual elements emerged. She gives amazing head, man, Ryan said, and he made a face to somehow illuminate the point. He carefully explained, too, that he was *cavalier*, and she had never had that before, so, he said, she just never stops fucking me. Their laughter turned to a late-night, drunken cackle.

I looked around at the people in line, those beside me, those passersby who showed some reaction to Ryan's story. Most wore distasteful looks. A few nodded, all men, and began telling their own stories. In the end, though, all of it was blowhard and general douchbagery until, as a grand climax, Ryan admitted to his friends, his boys he called them, that he was, in fact, madly

in love with Aimee. I would be too, a buddy said and slapped his arm, if I had a girl who could blow me like that.

Why I suddenly felt empathy for this woman, this stranger who'd chosen not only to cheat on her husband but to do so with this fucker, I can't say. Without thought, I tossed some *frites* at Ryan. A spot of mayonnaise lingered on his cheek. Quiet followed, and when he and his friends turned around, I did the same. The guy next to me, I could see, nodded subtly in my direction.

Ryan approached, and I saw that he was a small man, bit of a belly, but otherwise decent looking. My head, full of ale and anger, swayed heavy in the night air. Pointing to his cheek, Ryan asked if I was responsible. I placed my paper cone on a bench and stood up straight. The near one-foot height differential didn't seem to deter his moxie. He pointed again, repeated his question, his pupils large like a cat before pouncing. It was clear why I disliked the man, a stranger, so deeply. I felt like Ebenezer, forced to look at my own wretchedness through a milky, intoxicated window. I threw the first punch, this much was clear, and it landed on the fleshy cartilage of Ryan's nose. The *crunch*, I imagined, was heard clear across Tompkins Square Park. What remained unclear were these details: how many of Ryan's boys pummeled my face, how long it took before the cops stopped the display, how remnants of the paper cone and mayonnaise made their way into my boxer briefs, and perhaps most importantly, how I made the short trip home. Darkness was indeed cheap, but I didn't like it, anymore.

Morning. My face, well, I wouldn't even know how to begin. I remembered a ski trip in Vermont with my mother, before she died—I couldn't have been more than thirteen—when I veered off the beginner slope, found myself carving between intermediates and experts. No matter how hard

I snowploughed, the black diamond seemed to rip at me like an undertow. Pushing my right ski hard into the pillowy snow, I flipped end over end, face bouncing then sliding before finally finding the bark of an evergreen and stopping. Now, on this morning, I felt far too old for such things.

The events of the previous night lingered. Curled in bed, I called Maddie. She sounded surprised to hear from me. I started with pleasantries, asked her how the accommodations were treating her, if my cousin had been of any help. She thanked me but avoided the questions. Without going into detail, I told her I thought we needed to talk, perhaps for myself more than her. She said she wasn't sure we should meet, that it might complicate everything. I assured her I wouldn't champion for Josh. This was something else, I told her. Her silence translated to acceptance, and we decided to meet over on Christopher, along the Hudson.

After a quick shower—an attempt to defunk my face—I felt better but saw the necessity in accepting the black-and-blue. Reminders, I thought, of something I shouldn't forget, of courses foreshadowing certain ends. I lit a cigarette as I left the apartment. Mrs. Aguilera opened her door and poked her head out. She made a face and swatted the smoke sneaking into her nostrils.

“You come home early tonight,” she said. It may have been a question, though it sounded like a statement. “Don't forget.”

I stared at her, shrugged. I was hungover and beaten and I'd forgotten something important. For a moment, I pretended I knew.

“*Hijo*,” she yelled and brought her hand to my cheek, “what happen to you?” She looked as if she'd cry if I gave the wrong answer.

“It’s nothing, love,” I said, taking her hand. “I fell last night. It’s nothing. I am okay, now.”

She slapped my arm. “You drink too much.” Taking the cigarette from my mouth, she dropped it in her coffee mug. “Remember, tonight, for Carlos?”

Carlos, her deceased dog. I felt like such a shit. Mrs. Aguilera wanted to do something for him, to memorialize him. She was a sensitive woman in that way. I promised I would be with her. Holding my arms open, I motioned for her to come, to let me hug her. She did and patted her open palm against my chest.

“You’re a good boy,” she said.

“No,” I said, “I’m nothing like that.”

She smiled though I knew she didn’t understand. I thought of the words she called out the night Carlos died: *Como puedo salvarle?* I had no answer to her question. More than anything, I wanted to give Mrs. Aguilera a solace in loss I’d never found. I kissed her on the forehead and closed the door, listened as she fidgeted with the lock. She’d been through so much in her life, this little spitfire of a woman, and yet she gathered concern for me, a spoiled brat of a man. As I walked from the building, I felt a heat against my bruised skin and realized that Ashley had never called.

When I crossed Washington Street, the wind from New Jersey refreshed me. I saw Maddie, reading on a blanket along the water. It was strange to see her without Josh; I’d always believed they were one inextricable unit, that nothing short of an apocalypse could separate them; even then, though, a zombie apocalypse wouldn’t work, because they’d certainly continue on in their mutually-undead states, hunting and consuming brains as if it were nothing short of normal. As I approached her, the thought made me smile.

“Good god, woman,” I said, “where’d your tits go?”

Maddie looked up at me over her book, *Things Sound Different Sometimes*. She didn’t appear amused.

“Curves, too. I can’t say I approve.”

“You know,” she said, “exposure to syphilis is known to impair vision.”

“Ah,” I said, sitting down next to her. “That’s what I get for fucking Jen.”

“Benjamin Parker.” Maddie closed her book and bopped me in the head with it. “Only you compliment a woman’s weight by lamenting the loss of her breasts.”

“And the curves, Maddie. Don’t forget the curves.” I studied the cover of her book. *Sunsets*. Seemed a bit melodramatic for my taste. “What’s this title mean? Of course some things sound different.”

“You should read it,” she said, taking the book back and dog-earring a page near the middle. “It’s something special. I think you’d like it.”

“I really liked *Where the Wild Things Are*. Stellar book.”

Maddie laughed, and I wished Josh could see; I wanted to tell her how much he was hurting, how desperately he wanted her back. The desperation, though, I knew, was the root of many of their issues. He was constantly worried that he wasn’t good enough for her, that she would inevitably leave him. So many insecurities. None of them warranted. She was his wife. She loved him. She wanted him. I knew this. Maddie knew this. Only Josh, it seemed, needed convincing that his wife was in love with him.

The sun began to hurt the swelling around my jaw. I lit a cigarette and winced as it balanced between pursed lips.

“You’re really going to make me ask,” Maddie said, shielding her eyes.

I played dumb, raised an eyebrow. The tingle of tobacco numbed me somewhat.

“What the hell happened to your face, asshole!” she yelled, after which she pointed at the cigarette and made a throat-cutting motion, a Josh move.

“Had a little romp with a few dudes last night,” I said and took another drag.

“Your sexual preferences change since I last saw you?” Maddie seemed uncomfortable despite her banter. She played with the ends of her hair and held her bottom lip between clenched teeth.

“We don’t have to talk about Josh,” I said. “Not for a moment.”

“Okay,” she said, though her demeanor remained.

“This one’s about me, if you can believe that.”

“But you’re so selfless,” she said and cracked a smile.

“I’m all fucked up, Mads,” I said. I finished my cigarette and moved immediately to another.

“This I know,” she said. Before I could light my American Spirit, Maddie took my hand and held it down. “Talk.”

In the midst of thought, words escaped. “What happens if I fall in love?”

Maddie laughed, such that I imagined someone across the Hudson could hear. She let go of my hand and patted my cheek, which hurt. I grimaced, and she stopped, but the laughter continued.

“Ben, in love,” she said. “Dear lord.”

I patted my knee nervously.

“Think they have parkas in hell?” she asked and leaned forward, kissed me on the forehead. “I’m kidding, of course. Tell me.”

“Ashley and I had sex the other day.” In my head, the statement seemed self-explanatory.

“Okay? You two have had sex many times, from what I understand.”

“Yes, that’s true,” I said. I chewed on my fingernail. “But something’s different.”

“Syphilis?” Maddie asked. Her ability to go toe-to-toe with me somehow made things easier.

“I think I’m in love with her.”

Maddie stood up, wiped grass off her shorts. She opened her arms wide and held that way until I joined her.

“Welcome to adulthood,” she said, mid-hug.

“It’s scary,” I said.

“You’re definitely not in Kansas anymore.”

A zephyr whiffled across the water from Hoboken. Manhattan summers were usually brutal, unforgiving. This one, though, seemed to be turning. Shifting.

“But I’m so afraid of Technicolor,” I said.

Maddie lightly slapped my cheek and made no apology. “Have you told Josh?”

“Not yet,” I said. “Tonight, though.”

“What’s tonight?”

“You should come with.” A group of children ran around Maddie and me, playing a game of tag. “I know I told you about my neighbor’s dog, when he got electrocuted? We’re going to Tompkins Square Park to spread his ashes at the run.”

“That’s sweet,” Maddie said. She sat back down on her blanket, opened up the book. “Josh will be there, you said?”

“He will.” I looked at the cover, and the words, the oddity of them, made more sense.

“You should be, too.”

Maddie nodded but didn’t answer. I leaned down, kissed the top of her head, and thanked her. For everything. As I walked back down Christopher Street, I fought the urge to text Josh; I didn’t want to raise his hopes. Instead, I sent a message to Ashley: *hi*. It was all I could think to write.

Josh arrived first, just before eight. He carried with him a bottle of Madeira, and when I asked him why, he shrugged.

“I’ve never been to a doggie wake before,” he said. “I thought I should bring something.”

“Well played, sir.” I finished buttoning my shirt and struggled with the tie.

Josh furrowed his brow and watched me. The more I fussed with it, started over, and screwed up again, the more confused Josh seemed. Finally, he offered help, took the tie off me and tied it around his own neck. When finished, he slid off the tie and handed it to me.

“Why so fancy?” he asked.

“I thought it appropriate, considering,” I said and conquered the tie issue. “Mrs. Aguilera will like it.”

“I barely recognize you,” Josh said, referring to both my clothes and my bruised face.

We knocked on Mrs. Aguilera’s door and waited while she fiddled with the locks. Her smile, when she saw us, could have lit the city skyline.

“*Mi hijo*,” she said and kissed me gingerly. “And Joshua. It mean everything, you are here.” She grabbed Josh and hugged him like he was a child.

“Of course,” Josh said, and I nodded in agreement.

“We go?” she asked.

“Carlos needs his walk,” I said.

Mrs. Aguilera teared up and clutched a porcelain jar covered with drawings and passages written in Spanish. “Yes, he does.”

She locked the door several times before leaving. Josh and I lingered behind, like a procession. We moved along 8th Street with careful, purposeful steps. The weather had cooled since sunset.

With the park in sight, Josh tapped my shoulder, slow at first then faster until he was practically punching.

“What’s your deal?” I asked, turning and smacking Josh in the arm.

“Look,” he said, pointing to a bench a block north of us.

It was Canadian Jay, sitting with a black-and-white greyhound. They looked happy, he and the dog. But there was someone else.

“No way,” Josh said. He sounded like a valley girl.

“Great fucking Gatsby,” I said.

Josh and I stood stunned. There, on the bench with Canadian Jay, was Elliot. She was everything he’d said she was: leggy, electric blonde hair, and gorgeous. Unfuckingbelievably so. Like a Norwegian supermodel. Elliot leaned in and kissed her husband firm on the lips. I reached into my pocket to light a cigarette, commemorate the moment right, but there were none. I’d left them in the apartment. I stopped for a second and almost, almost, went back.

“Canadian Jay,” Josh said, a bit too loud, “well done, my brother. Well done.”

“Should we say something?”

“No,” he said, “don’t interrupt.”

“How can we be cynical when people like that exist?” I asked aloud, and rhetorically.

“People like what?” Josh asked. He always needed concrete answers.

“Lovers, rock star,” I said. “Those two are *lovers*. Through and through. It’s hard to say ‘fuck the world’ when something like that exists.”

Josh became quiet, and I didn’t press him. Mrs. Aguilera called to us from the dog run. She carried so much strength. We stood next to her as she held the porcelain jar. She stayed that way for minutes without a word; she was crying but silent.

“What can we do?” I asked her. “What would be right?”

Her tears welled and caught in the deep wrinkles around her eyes. “I don’t know, *hijo*. It’s hard to think.”

It was. That much was true. But I knew it wasn’t Carlos she came to bury at this park. In flesh and ash, yes; but her son, long since passed, could be felt every time she exhaled.

“You start,” she said to me. She passed the jar to me, to hold.

“Carlos,” I said loudly, “dear sweet Carlos. What a pain in the ass you were.”

I paused, nervously, gauging Mrs. Aguilera’s reaction. Josh’s eyes grew wide with anticipation. When she giggled and clutched my arm, I felt relieved.

“He was,” she said. “Always with the outside.”

“And I remember one day in particular, Carlos the Great, when I brought you to this very park.” I held the jar up high, like Simba in *The Lion King*. “You chased, for near thirty minutes, a pair of defenseless Yorkies.”

“He hated little ones,” Mrs. Aguilera said softly, grinning.

“You tormented them and scared them beyond reason. Then,” I yelled, “you stole their tennis ball. When the smaller of the two found the courage to confront you and nipped your

massive paw, what did you do? You cried. You cried and pretended to be frightened. Of a five pound Yorkie.”

“He fight a bear if you let him,” she said and laughed and cried. “But a tiny dog, he run like the devil.”

We continued on this way, trading stories and remembering, as one does at a funeral, all the times that mean something. Mrs. Aguilera recounted the day she got Carlos, a battered puppy at a local adoption fair in Union Square. The first time I met Carlos, he pounced on me in the hallway. Attack by licking, I called it. He lacked a single bad bone, which was more than I could say for any of us. Well, not Mrs. Aguilera. She existed as the human equal of Carlos: tender, fiercely protective of loved ones, selective of family. If Carlos loved you, you were a lucky one. Mrs. Aguilera and I leaned on each other, and the storytelling held us upright. She ran her hand over my head, almost like petting. Carlos, I remembered, licked the air and moaned when his ears were scratched. He was, above all else, happy.

As I handed the porcelain jar back to Mrs. Aguilera, a pair of hands slipped around my waste and gripped me. The action startled me, but there existed a comfort in the motion.

“Hi,” a soft voice said.

I turned and kissed Ashley without thinking. She smiled as we kissed, and her teeth brushed against my lips.

“What are you doing here,” I asked, though I didn’t care what or how. Only why.

“Maddie called,” she said and pointed to a bench behind us.

Maddie sat, looking nervous and expectant, and waved. Josh waved back but stood frozen.

“If I had a pillow,” Ashley said, “I’d breathe into it right now.”

“I know,” I said. “Me too.”

“Can we get you a bigger bed?” Ashley asked and stuck out her tongue.

“That sounds good,” I said.

Mrs. Aguilera touched my back. “Do you want to say something?” she asked Ashley about Carlos.

“No, I couldn’t,” Ashley said. “I only met him once. He was very sweet to me.”

“Because you are a keeper,” Mrs. Aguilera said, clearing her throat and taking a deep breath.

Just as things became quiet, Josh coughed. “I would like to say something,” he said.

Mrs. Aguilera nodded and smiled approvingly.

“Carlos, you were one for ages,” he said, his voice growing louder with each word. “A wild, formidable exterior. It was hard to approach you without knowing what lay beneath. Warmth. So much warmth. And mischief. Always giving me a hard time.” Josh cleared his throat. “You are wrapped up in a lot of tumultuous things in my mind, Carlos. But, in the end, you are also the center of everything wonderful. That’s how I want to live my life: the wonderful.”

They were, finally, the right words. For everyone. Mrs. Aguilera said thank you and opened the porcelain jar. Maddie stood and joined us by the run, and I watched as her fingertips danced along the edges of her husband’s. As Mrs. Aguilera released Carlos’s ashes into the Manhattan air, I leaned down and kissed her cheek.

“This,” I said, “is how you save him, love.”

The ashes caught in the early moonlight and could’ve been stars. I laughed, thinking that we must have looked like something out of *The Empire Strikes Back*. The wind and trees and

cars and footsteps around us gave the moment a soundtrack of solace, of city life. If I'd had my way, summer would have ended, right then. I needed the coolness of autumn to guide me home. Thinking about what Josh had said those days before—it was there and then it was gone—I looked at Ashley. She was that woman from my dream, the best parts of every encounter I'd ever had shaped into one perfect puzzle piece. Whatever *was* there had indeed gone. Thank the fucking lord. Ashley moved closer and took my hand in hers. The streetlights in Tompkins Square Park, those beacons keeping the city awake, illuminated the small dog run. Carlos would be happy here. We all would, I hoped. Mrs. Aguilera grabbed my other hand and held it so, so tight. The five of us remained that way, without speech or movement, and I was sure, for better or worse, in the brief spaces between us all, New York City burst to life, lived, and died.

Vita

Danny Goodman was born in Florida, has fallen in love with many places, and calls New York his home. During his travels, he has met fascinating people, none more so than in New Orleans. He loves a good bowl of pad see ew and finds pleasure in the company of friends. He earned his BA at the University of Central Florida and MA at Lancaster University in England. While at the University of New Orleans, where he received his MFA in Creative Writing, Danny served as Editor-in-Chief of *Ellipsis*, the student literary journal, and was a two-time recipient of the Samuel Mockbee Award in Nonfiction. He currently teaches creative writing for the Gotham Writers' Workshop.