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North of Almost Everything

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North of Almost Everything

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
Creative Writing
Fiction

by

Joe Kelly

B.A. University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, 2013

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Table of Contents

California Psychics	1
Black River Falls.....	14
Self Portrait as a Dog in Sunglasses	28
So Where’s Quinn?	44
If You Can’t Say Anything Nice	58
The Cleaning Lady.....	72
Something at the End of the Day	85
North of Almost Everything	100
Vita.....	119

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California Psychics

Naked save his boxers, Jeremy sat at the kitchen table with his phone pinned between his ear and shoulder, hands on his laptop's keyboard. Tall Amy, a friend since grade school, said she could smell his bullshit over the phone. The cursor on the laptop screen blinked on and off in an empty Google search bar. Jeremy typed 'unemployment rate, historically' into the search bar. He deleted the words with an index finger, letter by letter, and typed 'reasons to live lol' before deleting that, too, and leaning back to look out the kitchen window into his neighbor's backyard. He watched their French bulldog sit and gnaw on its crotch.

"Yeah, something like that," Jeremy said.

"Come on, bitch," Tall Amy said. "How many days has it been? Since you've left your rat's nest, that is."

The French bulldog lifted its head to sneeze before returning to its crotch.

"I plead the fifth," Jeremy said.

Tall Amy laughed into the phone. Jeremy heard her drag on a cigarette. He looked around the table for his pack. He said it had only been a couple days, which was a lie. He'd barely been outside since he'd been fired from the hardware store a week and a half earlier. Three days before that his girlfriend of two years, Karen, filled a duffle with her clothes and whatever else she could grab within minutes and drove to her friend's house on Brady Street.

An uninvited streak of afternoon sun landed on Jeremy's arm. He stood and walked over to the window and fixed the blanket hanging over it so it was completely covered. Back at the table he typed in the Google search bar: 'ditch digging jobs.'

"So are you coming out later or not? Be good for you," Tall Amy said.

Jeremy cleared his throat and sipped cold coffee. He was the first one to call her Tall Amy. It'd been around his mom's wake during sophomore year. He stood aside the casket all afternoon next to his crying little brother, heavily medicated aunt and the still shell of his father with his eyes on the burgundy carpet. The orderly shuffle of visitors curled around the room. They shook Jeremy's hand, offered boilerplate condolences. Tall Amy stood in a group of girls from high school near the back of the line. She was at least a head taller than everyone else. The image, and eventually the name, as things do, stuck.

"I don't know, man," Jeremy said. "I got a pretty full docket."

The French bulldog stopped gnawing and walked from the wet grass to the crumbling patio to take a shit. The cicadas droned.

"It's fucking gangbusters over here."

"God I hate you," Tall Amy said. "You're a pain in the ass when you're sad."

Jeremy heard street noise through the phone. She must be outside. How ridiculous.

"Well," she said, "if you decide to buck up, I'll be at Carmichael's with Tony and Beagle and all of them around nine. It's the most dimly lit bar in town, so it shouldn't burn your eyes too much."

"Cool," Jeremy said.

"Take care of yourself, bud. See you soon."

Jeremy set his phone on the table and grabbed a beer from the fridge. In the search bar he typed: 'assisted suicide, legality by state lol.' His air conditioner clicked and sputtered from the adjacent living room window. It was the type of day where Milwaukee tried to prove that it, too, was capable of summer weather. He knew he wasn't going anywhere. The afternoon came and went, as if on its way to somewhere more interesting.

That night Jeremy sat in front of his muted TV with a stack of empties near his feet. He wiped the cool condensation from a beer can on his forehead. The TV played an ad for a local bail bondsman across from the supposedly haunted Ambassador Hotel on Wisconsin Avenue. Jeremy tried to remember if that was near the apartment complex where Dahmer lived back in the day. He stumbled to his fridge, opened it and stood in front of the Freon cool for a few seconds. He listened to the couple downstairs argue in shouts. He grabbed a Best Ice, sat back down on the couch, and turned the volume up on the TV.

Tall Amy texted: *Coming?* He threw the phone to the other end of the couch. He could barely walk much less entertain the idea of being in the squall of a Friday night bar with Beagle and Tony and the blur of other people, the slurring and the cackles. He knew his self-pity was indulgent and trite, that selfish moodiness was his kneejerk condition in times like these. He allowed that acknowledgment to feel like progress and turned up the volume to drown out any further self-reflection.

A bright, smiling man came on the TV. Over stock footage of him jogging through a park and sailing in a catamaran was a voiceover explaining his reluctance. The voice explained that he, too, was skeptical at first.

“They can’t be for real, can they?” he said. His teeth were impossibly white.

California Psychics, however, was different. The TV explained that dozens of professional psychics were standing by and that, at just one dollar per minute, *you* could change *your* life. The bright, smiling jogger came back on the screen and wondered how the psychic could have *possibly* known so much about him. He jogged away toward a horizon in soft focus as the 800 number scrolled across the bottom of the screen.

The ad played twice more within an hour in between *I Love Lucy* reruns. Exploitative shit, Jeremy thought. He started talking to himself about how people would pay anything for anything to feel complete. To feel justified for being themselves, for being here. They just wanted permission to exist.

Jeremy watched the jogging man disappear into the blurry middle distance for a fourth time when Tall Amy texted again. He replied without reading: *hang on cussing out TV psychic*.

Jeremy squinted at the phone with one eye and dialed the number from the TV. A pleasant voice explained that, as a first time caller, the first five minutes were free. The voice assured that the call was completely confidential and asked Jeremy to please hold while they set up his psychic reading. Jeremy muted *I Love Lucy*. He thought the hold music was appropriately jangly, folksy. The voice came back and said Jeremy would be connected with his psychic, Grace. He pulled out his laptop and brought up the website. After a moment, she spoke.

“Welcome to California Psychics; this is Grace; how can I help you?”

“What’s crackin’, Grace?”

“I’m well, thanks. And who is this I’m speaking to?”

Jeremy gave his real name and wondered why it mattered.

“Okay, Jeremy,” Grace said cheerily. “How can I help you?”

“Isn’t that your thing? Figuring that out?”

Grace laughed. “In a way, yes,” she said. “But it helps if I get to know you at least a little first. How old are you, Jeremy?”

“Twenty-six.”

“And I see you have a Milwaukee area code. Is that where you’re from?”

“Yeah.”

“Great, great. I’ve never been there.”

“Many haven’t.”

Grace laughed again. The laugh was sort of bouncy, like something oblong rolling downhill. “I suppose not,” she said. She let some dead air fill in before speaking again. “How is everything, Jeremy?”

“Everything’s fine,” he said. “Peachy even.”

Jeremy stared at a pimple near a fold in his stomach rolls beneath the dark hair, and scanned the dirty carpet and the mess of his apartment. A pair of Karen’s sandals sat near the door. He lit a cigarette.

“So that’s how you start this, right?” Jeremy said. “Act sweet and friendly, ask how they are, wait for them to say they need help?”

“Not everyone who seeks the services of a psychic is in need of help. Although…”

On the muted TV Lucy was planning a surprise party for Ricky.

“Although what?” Jeremy asked.

“Although I’m sensing that something is wrong,” Grace said. Her tone sweetened. “Like your life is in disarray.”

The website had profile pictures for all the psychics. Jeremy scrolled until he found Grace. She had shoulder length blonde hair that curled tightly at the ends, light brown eyes, and a perfectly symmetrical smile.

“Everyone’s life is in disarray,” Jeremy barked. “I’m sure you people hope for that.”

“We only hope we can help,” Grace said.

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m sensing that you’ve recently lost something,” she said. “No. Someone.”

Jeremy grabbed for the beer near his feet but got only air. “I like the lineup of pictures on the website. A little human touch. Nicely done.”

“That’s us. It’s a wonderful group. Just wonderful.”

“So do some psychic stuff. What am I doing right now, where am I? Do some spooky shit.”

“*Spooky* is not really our purview. And that’s not quite what a psychic does.” She sighed. “But I know that you know that.”

“You know what I know, huh?”

“I might if you let me in. But you’re trying to block me.”

“I’m not going to, quote, ‘let you in’ or whatever. Just read my mind or something. Go for it, Miss Cleo.”

“You already have,” Grace said. “I already am.”

Jeremy shifted and tried to sit up straight before slouching back as if strapped down.

“Jeremy,” Grace said, “I thought it was just disarray at first, but I’m sensing something else.”

Jeremy didn’t answer.

“You’re in pain,” she said.

“Whatever,” Jeremy said, “I’ve had enough of this. I just wanted to call and see what kind of manipulative shit you pulled on people.”

“Jeremy,” she said through the same bouncy laugh, “we don’t, as you say, pull manipulative shit. But I’m glad you called. I have a feeling we’ll talk again soon.”

“Sure,” he said.

As he was about to hang up she spoke again.

“Jeremy,” Grace said. “I’m seeing something else.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“Birds. I see birds.”

“Birds?”

“It just came very strong, very suddenly. Well, *a* bird. A bird flying through the air and landing somewhere near you.”

Jeremy burped. “*Why do birds suddenly appear,*” he sang before hanging up. The TV played an ad for shingles medication, followed by the bail bondsman. He whistled the tune now stuck in his head as the couple downstairs started up again. Their fight broadcasted through Jeremy’s floor with terrific clarity. Jeremy resented that he couldn’t completely ignore them.

When he sprang awake at the sound of broken glass and the blare of a car alarm, Jeremy had no idea what time it was. He didn’t realize that he’d even been asleep. Out the window from his bed he could just see the reflected blink of emergency lights. He fell putting his pants on.

On the street he stood in front of his car, half-drunk and dumbfounded. His busted windshield radiated in shards around a frozen turkey, like the center of a big sunflower. The turkey was halfway in the car, ass end sticking out. The alarm hooted through the empty street. The dirty windows of neighboring houses lit up. Jeremy stood in the middle of his street and looked up and down, but nothing moved. A voice from somewhere in the dark shouted to shut that fucking thing up.

*

The next day Jeremy sat across from Tall Amy at a coffee shop a short bus ride from his house, thinking it was time, or something, that he got out. In truth he felt forced out, dragged out by the crash and the alarm.

Their sidewalk table was flecked with little ink graffiti smears. Across Center Street a small auto parts warehouse was being converted into a microbrewery. Men in hard hats smoked and spray-painted orange X's on the cream-colored bricks.

Jeremy and Tall Amy complimented each other on their midday hangovers. She rubbed her eyes beneath reflective aviators and shook her head in disbelief.

“Right through the fucking windshield?” she said.

“Right through the fucking windshield,” Jeremy said.

“Jesus, bud, that’s messed up,” she said. “Albeit funny as hell, but messed up.” She tried not to laugh as she sipped her coffee. She wiped some spilled drips from her chin with her sleeve. “Insurance?”

Jeremy shrugged and drank his coffee. Someone brushed his elbow walking by. Jeremy recoiled as if he’d been pricked with a pin and scraped his chair away from the edge of the sidewalk.

“Little jumpy?” Tall Amy said.

Jeremy spoke without looking at her. “How could she have known?”

“Who? What?”

“The psychic. Grace. It’s like she called it.”

Tall Amy scoffed. “She couldn’t have, man. You’ve just been in your own damn head for too long.”

“She said she saw a bird.”

“And then some prick smashes your windshield with frozen poultry. I fail to see a tangible connection.”

“I don’t know, she—it’s like she saw right through me and then saw that.”

“No offense, Jeremy, because I love you, but you’re pretty transparently miserable right now.” Tall Amy rubbed her temples. “Wow.”

“She knew about Karen, too.”

“My ass,” Tall Amy said. “She said something vague about losing someone and some wishy-washy shit about a bird.” She took her sunglasses off and looked Jeremy square in the face. “They tell you what you want to hear.”

“It was like two hours later, man. There’s no...”

Jeremy thought he might puke, or cry, or jettison something far too heavy from inside himself. He felt exposed.

Tall Amy leaned in. “Have you thought about calling her?”

“Grace?”

“Jesus, Jeremy, not the psychic. Karen.”

“No.”

“Seems like what you need. Closure or something, I don’t know.” She looked at her phone and slipped it in her pocket. “I have to get to work. But listen, think about coming tomorrow?”

“Where was that?” Jeremy hadn’t been listening. He observed his wavy reflection in his coffee cup.

“The beach. We’re going up to Bayside tomorrow, Doctors Park. All of us. Come, dude.” She grabbed Jeremy’s chin and forced him to look at her. She smiled. “Don’t be a bitch.”

“We’ll see,” Jeremy said.

“Love you,” Tall Amy said. “Enjoy your misery.”

Tall Amy lit a cigarette and rolled her eyes. She walked toward her car, got in and pulled away. The workers across the street walked in the warehouse with pale drywall and out with concrete rubble. Two men per pile threw whatever they held toward a dumpster in arcs.

Jeremy watched a woman facing him at a nearby table open her laptop and press some keys. Eventually a voice came from the laptop. The woman waved at whomever’s nonmaterial image was there on the screen.

On the bus back to his apartment Jeremy observed people like an experiment. It was one of the old MCTS buses with brown seat fabric and leftover screens from the failed transit TV. It rattled as if held together by chewed gum. All the people, to Jeremy, were indistinct moving parts in something he couldn’t put a fix on. They jostled and shifted as the bus did. The tattooed cursive on their forearms, the scars of long-past acne, the spittle from cooed-to babies, their scabby ankles were all interchangeable. Jeremy could’ve rearranged their parts into anybody if he cared to.

The bus stopped and let some passengers off. Out the window Jeremy saw Grace first as a blonde flash, like a camera bulb snapping a picture. The tight curls near the bottom.

“Grace?” He tapped on the window. He swore she smiled back, that unnerving symmetry. Jeremy yanked the yellow cord to stop the bus as it was pulling into traffic. He brushed and bumped past people as he worked his way to the door, telling the driver to hold it. Outside, Jeremy scanned the passersby. The bus pulled away from him with coughs and an asthmatic scratch, leaving Jeremy alone at the empty stop.

*

The lineup of psychics on the website stared back at him. Mystique, Sonnet, Paul, Gloria, Wednesday: some old, some young, but all clean and buoyant, well-situated lines and airbrushed features in tidy headshots.

Grace was on the bottom left. Jeremy felt her stare, disembodied through the blue glow of the screen. He dropped his cigarette butt into an empty can and grabbed for his phone.

“California Psychics, this is Carl, how can I help you?”

“No,” Jeremy said. “I need to talk to Grace.”

“Uh,” he said, “sir, I’m not sure I know—”

“Grace. Is she there?”

“Sir, we’re not all just...how can I help you?”

Jeremy hung up. He clicked the ‘talk’ icon next to Grace’s picture on the site. A screen came up asking for account details and a credit card number. Jeremy set all this up in a blur.

He dialed and paced as the phone rang. He opened the front door and stood on his steps. The sun was setting into the Menomonee Valley. The orange light settled over the quiet tallow mills and tanneries, the crooked, toothlike peaks of crane and railroad machineries, the tracks below leading to bridges long since demolished. A neighbor sat on the porch and laughed with a short man in a tank top, throwing a rubber ball to a toddler. Jeremy walked back inside, leaving the door open.

“California Psychics, this is Grace, how can I help you?”

“Grace. Grace, it’s me. I mean, it’s Jeremy.”

“I’m sorry, Jeremy, but I’m not sure I remember you, high call volume recently. Have you called us before? Wait, my screen says you’ve recently registered.”

“Last night,” Jeremy said. “I called last night, and we talked, and you, you said something about a bird and then what happened with my car, and you said I’d lost someone, and I have, well, a couple of people and I...”

Jeremy looked at the picture of Grace on the website. It occurred to him that the picture could be anybody, the voice anybody else. The woman in the picture and the voice on the phone were two halves of something he imagined as whole but was not necessarily.

“Jeremy?” she said. “Are you there?”

“Are you?” he said.

“Of course. Are you in trouble?”

“Grace? Where are you right now?”

Jeremy tried to picture palm trees and manicured sunbathers on peerless beaches, but came up with a linen white call center full of cubicles and idling computers.

“Why don’t we start from the beginning,” the voice said. “I’m sensing something.”

“Are you in California?”

“Sir, I can help you.”

“Are you in California? What’s it like? Please just tell me. How’d you know about the turkey?”

“Sir, I mean, Jeremy. I really don’t know what you’re talking about. But let me offer you my current reading, something is coming.”

He could hear that the phone was away from her ear. She was having a conversation with another muffled voice. She said his name into the phone, asked if Jeremy was still there.

“Nobody’s in California, are they?” Jeremy said.

“Sir?”

“Grace?”

“Yes?”

Jeremy hung up. Okay, he thought. He walked back out the front door and down the steps. He dialed the phone and pressed it to his cheek. It rang several times.

“Hi, this is Karen, please leave a message and I’ll get back to you. Thanks.” Beep.

Jeremy didn’t say anything for a few seconds. It was nice just to hear her voice, hear Karen talking-but-not-talking through a pre-recorded formality. It wasn’t her, but it was her. It was enough, even if it wasn’t contact. Jeremy tried to think of something to say.

“Hey, Karen,” he said. “I just, uh, I don’t know.” He twisted his neck and looked through the open door of his apartment. “You left your sandals here. Let me know if you want them. I’ll hold onto them for you.”

Then the call was over. Jeremy hadn’t expected to feel better for calling Karen, and he didn’t. He felt like shit. But it was the type of shit attached to some real thing that had departed. It hurt; Jeremy tried to think of that as a good start. And it could be a start heading for a fresh defeat. But it felt like movement, however lateral, or even negative. There was evidence around the apartment. She had been here. And she’d never come back, and he knew that, too.

Shit, he thought. Okay.

He pulled out his phone and called Tall Amy. She answered and told him it was about fucking time.

Black River Falls

Jack pulled up to a Shell station outside Baraboo on fumes. He and Renner, his friend since grade school, were on the way to Jack's dad's defunct hunting cabin in Black River Falls. Renner decided to spend his weekend off from his custodial job at the Thermo Fisher plant to join Jack. The two of them had stayed up drinking through the small hours the night before. They'd seen each other twice, including then, since Renner moved back to Milwaukee two weeks ago. Renner was coming off a failed six-month fresh start working at his cousin's wood shop in Wyoming. He left behind an ex-girlfriend and most of his stuff.

It had also been roughly a year since Jack's dad had passed, something neither of them talked about until near morning as they staggered up Oakland Avenue back to Jack's mom's, where Jack had been living for most of the past year.

The hunting cabin was waiting to be unloaded and put up for sale, a process that had taken the better part of the last year. Their mutual friend Michael, whom Jack also enlisted to help with the endeavor, would meet them in Black River Falls, on his way from Madison where he taught freshmen as a TA in the English Department at UW. The three of them were once inseparable. They'd concocted and agreed upon flimsy alibis for each other's parents. They used to wear each other's shoes.

When Jack came back out to the lot from inside the gas station, Renner was puking at the foot of the Jeep's front passenger-side tire. Jack walked past Renner casually. Jack waited behind the wheel for Renner to finish, setting two cups of watery gas station coffee in the cup holders. Renner eventually flopped back into the car and put on a pair of black sunglasses. The tinted circles popped against his colorless face. He grunted, which meant they were good to go. Jack

adjusted his seatbelt uncomfortably over his gut and slogged back onto I-90. He and Renner didn't talk for the rest of the drive.

They pulled up to the cabin at around 11:00. Jack's dad had come to it often when Jack was growing up, usually for long weekends. Sometimes he was gone for as much as a week at a time, hunting grouse or deer in the nearby state forest, or fishing for trout in Pigeon Creek, or for bass in the Black River. Jack, for his part, only went to the cabin a couple of times growing up. He was the youngest of three and the only boy. His sisters had had no interest in the place or what went on there. Jack found out at age thirteen, on his second trip to the cabin, that he didn't have the nerves for hunting. That trip was intended to be the first of many deer seasons for Jack. But the shotgun shook in his hands; he remembered feeling like a fucking joke, clownish in the oversized woodland camo and blaze orange cap. His dad didn't ask him if he wanted to go anymore after that. The cabin, and what went on there, got added to the list of things they did not share. The list ended up long by the time Jack's dad died.

The deed for the cabin was in his mom's name now. She'd always avoided the place like a curse. Some of Jack's dad's friends had started pitching in over the last year to empty it, but now his mom instructed him to go up and claim anything he thought he wanted to keep. Jack turned it into a reason to get out of town for a weekend. He denied any meaningful connection to the cabin. He hoped it wouldn't take very long to trash everything.

Jack shook Renner awake, and they got out of the car. Renner stretched in the quiet late morning cold and shivered in a thin Dickie's crew jacket and a knit beanie.

"I'm going to freeze my balls off all night, aren't I?" Renner said.

Jack thumbed back at the Jeep. "Space heater's battery powered." He listened to Renner dance against the cold. "Is that all you've got to wear?" Jack asked.

"I'm still trying to get Therese to send me a box of shit from Cheyenne," he said. Renner lit a cigarette and swiveled on the gravel driveway. "You know," he said, "this place *is* your old man to me. I can see why he hung out here. There's just, nothing."

"He was something else," Jack said. He felt like he and the cabin were staring at each other.

"I guess it's not a bad place," Renner corrected. He scanned the surrounding woods. "It's peaceful."

At peace, Jack thought.

They grabbed two Rubbermaid tubs from the trunk and walked up. One tub was empty. The other held essentials: a couple of gallons of water, some sandwich fixings, plastic cups and utensils, flashlights and matches and sturdy canvas gloves, some firewood, sleeping bags, batteries, the space heater, the bourbon.

The small cabin was built of red cedar clapboard. It had a few steps leading to a small deck. The wood was faded and dirty, and the windows frosted. A small walkway of stones along the dirt and brown grass led to a tool shed on the back of the property. Not far out the door was a now naked forest of jack pines and bare tamaracks.

The floorboards inside creaked beneath their feet until they reached a threadbare navy blue rug in the center of the one room. Jack recognized it from his childhood home; it was from the living room. His old man had had a habit of re-appropriating stuff from their house and bringing it up to the cabin. Jack always found this peculiar and wondered what his selection

process was like. How did Dad pick what he liked enough to bring up here? Jack was glad to have old friends around to help him throw away his dad's favorite shit.

A small sofa covered in plastic and two folding chairs sat against one wall near a card table. Jack opened a closet to find Carhartt overalls, jackets, and a couple of big pairs of snow boots.

"Dad's friends didn't leave much," Jack said.

"They left at least one thing for us to take down," Renner said, pointing above the door. Jack followed his finger to a crucifix—the Son of God, hanging out. Jack unfolded a chair and stood on it. He took down the crucifix and threw it into the empty Rubbermaid.

*

The space heater hummed as Jack and Renner swept up and wiped away a thick layer of dust from every surface. After they cleaned some of the dried mouse shit Renner pulled out a bottle of Ten High from the supplies-Rubbermaid.

"It's five o' clock somewhere," Renner said.

"It's one o' clock here," Jack said.

Renner poured a finger of bourbon and a drop of water into two red Solo cups. Jack grabbed one.

"Close enough," Renner said. He downed his cup before Jack could think of something stupid for them to toast to.

After that drink and another, Renner put on one of the musky Carhartt jackets from the closet and they rolled up the rug and carried it outside on their shoulders. They hung the rug over a broad, low branch on one of the sturdier jack pines. Renner went back into the cabin to grab gloves while Jack stood and observed the rug hanging on the branch. It was once a nice rug.

Jack noticed some specks of dust coming off the rug against the waning afternoon light. He hit it with his gloved hand, creating more dust. He grabbed a nearby stick and hit the rug. He hit it and hit it, harder and harder. Dust flew off in little insignificant clouds. Jack swung until he was out of breath.

“Feel better?” Renner said.

Jack felt his face turn red. “It’s dusty,” he said. “See?” He pointed to the little clouds that were thinning and disappearing.

“Thought you said it was going in the nearest dumpster?” Renner said.

Just then Michael pulled up, his tires crackling over the gravel. Jack threw the stick away and chose not to answer Renner.

Michael wore a braided sweater and a pea coat. He had a backpack slung over one shoulder. He walked up smiling in a way that Jack knew meant he was wondering what he’d gotten himself into.

“Boys,” Michael said. “How’s life in the fast lane?”

“Backed up,” Renner said. “How’s academia?”

“A welcome distraction,” Michael said.

It had been close to seven months, since just before Renner moved to Wyoming, that the three of them had been together. Michael hadn’t been around much since moving to Madison. Jack missed Michael. He would never say that, though. Jack just said he was glad Michael could take the time out to make it and led the three of them back into the cabin.

“So,” Renner said, “when’s the last time we all got drunk in the woods?”

“A handful of trees along the Milwaukee River hardly counts as woods,” Michael said.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Jack said, pouring three Solo cups of bourbon. “I suppose this’ll have to do.”

Michael took his cup and checked his watch. “You two never were for wasting time.”

“One life to live,” Renner said.

“Sure,” Jack said.

“May as well, then,” Michael said.

“Old man would be proud,” Jack said. “Fucking hard ass.”

Renner tilted his cup. Michael looked confused.

“My dad,” Jack said.

“Oh,” Michael said. “Yeah, man. He’d be happy to know the place is getting put to use.”

He clapped Jack on the shoulder and downed his cup, twisting up his face as the liquor went down.

“So have you two just been drinking in this empty cabin all day,” Michael asked. “Or is there work to do?”

Jack began to feel the cabin’s pressure on him. He tore a two-year-old Packers calendar off the wall and threw it into the empty Rubbermaid. He imagined his dad puttering around the empty room, or dragging back a buck he’d shot through the drying November grasses. He imagined him drinking Genuine Draft and Canadian Club with his own friends that he’d grown up with and grown apart from.

“Couch,” Jack said.

The three of them lifted the couch and hauled it outside. It landed next to Jack’s Jeep with a thud.

“Where’s this going?” Michael asked.

“What do you mean?” Jack said.

“It’s not going to fit in your truck,” Michael said.

Jack nudged the dirty couch with the toe of his boot. “It’s not coming with me,” he said.

“Just got to go.”

Renner lay down on the couch and stretched out with his hands folded behind his head.

“Late checkout,” he said, curling up and turning away.

Jack chuckled as he walked back toward the cabin. The wind was picking up. It stirred the smaller branches on the trees. They waved like arms.

Michael followed him back into the cabin. “How is everything?” he said.

Jack turned to him with the bourbon in his hand and shrugged as he told him everything was more or less okay.

“Just been a little while, you know?” Michael said.

“Sure. Sure,” Jack said. He poured some Ten High in two Solo cups. “Thought this might be a nice reason to get together again.”

“Yeah,” Michael said. “I guess so.” They touched cups and Michael drank. Jack tapped the bottom of his cup on the nearby card table.

“You remember how Dad used to do that?” Jack asked. “Touch the table before drinking?”

Michael shook his head. “I mean, no,” he said. “I never really knew him, to be honest.”

“He used to say the table was where the luck was,” Jack said. “And if you didn’t tap it with your cup it was, like, wasting it.”

“When’s your Mom putting this place on the market?” Michael asked.

“I don’t know,” Jack said. What he meant was that he didn’t want to know.

Jack noticed that the space heater had started to thaw some of the frost on the windows. He grabbed the ice scraper from the Rubbermaid. He took a glove off and scraped small bits of frost from the window with a fingernail before going at it with the scraper.

“Won’t all that just come back once we’re gone?” Michael asked.

Jack ignored him and kept scraping, sure he could get all of it off.

Renner walked in and poured himself a Ten High. “Anybody else for one?”

“Two,” Jack said toward the window as he scraped. “Michael? Three?”

Michael ran his hand through his hair. “Why not,” he said. “Three.”

The three of them stood across the room from each other and held up their cups.

“To the old days,” Renner said and laughed as he drank. Michael nodded once and sipped his cup. Jack turned back to the window and tapped his cup on the windowsill before drinking.

He dropped the scraper. Tiny chips of frost fell and outlined it on the floor.

“What’s next?” Michael asked.

“Let’s clear some brush for the fire,” Jack said.

Renner grabbed a pair of gloves and threw them to Michael, who wasn’t ready to catch them. He grabbed his own and walked out of the cabin while Michael lingered near the door and waited for Jack. The window sweated where the frost had been.

*

The fire roared by dark. The three of them arranged the folding chairs and the couch around the fire pit. Renner lay on the couch on his back, with Jack and Renner flanking him in the chairs. An empty Ten High bottle sat next to a fresher one. The cold was taut, but the fire helped. Jack felt imbalanced in his chair. He remembered that his dad used to come back from the cabin in wool and Gore-Tex that smelled like the same kind of smoke.

Renner finally spoke up after a lengthy silence between them. “You guys remember Benny Cox?”

“Sure,” Michael said.

“Vaguely,” Jack said.

“He had a kid sister, right?” Michael said.

“The one who...?” Jack said.

“Yep,” Renner said. “She was, like, sixteen.”

“Jesus,” Michael said.

“Jesus didn’t have anything to do with it,” Renner said.

“What kind was it again?” Jack asked. “Brain?”

“I think so,” Michael said. “She and my sister were friends.”

Renner poured and passed the bottle to Michael who passed the bottle to Jack without pouring any. Jack held it tight.

“What about Benny, though?” Michael said.

“I don’t know, nothing I guess,” Renner said. “He just overdosed again, few weeks back.” Jack watched the fire reflect on Renner’s face.

“Fuck,” Michael said. “What a dumbass.”

“He was nice,” Renner said. “Don’t say that.”

“How so?” Michael replied sharply.

“He almost died, man,” Renner said. “Have a heart.”

“His sister *did* die,” Michael said. “And we’re already done talking about her.”

“Never settled right with Benny, did it?” Jack said.

Renner and Michael quieted. Michael grabbed the bottle from Jack's feet and poured some in his cup. "I guess not," he said.

The wind blew through and made it sound as if something moved in the dark trees. Jack didn't care if there was anything out there. He thought about the remaining few boxes in the cabin. They were all there was left to attend to.

Michael brought up a story about a basketball player at Madison who slipped on the ice next to Lake Mendota and broke his leg and was going to miss the rest of the season. This turned into more stories about ice and worst tumbles and girls from high school and asshole cops and bright ideas and all the things that they were going to do. The conversation lost steam after a while, though, sputtering out until the pops and cracks of the fire were louder than anything they said. Soon they didn't talk. Jack felt short of something right to say.

Once the fire died down a little, Renner threw more wood on. "Wasn't Benny the one who got all high and fell off his bike and broke his cheekbone?" he asked.

"Maybe," Jack said. "I don't know."

"Would fit his description, that's for sure," Michael said loudly.

"Oh fuck off, Mike," Renner said. "You were there, too."

"Were we?" Jack asked.

"Kind of seems like you're still there," Michael said.

"I forgot that a little liquor turns you into a prick," Renner said.

"Better than a lot turning you into an alcoholic," Michael said.

"Old man really loved this place," Jack said. He was startled by the sound of his own voice, like it was suddenly new to him, or wasn't his at all.

“Just because I don’t want to sit around and talk about our childhood and get piss drunk doesn’t mean I don’t remember it fondly,” Michael said.

“Hey, Jack,” Renner said. “Remember the time— ”

“Give it a fucking rest, will you?” Michael said.

“Fuck you,” Renner said.

“Boxes,” Jack mumbled.

Renner shifted on the couch. Some of the bourbon sloshed from his cup. “You got away, what do you care?” he said.

“You tried to,” Michael said. “I hear Wyoming’s lovely. How’s Therese by the way?” He tossed his cup toward the fire.

Renner tried to jump up but fell back on the couch. He gathered himself and grumbled under his breath, an unintelligible growl. He worked his way to standing and unzipped.

“Cheers, pal.” Renner’s stream wavered from the fire to the foot of Michael’s chair and back. Michael jumped back and knocked his chair over.

“Boxes,” Jack mumbled again. He stood and tottered toward the cabin. The shouting match behind him grew duller as he entered the front door.

Jack stumbled to the edge of the dark room and opened up one of the boxes, kicking over the dead space heater in his path. The box was full of winter clothes: scarves and gloves and long underwear, thick wool socks and a heavy overcoat, a Badgers beanie with a faded red and white ball on the top. Jack smelled it. It smelled bad, like musk and mothballs and stale smoke. He put it on. He put on one of the scarves and the gloves and the overcoat over his thick coat. He took off his boots and put the wool socks on over his own socks. He put on another scarf and another pair of gloves and a pair of earmuffs over the hat.

He opened another box. In it were some more clothes. Hunting gear. He took the blaze orange hat and stretched it on his head. He dangled the camo Gore-Tex coat over the overcoat over his own coat. He could barely move his arms. His girth was tight in the layers and layers.

In the bottom of the box were three small boxes of shotgun shells and a tin of long cut dip, mint Grizzly. The shouting outside got louder through the walls of the cabin, through all the hats over his ears. He pocketed the dip and picked up the shells and stumbled into the wall. He wondered where the shotgun was. There better be a fucking shotgun around here.

Michael stormed into the cabin and startled Jack.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Michael said.

Jack couldn’t see him very well. It was dark and his eyes, without him noticing, had begun to well up.

“Let’s find the shotgun,” Jack slurred. “Let’s find the shotgun and shoot the fucking thing.”

“Jack, there’s no shotgun here,” Michael said.

Jack dropped the box of shells. They clattered and rolled away from Jack all over the floor. He got on his knees and tried to gather them.

“You may want to check on Renner,” Michael said. “Fucker.”

Jack burped and almost threw up in his mouth. He swallowed it down, deep.

Michael pinched the bridge of his nose and rubbed his jaw. He wobbled in place. “Jack. What the hell, Jack?”

“There’s all the shells,” Jack said. “If we can just find the goddamn gun we can blow it all away. Away, huh? Want to shoot the goddamn thing and blow it all away?”

“I’m sorry, Jack,” Michael said. “Really. I am.”

“Bang!” Jack shouted, holding an imaginary shotgun. He tracked an imaginary bird, a beautiful grouse, across the absolute dark of the empty room. “Bang!”

Michael backed away toward the door. “Get a fucking grip, Jack.”

Jack stood and turned away to pick up the box of shells. He continued mumbling about finding the gun. By the time he turned around Michael wasn’t there anymore. Jack wobbled out the front door and scanned. There was nothing but dirt and trees. There was no moon. The only bit of faint light glowed from the fire in the backyard.

*

Jack woke up on the floor of the cabin in all his layers, curled up under a sleeping bag. His head throbbed and spun. The shotgun shells were still everywhere.

The pre-dawn sky was a slowly lightening violet. The air was thin. Jack went around to the fire pit. The ashes and cinders were giving off a slight amount of smoke. In the front Michael’s car was gone. At his Jeep, Jack found Renner passed out in the backseat. He was snoring with his mouth wide open. He was balled up very small beneath a blanket. He looked like a pile of laundry.

Jack walked without direction. He trudged through the silent woods, tripping over roots and fallen branches. He stumbled and fell on his hands and knees. He cursed and cursed and got back up and stumbled more. He didn’t walk so much as let the spinning earth move his body forward, allowing gravity to roll him with the Earth’s spin.

He reached Pigeon Creek. It was frozen over and very shallow. Jack felt rocks under his feet. He crouched down and picked up a rock and threw it. It bounced, never breaking the surface. He threw more and more rocks. Each one disappeared into the snow without a sound.

Jack felt a rock and picked it up, but noticed what it actually was: an empty tin of dip. The label was weathered and torn, but Jack could still make it out by the impression of the faded green. Mint Grizzly. He opened the tin. It was empty. It had once been full. Jack pictured his dad alone on the banks of the creek, holding a rod or a gun and spitting brown onto the shore, listening for the calls of animals in the woods to his back. The old man looked satisfied. Jack slipped the tin into his coat pocket and bent down for something else to throw.

Self Portrait as a Dog in Sunglasses

One year, five months, and seventeen days after a tall man in a Chevy Silverado abducted Louise from Kadish Park during her senior year, she sat in her psychotherapist's office and watched him subtly adjust his toupee. He tried to mask correcting its awkward angle by scratching his head. Louise knew better. She might have laughed if she didn't know what was coming next. Their conversation, as it tended to, was about to shift to Julia, Louise's friend since grade school. Louise had not seen Julia since their argument the night of her abduction. Julia had stormed off; Louise had stayed behind, alone, hurt. And then there was nothing that could be done when she was alone. Braided into the trauma in the time since was Louise's tug of war over Julia, between love and resentment.

Julia was coming back to Milwaukee from Chicago to see her family in two days. Louise recalled the text Julia sent: *if you can, please, I love you.*

Louise felt the quicksand of panic and sadness. Dr. Joyce, settling on a flattering hairdo, tried, gently, to encourage her.

"I've explained to you many times why not," Louise said.

This was a common problem post-abduction: the feeling that everything Louise could say, and understand, was lost in translation. Julia was always the one person who spoke a familiar language. But since Louise left school after her abduction, Julia graduated and moved on to college at DePaul. The language they shared was long since coded and scrambled anyway. Louise lost the ability to access it. Part of her blamed Julia for abandonment, part of her loved her, and another part wondered if Julia was even the same person anymore. The competing notions muddled and stymied Louise from taking any action at all.

Lately it seemed to Louise that she knew, deep down, that she desperately wanted to reconnect with Julia. But what does ‘want’ have to do with anything?

“I hear you,” Dr. Joyce said, “and I understand. I, we, only want what is best for your recovery, Louise.”

“I know,” she said softly. “I know.”

Dr. Joyce scribbled some notes. She’d been with him for months, and unlike the slew of other male doctors Louise had seen since her abduction, she actually liked him. He didn’t have the same masculine energy or the same dominant, unearned confidence Louise felt from most men that unnerved her. Dr. Joyce was sheepish. He was sweet. He was, Louise thought, terribly awkward but terribly aware of it. It was relatable.

“Let’s move on for now,” Dr. Joyce said. “That okay?”

Louise nodded.

“How was your morning?” Dr. Joyce asked. “Walk me through it if you would.”

“Nothing special,” Louise said. “I don’t know. Oatmeal.”

“How are your parents?”

“The same,” Louise said.

What Louise wanted to say was “static.” Her abduction had been traumatic for them, too. Louise’s first clear memory after the fact was of her dad in tears next to her hospital bed, one day after a stranger found Louise walking on the side of US-41 in a daze. He still had crying spells now and again. Mom became the stoic one. Other than fielding questions from law enforcement and doctors, her mom didn’t talk much at all those first weeks. She just stared out the window, maybe at a cloud of gnats gathered around a streetlight, or through a fuzzy hospital TV screen. The abduction carved her out of oak.

Louise and Dr. Joyce talked casually for the rest of the hour. Louise could feel that he wasn't going to dive deep. She uncoiled at the notion that he wouldn't raise the stakes. He wouldn't ask her about her foggy memories or recurring dreams about the man's tall, imposing frame, or the scrape of the latch on the door of the shadowy cellar, or the tumbling sound of the bottle of water he'd roll daily down the stairs. Instead, Louise and Dr. Joyce talked about her GED course work, the paintings Louise was working on (she'd once painted Dr. Joyce as a basset hound, toupee and all), and how there was more snow in the forecast.

At the end of the hour Louise stood at the door putting on her coat when Dr. Joyce got her attention.

"Just one more thing?" Dr. Joyce asked.

"What's that?" Louise said.

"You might, if you want to." He adjusted his glasses. "If you feel up for it, give some thought to seeing Julia. The three of us can even meet here if you like."

Louise cinched her coat. She paid careful attention to each black button.

"I really believe it could help," he said. "I wouldn't recommend it if I didn't." He scratched his head along the seam of his toupee.

"Maybe," Louise said. She opened the door and turned back to him. "Maybe."

When Louise got back to her parents house from Dr. Joyce's, she went to the kitchen. Her mom was at the kitchen table preparing a lesson plan, right where she'd been when Louise left. She looked up at Louise. Her mom's reading glasses sat on the end of her nose. Louise thought it made her look old.

"How was Dr. Joyce's?" her mom said.

“It was fine.” Louise decided to spare any details.

“Good,” her mom said. She set her glasses on the table, squinted and pinched the bridge of her nose. “I’m going to start on dinner soon,” she said. “If you’re hungry.”

“Sounds good,” Louise said. She hugged her mom with one arm. Louise heard her open a book and scratch pen to paper as she left the kitchen.

In the living room, Louise’s dad was watching the Badgers game on mute. He held his latest distraction: crochet. Dr. Joyce had encouraged Louise’s parents to take up constructive hobbies. Louise leaned into her already existing passion for painting, and her mother had books, the nebula of her intellect to get lost in. But Dad had never liked anything. When he got home from contract plumbing, all he really wanted was Miller Genuine Draft and televised sports. He tried, though.

Louise’s dad held up to Louise what looked like half of a light blue scarf. “This color work for you?” he asked.

“Sure,” Louise said. “It looks nice.”

“Damn thing,” he said. “Takes forever.”

Louise watched him force his big red hands to negotiate the delicate needles and fabric. She kissed the bald top of his head.

The afternoon, Louise knew, would continue at this glacial pace, without any sudden movements, as if they were all walking by a vase that had shattered and been put back together with scotch tape. At night, in the dark, they’d all be excused from pretending.

In her room Louise sat before the easel. In the frame was a series of zigzagging lines and vaguely human shapes. It signified nothing. Louise set her phone down on the adjacent desk and

stared at it. Then she picked it up. Glowing on the screen was the draft of an unsent text. *Julia*, it read.

Louise wanted to tell her it was neither of their faults. And she wanted to believe that completely. It'd been random, anonymous cruelty. But Louise's psychic block was incredible. She felt the quicksand even picturing Julia standing before her in that moment.

Louise breathed; the room stilled. She took the brush and dabbed purple.

*

In high school, pre-abduction, Louise would sneak out and meet Julia at Kadish Park. More friends would sometimes come and they'd drink silo cans of Milwaukee's Best or a water bottle full of contraband vodka. She and Julia always bought Best and joked that it was Milwaukee's Worst. Their connoisseurship of Milwaukee piss beer seemed out of character for teenage girls. It impressed the cute but pea-brained boys they experimented with. Sometimes they would pass around a sloppily rolled joint of brick weed and watch the twinkling lights of the Holton Bridge and the few tall buildings downtown.

One such night during junior year, Louise's friends Toni and Jeff got busted having sex in Jeff's car parked on the street nearby. Louise and the rest of them got on their stomachs and watched from the shadowed grass as the cop accosted them. His flashlight beam fell on the Camry like a blade. Louise and her friends crawled away down the hill, high enough to think they were hiding. They walked along the obscured, graffiti-peppered bike path and hummed the Law & Order theme song. Julia and Louise split a pilfered menthol and laughed about it all the way home under the honey-glow of streetlights.

*

The Sunday before Julia's arrival, Louise painted an octopus with shoes on against a backdrop of house fires. She also caught up on her GED work and watched bad daytime TV. It had been another cautious and discreet day at home. Louise's mom graded essays on *Turn of the Screw*; her dad installed curtain rods and touched up the paint on a doorjamb with the Packers game on the radio as gauzy background noise. The day felt liminal and incidental, like Louise was brushing up against the inside of a snow globe.

On Monday, Louise woke up to the sound of her dad shoveling the driveway but stayed in bed and tried to force herself back to sleep. She made sure her phone was beyond arm's distance.

When she went to the kitchen to make coffee, she heard her phone ringing from her room. Louise spilled some of the coffee she poured. She walked to the bottom of the stairs, mug in hand, and looked up.

The phone stopped as she entered her room. Louise looked at the unfinished painting at the foot of the easel, leaned against a stack of other canvases. The man's blank outline came to mind; the doctors told her she might never remember his face; the cops told her that he got to himself before they could.

Louise braced and forced herself toward the phone. She didn't even feel her legs. On the screen were a missed call and a voicemail from her mom. The voicemail said she had conferences in the afternoon so she'd be later than usual.

Louise set her coffee down on the end table. She sat on the bed and watched the steam rise in ribbons. The phone was still tight in her hand when Julia texted a minute later.

Hey.

Louise's gut raveled. It was different knowing Julia was in town. She could be around any given corner, Louise thought. Why did that feel like a threat?

Louise started with the letter *J* and thoughtlessly typed for a long time. She held her breath. When she exhaled, she read it back. The message made little to no sense. Louise deleted every letter. She typed, *Hey*. She sent it.

Louise remembered when she and Julia first got cell phones. That very day they sat side by side on a bike rack and sent each other little green messages.

Julia texted back that she'd be at the coffee shop near Louise's parents' house in a little bit. She said she understood if Louise didn't want to come. Louise said she would before she had any idea of how she would make that happen.

Louise dressed in layers. She looked out her bedroom window and saw the banks of snow and settled ice. Wind tossed some fresh snow in powdery wisps. The layers, combined with the heat in the house, made her sweat. At the kitchen sink she poured the rest of her coffee down the drain. The drain gurgled as the coffee passed out of sight.

Louise stood in the space between the open mahogany door and the closed screen door and looked out at the bright white yard and the ashy slush in the street beyond it. The walkway to the front door was clear. Louise stood in her hat, scarf, gloves, hoodie and coat, wool socks and boots. She had her purse, phone, keys, and Velcro wallet. She noted these things in her head. Her pulse knocked impatiently.

Louise closed the front door and leaned against it. She took off her hat, scarf, gloves, hoodie and coat, and her boots. She threw her purse on the couch. She turned on the local news and cried quietly. Louise took out her phone and sent Julia a message. She pretended the two of them were sitting side by side. *Later*, Louise said. *I promise*. Julia responded: *Okay. All good*.

Louise changed the channel. Through a blur of tears, she saw Judge Judy take off her glasses and roll her eyes in disbelief at the wide-eyed plaintiff.

*

The night of her abduction, Louise met Julia at Kadish Park. They sat in their usual spot.

Things between them had become tenser than usual. It was this and that: a boy they both liked, some unanswered phone calls, the stress of graduation and who knows what next one and a half semesters away. Louise was, in truth, afraid that she was losing her friend to the future.

As the night went on the arguing got more intense. Julia complained that she felt smothered, like she couldn't move freely in Milwaukee anymore.

"Sorry to hold you back," Louise said.

"Did I mention you?" Julia said.

"No," Louise said. "You didn't."

Julia picked up a twig and snapped it into smaller and smaller pieces. "We're not married, Louise."

Louise pursed her lips and locked her jaw. The energy between their bodies was charged. Louise's skin prickled with heat. The city skyline looked meaningless to her.

"I got accepted to DePaul," Julia said. "I'm going."

Louise was stuck. She knew that someday she and Julia would be apart. But now that it was within sight, the ninety miles to Chicago may as well have been on the other side of the world. Louise didn't know how to fix what had come between them. There'd be time, she assured herself.

"Good," Louise said.

Louise remained on the hill for a long time after Julia left. She almost called her. She didn't. Before too long she heard the rumbling clatter of a rusty-sounding car behind her. She ignored it and counted the lights in the windows of a particularly ugly building in the distance. Louise wondered if there were actually people behind those windows. She wondered what the hell they were doing with their lives.

*

Louise sat on the couch with a cup of green tea. The Judge Judy reruns bled into Judge Joe Brown reruns, which bled into a soap opera. It was early afternoon.

Louise roiled with sadness and shame. Her layers of winter wear were in the spot she'd left them at by the front door.

Louise fortified herself. This is a chance, she thought. Louise knew she couldn't make everything right. She knew that the past was something she and Julia couldn't fix. She clenched her teeth, took out her phone and scrolled through her contacts. There used to be so many of them. Before she knew it, Louise was on the phone with Dr. Joyce's secretary.

"Dr. Joyce is at lunch right now," the secretary said, "but I can take a message and—"

"I need to talk to him now," Louise said.

"If you'd like to make an appointment I could..." the secretary mumbled. The sound of shuffled papers came through the receiving end.

A moment later Louise could hear Dr. Joyce's voice in the background.

"Tell him its Louise," Louise said.

Dr. Joyce was on the line a few seconds later. He was chewing something.

"Louise," he said, swallowing, "hello. Is everything okay? I don't have you scheduled for a couple of...let's see here."

“No,” Louise said, “it’s not about an appointment.” Louise concentrated on her breaths.

“I almost went to see Julia. But I couldn’t. But I need to.”

“Do you feel ready?” Dr. Joyce asked.

“Yes,” Louise said.

“Do you feel like you can see her?” he asked.

“Yes,” Louise said. “Well, I don’t know.”

Dr. Joyce sighed into the phone and explained that it was natural to feel nervous. “It’s been a long time, for both of you,” he said. “Whatever you choose to do, just be calm and safe.”

“I’m tired of this,” Louise said. “What happened?” She’d never stated all of this so plainly in Dr. Joyce’s office, typically choosing evasiveness. Louise realized she’d never had a conversation like this with Dr. Joyce over the phone.

“I know, Louise,” he said. “You’ve made tremendous progress.” He sipped something and cleared his throat. “You’re very brave.” He gasped. “Oh, shit. I mean, shoot. Shoot.”

“What happened?” Louise asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Dr. Joyce said. “Just a coffee spill.”

Louise laughed. “Please tell me it’s everywhere.”

Dr. Joyce chuckled nervously. “I’m afraid so.”

“Thanks, Dr. Joyce,” Louise said. “This helped.”

“Anytime, Louise,” he said. “What are you going to do?” He sounded rushed and flustered. She heard him crumpling napkins and shifting the phone from ear to ear.

“Breathe deeply,” Louise said.

“Good, that’s good,” Dr. Joyce said.

“I meant you,” Louise said.

“Oh,” Dr. Joyce said, “of course. Just a little spill.”

“Remind me to show you a painting I did of you sometime,” Louise said.

“Oh, okay. What...”

“You’re a basset hound,” she said. “In the painting, that is.”

“Interesting choice,” Dr. Joyce said. “I can’t wait to see it.”

“Thank you,” Louise said.

“You’re very welcome, Louise,” Dr. Joyce said. “Let me know how everything goes, or, uh, *if* it goes.”

“Talk soon,” Louise said. “Bye.”

Louise hung up and texted Julia. *Come over?*

Julia replied within seconds. She said she’d be there soon. Louise picked up her cup of tea and bobbed the teabag up and down. It was quiet enough to hear the little splashes against the sides of the mug.

Louise was at her easel when the doorbell rang. She didn’t move. It occurred to Louise that if she just sat still and silent Julia would walk away after a while. The doorbell rang again.

Louise’s knees wobbled as she walked out of her room and to the top of the stairs. Her eyes followed the stairs in a straight line to the front door. Louise determined to walk there, in a definitive line. She took each step gingerly. At the front door she looked through the peephole. She saw Julia’s back as she was walking away from the door. Julia’s figure got smaller and smaller through the convex curve. Louise threw open the mahogany door and pushed open the screen door. The rush of cold air was crisp and bracing.

“Julia,” Louise said.

Julia stopped at the end of the walkway and turned. Her hair was shorter than Louise had ever seen it. The root beer brown was faded into a burnt blonde near the bottom just below her ears. Julia walked slowly up the walkway. She was in a baggy green coat. She stopped at Louise and the open door.

Louise searched for words. "Hair," she blurted.

Julia touched her hair at the ends. "What do you think?"

Louise shook, but smiled and nodded. "Nice."

Julia tapped a bulge in one of her coat pockets. She pulled out a white paper bag.

"I brought donuts," Julia said.

Louise motioned Julia in. She closed the door behind them as Julia wiped her snowy boots on the doormat and removed them.

Louise and Julia stood at the foot of the stairs. Louise wasn't sure if she could move, or whether or not she was about to throw up, or cry, or shout. The person in front of her was different. Julia looked older. Louise couldn't place something thinned out and composed about her face. She noticed a small, barely noticeable hole on Julia's nose where a piercing used to be.

"What do you want to do?" Julia asked.

"I don't know," Louise said. "Sit down?"

Louise pumped on adrenaline as she made tea for the two of them. They sat at the kitchen table. Neither of them touched the donuts.

"You look good," Julia said. "I can't...yeah. You look great."

"Yeah," Louise said. "Thanks."

Julia nodded and sipped her tea. She traced a ring the mug left on the table with her pinky.

“Do you hate me?” Julia asked. “Still?”

“I don’t know,” Louise said.

“Then why am I here?”

“I don’t know,” Louise said. Louise picked a strand of hair from her sweater. “I don’t think I do hate you, to be clear.”

“Then why did this take so long?” Julia asked.

“Because it’s fucking complicated,” Louise said, more forceful than she meant to. She reeled herself in. “It’s just been weird.”

Julia took off her coat and played with the ends of her hair. “It’s all I’ve thought about,” she said. “Hard as I’ve tried not to.”

“Sure,” Louise said. “Same here.”

Louise envisioned getting up and walking away. She could walk away from Julia forever, theoretically. But Louise considered her oldest friend from across the kitchen table. She finally found a word for what she couldn’t place in Julia before: womanly. Time had done to Julia what it does to everyone, eventually: it had changed her, whether she liked it or not.

“Can I just ask you one thing?” Louise said.

“Of course.”

“What did you do that night?” Louise asked. “After we fought.”

“Straight home,” Julia said. She coughed. “My mom busted me sneaking back in. Then I was up all night. That’s about it.”

“Shit luck,” Louise said.

“Yeah,” Julia said. “Shit luck.”

“I blamed you at one point” Louise said. “I really did.”

Julia backed up in her chair, but she sustained dead eye contact. “Do you now?”

Louise raised her chin and reflected Julia’s poise. She shook her head.

“No,” Louise said. “That wouldn’t change anything.”

Julia’s lip trembled. “I’m so sorry, Louise.”

Louise beheld her best friend, different but the same as she ever was. She let the grudge go. It felt like waking up.

“Ditto,” Louise said. She shook her head and wiped her eyes. “I still might puke. Fair warning.”

“I’ve seen that before,” Julia said and laughed like she really needed it.

Louise missed her laugh. It was husky and squat. They used to joke that it was “boyish.”

“Please,” Louise said. “Talk.”

“Sure,” Julia said. “Okay.”

Julia started and didn’t stop for several minutes. She talked about her family, her car, her apartment in Chicago, the laundromat near her apartment, her weird neighbor who always wore a fanny pack. She talked about DePaul and what she was studying. Prelaw. She went on and on and when she was done Louise wished she would keep going. She wanted to know everything about Julia’s life; she wanted to know how it felt to have one.

Soon it was Louise’s turn to talk. She didn’t say much. She talked about her GED and her parents, mostly. She, like Julia had been, was careful to keep the details to the present. She didn’t mention any regrets, any fears.

Louise mentioned Dr. Joyce. She mentioned his toupee.

“I didn’t know men still did that,” Julia said.

“Wait,” Louise said. “Hold on.” She took out her phone and scrolled through the pictures to the one of Dr. Joyce the basset hound.

Julia howled with laughter. “Speaking of dogs,” she said. She scrolled through the pictures on her phone and showed one to Louise. It was a golden retriever sitting on an intricate Oriental rug wearing a pair of dark sunglasses. Julia said it was hers.

“His name’s Tom Jones,” she said.

“Perfect,” Louise said.

A couple of hours went by without Louise noticing. Eventually Julia had to go. She apologized profusely at the door.

“Louise,” she said. “I can’t even to begin to explain.”

Louise shook her head. “It’s enough,” she said. “For now.”

Julia put on her coat. “Another time, maybe.”

“Right,” Louise said.

As scared as Louise was of Julia coming, she was just as scared to let her leave again. But she did. Louise stood in the cold open doorway and waved. Julia waved back from the sidewalk.

“Enjoy the donuts!”

Louise couldn’t think of anything to say. She just kept waving goodbye.

And just like that Julia was gone. Louise was drained. She gripped a note where Julia had written down her address in Chicago. She didn’t know how long it would be, or if she would ever make it there. But it was there, a possibility.

Back in her room Louise felt a small rush of quicksand. The panic lingered and simmered. It squeezed. Louise fought it and sat in front of the easel. She took a blank canvas and traced in gold the outline of a dog.

Later that night, Louise snapped a picture of the finished painting with her phone and texted it to Julia: *what do you think?*

So Where's Quinn?

A couple of weeks before Christmas it became clear to me that my kid brother, Quinn, was in trouble again. Of course. Tis, after all, the fucking season. He tested love like a branch he was sure would never break, just taking the both of us farther and farther out with each incident, each subsequent crow-eating. That, more or less, had always been Quinn's problem: he didn't seem to realize those branches couldn't sustain both our weights forever.

In high school, they called me "the boring one." I was taller than all the girls my age, and I was awkward and less suited (and less inclined) to be social. Quinn shot up for the first time his senior year. Later on I almost left UWM during my last semester while in a phase of therapist-mandated disengagement from Quinn. But it wasn't just Quinn, honestly. My therapist called my stressors 'multi-faceted.' A real potpourri. I still mostly blamed Quinn.

And still. My little brother.

I was eating reheated Chinese food and grading freshman essays on *The Odyssey* in front of the TV when he called. We hadn't talked since Halloween. He'd missed Thanksgiving. *So where's Quinn* the family had asked, keeping up a performance. We answered: *Well...*

Quinn sounded hurried, breathless. "I mean, I want to get Mom something nice, you know?"

"Do you have a job?" I asked.

"What are you getting her?"

The electric teakettle, the one she'd mentioned in a way she thought was subtle, sat on my kitchen floor in its box. She'd described it as if it were a rare luxury. At that age they have everything, or are at least satisfied with what they have. I'll probably die at thirty, tripping over a stack of self-help books I didn't have time to read.

“So you don’t have a job, then?” I said.

“I’ve been, you know, pitching in with Sheets’ snow removal.”

He said ‘Sheets’ like anyone who was anyone would know who that was. Probably one of his seven or eight roommates from the Riverwest flop he’d been staying in last time I checked up on him over the summer. He was ‘just drinking beer’ at the time, again. I refused to go visit him there but drove by once after work and made sure: the front yard’s patches of dead grass, the overspill of cigarette butts, the fetid couch on the sagging porch, rumped burnouts obscured by smoke at the front door. Standard issue.

“Sarah,” he said, “ it’s legit. I have money.”

“Then buy Mom a gift and show up at the house on Christmas, Quinn.” I pushed some rice into a small pile in my bowl. “It would mean a lot to her.”

This he knew, but I said it anyway, even though it might hurt him. I wanted it to. My radiator clanged as if struck by a hammer.

“I will,” he said. “I’m totally going to. I just need to, like, get this gift thing right. Fuck.”

“Uh huh,” I said.

A student’s essay read: *I mean, Polyphemus isn’t such a villain in my opinion. Odysseus and his guys just barged in his house, right?* I clicked my red pen and wrote: *Use context. How does the villainy Polyphemus displays play counterpoint to Odysseus and his men specifically?*

“I have money,” Quinn said.

“You already said that.”

“But Sarah, will you do me a favor?”

“I have to get off soon.”

“Come with me to the mall to get her something? I just, I don’t know. Just come with me maybe? You want to?”

“Are you doing okay, Quinn?”

“It’s been since, like, summer since we hung out anyway.”

“Halloween,” I said. “You showed up at my party and nodded off in the tub with a Snickers in your hand. My Xanax were missing the next day.”

There’s a photo on my TV stand of the two of us dressed as Ninja Turtles, standing on the front steps next to jack-o-lanterns with crooked mouths. Mom always coordinated us; cartoons opened a lot of doors for her, costume-wise.

“Fuck,” Quinn said.

He was quiet for a moment. The radiator hissed and clanged. I guess I couldn’t help it: Quinn, the Michelangelo to my Donatello.

“So you’re really going to drag me to Bayshore Mall two weeks before Christmas?” I said.

“I’m clean, Sarah,” he said. “And I have money.”

I hadn’t asked if he was, in fact, clean. “Saturday,” I said. “I’ll pick you up.”

“Okay, Thanks. Thanks. Peace.”

“Yeah.”

I kind of just stared at nothing for a while after I hung up. I loved him. Little asshole.

I poured a glass of wine from a bottle some guy had left a week or so back. Anthony? Chris? Whatever, he never called me again. Left the Merlot, probably an accident. An idiot, like most of them. I spilled some on my pants when I sat back down on the couch.

The snow started to fall in abundant drapes around full night. A streetlight outside my window gleamed pale yellow through a swarm of flakes. I sipped the wine and took up another essay.

Odysseus frees his men and everything, but stays on Circe's island for another year anyway. What kind of hero does that? I clicked my red pen: *Was it Odysseus's choice to remain on Circe's island for that long? Use quotes to support your assertion.*

*

I explained the situation to my mom the following evening while she washed the dishes. Her hair was in a sloppy ponytail, more and more grey all the time.

"Well that's good," she said. "He needs to spend time with his sister." She talked as if we were discussing some third person of no relation to either of us.

"He didn't sound great," I said.

"The holidays are hard," she said.

"For him or us?" A small wreath peppered with holly sprigs was hung on the swinging kitchen door. "When was the last time you talked to him?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know, maybe a week ago?" she said. "He told me was getting a new job."

"The snow removal thing, yeah."

She hesitated. "Uh huh, yeah. I think that's what it was." She grabbed a pot she'd just scrubbed and scrubbed it again.

"Did he ask you for money?" I said.

"No, dear." She must've felt me looking at her. "No, Sarah. I don't anymore, you know that."

I hadn't come over to corner her, or make her feel like Quinn's accomplice. But I didn't exactly have to try to find the pinched nerves.

"So when are you going shopping with him?" she asked.

I leaned my back against the fridge covered with family pictures, closed my eyes and rubbed my temples. "Tomorrow."

"Sweetie," she said, "this will be good for him. And you."

"And me?"

When I opened my eyes, I saw she'd set two mugs on the counter. The strings from chamomile bags dangled over the sides.

"I can't stay, Mom."

She poured hot water into both cups and handed me one. "Just for a minute," she said.

I followed her to the living room in the front of the house. It was completely dark outside even though it was barely five o'clock. Winter nights fall so fast up here there's barely time to rush for lights to turn on. Mom only had a small table lamp on, aside from the silvery white lights on the fake Christmas tree. We sat across from each other in matching chairs that'd been around since I was in diapers.

"How are things with you?" she said. "Really."

"With me? Fine." Sure, fine.

"Good, good. How are the kids?"

She meant the high school freshmen in my class, but the words were vanilla soft. She very obviously longed to ask that with more meaning at some point. I had my doubts. Raising kids of my own seemed like a bit of an absurdity to me, and my disinclination to start a family

was something I had to explain to seemingly everyone. I could barely take care of myself properly.

“Obnoxious, but they’re doing well,” I said. “I like them. You get attached, you know?”

“Sure, I understand,” she said. “That’s a tough age. You both had some trouble adjusting.”

“Yeah, *both* of us,” I said. I had, though. A thousand hormonal train wrecks shuffling and bouncing off one another, testing what it felt like to hurt each other. It’s a wonder anyone makes it out. Being a teacher seemed like a necessity for me, to help them help themselves. But sometimes I wondered if I was just righting a personal wrong; help them help themselves help me. Help me.

“Kids just grow up too fast nowadays,” she said. She sipped her tea. “Too fast.”

“Some more than others,” I said. “But then again, some never do.”

“Sarah,” she said softly, like a plea. The lights from the tree at her side filled in the deep lines on her face. She took an ornament gently in her fingers: a little snowflake made of Q-tips with a small picture of a little girl in the middle.

“Remember when you made this?” she said.

I didn’t remember, not even vaguely. “Sure,” I said. “First grade. I remember.”

It was just easier this way: warm, cottony escapism. We could both just sit there with our tea and go back in time, to *those* days, a comparative halcyon era.

We talked for a bit longer before I said I needed to go. I didn’t have anywhere I needed to be.

At the door my mom told me to have a good time tomorrow. I told her I'd try. At my car I watched her retreat into the dimly lit little house I grew up in, on a quiet street of dimly lit little houses. It'd been hard for her, and she did it alone. I lost sight of that sometimes.

The neighbor's tacky rainbow lights made it look like a kaleidoscope had thrown up in the snow. I took a second to enjoy hating it before I drove away.

*

Quinn was late enough that I thought he was going to blow the whole thing off, even though it was his idea. But when he finally emerged from the teardown on Weil Street, the same one from the summer, he seemed cheerful, and cheerfully unaware that I'd been waiting on him. He chattered endlessly about this and that on the drive over, practically sizzling. How many driveways and sidewalks he'd shoveled, which roommates were dating people he couldn't stand, which roommates couldn't stand him, random people he encountered at the bar, how many driveways and sidewalks he'd shoveled again. He said he felt good and was doing well, which are really two different things.

The parking garage at the mall was packed. We circled up and up and up to the top floor of the behemoth before finally finding one empty spot in a row among rows of salt-streaked cars. When they'd torn down and expanded the mall into its current Disney-esque sprawl, they transformed a swath of Port Washington Road into parking palaces, banking on the traffic from nearby exits off of I-43. An indoor/outdoor shopping center in Southeastern Wisconsin defied basic logic, but centrally heated sidewalks completed a facelift that flew in the face of common sense. They didn't even call it a 'mall' anymore; it was 'Bayshore Town Center.' Christ. It made me feel old and out of touch. Where I'd grown up was gone. The humble, somewhat dingy mall of my teenage years, where my few girlfriends and I would commiserate and practice acting

disaffected, seemed like a dump in comparison. Quinn had gotten busted shoplifting from Sam Goody when he was only in middle school.

Quinn patted his pockets in a small panic as we waited for the elevator.

“Don’t tell me,” I said.

He pulled his wallet out of his coat pocket. “All right, cool. Found it.”

I scowled at him. He didn’t realize it for a few seconds.

“Just chill, Sarah,” Quinn said. “I’ve got it.” He laughed and called himself a dumbass.

His self-deprecation always came off too forced. He overcompensated.

When the elevator got to the bottom he almost spilled out of it. His energy bordered on manic. It was almost childlike. I followed him into a sea of red-faced families eating fried food in mid-stride. They carried bags and pushed strollers and stared into screens. Snowplows had piled the salt and pepper slush into hip-high banks along the heated promenade, which was bone dry. Christmas music chimed in fuzzy echoes from some secret, ungodly source. The day was bright and sunny and terrible.

I kept up with Quinn, the two of us weaving in and out of slower moving people.

“So where are we going?” I asked. “Please tell me you at least have some idea of what you want.”

“I was thinking, like, a sweater,” he said. “But a nice one, you know?”

“Groundbreaking.”

“Is that no good?” Quinn asked. “You’d tell me if that was a shitty thing to get her, right?”

Quinn waited on an answer. Selfish as he was, it seemed like he really wanted to blow Mom away. He was trying.

“That’s a good idea,” I said, brushing my hair from my face. “She’ll love it.”

We walked on through the crowd. He seemed to settle down before his pace picked up again in rapid, jerky steps. Before long he looked back at me to say something and almost plowed into an old woman using a walker. I pulled him out of the way and slowed him down.

“What is with you?” I said. I subtly tried to check his pupils when he looked at me with some flush and bewilderment, something I’d gotten good at.

“Nothing,” he said. I watched him decide that was too defensive. He eased up. “I mean, we want to get in and out of here, right? You were right, it’s crazy crowded here.”

“Right.” I acquiesced to let him think this was what hanging out was.

We plodded in the direction of the sweater-ready Boston Store. Quinn and the crowd pushed me near anxiety-attack levels of stress, so I resolved to find the quietest spot I could. When we got to Boston Store, I told him to do his thing and meet me back in half an hour or so. He rushed into the glowing maw of the store, wet boots squeaking on the polished floor. I found a nearby coffee shop and sipped a decaf coffee. I reread old emails on my phone and occupied myself with appearing busy.

After Quinn didn’t answer his phone when I called him in an hour, I considered the possibilities. Having an addict in the family makes people tactical thinkers: alternate exits, ulterior motives, strategies for containment, distraction. The fact that I left him on his own made me kick myself; the fact that I had to consider the fact that I’d left my twenty-three-year-old brother unattended fucking crushed me. I called again. Nothing.

I stood still among a swarm of passersby and stared into the store’s entrance. I would not go look for him.

As I leaned against my car, I considered he might just be gone. Why did I always wait for him? As if I didn't have my own menu of problems, things I couldn't fix about myself, or was just afraid to confront. That's another thing Quinn did. The more I focused on him the less I focused on myself, and the more I focused on him the more I indulged in the idea that I didn't have to fix my own problems, therefore letting myself off the hook. Does the martyr shit give me purpose? What does? Cars hummed past and circled for spaces, the same ones again and again.

Finally, Quinn shuffled out of the elevator, practically dragging his feet, carrying a white bag and a receipt. I shouted at him. He didn't even flinch. I wanted to lean into him and unload my baggage, but something in his mood stopped me. The manic quickness from before had slowed into a heavy weight. He looked pallid and vacant. I asked him if he was okay.

"Yeah," he said, not so much speaking the word as letting it dribble from his mouth.
"Sorry for taking so long. I, uh, yeah. I don't know. Sorry."

"Quinn," I said.

I grabbed his shoulder and checked his eyes. They looked empty.

"Let's just go," I said.

He apologized a couple more times on the car ride home. It sounded like a loop of a recording of his voice instead of his actual voice. When I stopped in front of his house I asked him if he was going to be okay, or if he want to come over to my place. He told me he was just tired and stepped out of the car. I almost reached after him. I should have, but I didn't. I also told myself that I was tired. Years ago I would've followed him, tried to force him to come with me. But that's meeting illogic with logic; therapists always said he needed to find bottom for himself. And yet I wanted to think of Quinn's addiction as something algebraic, something that could be

solved by manipulating balances of variables, when in reality it had no such lucidity. There was no clean, easy answer.

When I got home I saw the Boston Store bag in the backseat. Inside was a green sweater. It was just Mom's size.

*

I finished the rest of whoever-the-fuck's Merlot and opened a second bottle. The snow picked up throughout the afternoon and early evening, eventually building into a full-blown storm system. These types of snows seal you in and bury you under their howl, their density, and turn wherever, anywhere, into a cave. I welcomed this.

Quinn never quite left my mind even as I sank into the ink of the evening. I mostly hoped he was feeling okay, but there was something else there, too, something more ugly. In an equal but opposite way I hoped he felt bad. He'd put us through the shit, Mom and me, through the counseling and the arrests, the outpatient stints, the sleepless nights awaiting headlights through the dark windows. I hoped he knew it, and I hoped it hurt him to know the cross that we, that I, bore for him. Junk takes, so junkies take; it's pretty simple. Being collateral to Quinn for so long, whether second-fiddle-plain-and-tall at school, or corresponding damage control as an adult, got in me like a bitter tick. And then there's me.

But still.

I sipped the wine, spilled some. I hadn't even turned any lights on.

My phone rang and startled me, a number I didn't know. The voice on the other end, in an irritated slur, eventually told me that Quinn had split. And the fucker better not die without paying the rent first. I coiled.

"Where the fuck is Quinn?" I said. "Where did he go?"

“Wrung us dry and,” the voice slurred, “wrung us dry and split. Sayonara.”

“Where is he?” I said, almost snarling.

“Something about a river, the river park. River. *Take me to the river.* Riverside.”

Riverside Park. It was just across the Locust Street Bridge from his house.

“Riverside Park?” I said.

“Shit. Why not,” the voice said. “Hey, so you’re his sister right? You got some money to cover him or what?”

I hung up and was out the door, all instinct, all reflex. The thick snowstorm churned with purpose, everything inside and out of it taking on fuzzy definition at its whim. The headlights of my car barely made out the street’s details. I slid ahead with little traction.

Riverside Park sits next to adjoining Riverside High School, separated by the paved Oak Leaf Trail. I parked as close as I could on Oakland, which still forced me to walk across several inches of dense snow over a broad mulch playground and a practice football field. The adjacent jungle gym and slide were dressed in inches of flawless white.

I trudged across the field. My boots filled with snow. I hadn’t even tied them. Down a slope and across the Oak Leaf Trail I got to the mouth of the park. It was profoundly dark. It occurred to me that I’d never find him. What are the odds? I crossed the threshold into the woods. The nude broadleaf maples and ashes barricaded enough of the storm that the woods were silent, dead still. I called Quinn’s name even though I knew he wouldn’t hear it.

I pressed through the woods and found a path and walked what I thought was west, toward the river. The path curled around to a slope and back up, then to another slope. But when I saw the tracks leading from the entrance to the woods I knew they were mine. I’d been in this

park a hundred times but it now seemed completely strange, almost inter-dimensional. I shouted again. My voice shouted back.

I headed in the other direction, north toward the Locust Street Bridge and edged closer to the river at a slant. I came to a steep set of stairs that led down to the riverbank. The railing was crowned in white; beneath the fresh layer I felt ice. My fingers were red and raw, numbing. I slipped and slid down the last five steps. I sprang up at the bottom and kept north, as if pulled. The river was a fixed white sheet. It was frozen over, but not thick. Not thick enough.

I saw the bridge. A single streetlamp lit the steep grade that led down from the bridge to the bank. When I saw the footprints leading to the uneven trench from a body sliding in snow, I tracked them towards the river. What sat there at the edge of the bridge and the river looked like a pile of wet clothes.

Quinn was crouched with a lit cigarette cupped in his hand. At his side I spoke his name, even though I'd shouted it time and time again already. He'd gathered snow in downy layers like a thing that couldn't move. He looked up with excavated eyes and said my name without surprise. His lips were chapped scarlet.

He followed me when I walked past him and beneath the bridge. We both let ourselves collapse. The bank was rocky beneath the bridge, and to our backs was a slight incline up to a small plateau beneath the bridge where someone was likely sleeping.

We were pretzel-legged there for a silent minute. A car or two whispered by above. But that was it. There was nothing else.

"You left your sweater in my car," I said.

A tiny smile strained across his face as if he was learning how. "My bad."

I brushed some snow off his hair. "What the fuck, Quinn?"

“I know,” he whispered. “I almost...” he started before trailing off. “I can’t remember.”

“Are you going to be sick?”

He shook his head.

A bus moaned by overhead like a whale song. I was going to say something to him, but I let it be. I swallowed it. It would still be there tomorrow, and so would he. Anything beyond that seemed unreasonable to ask for.

“You’ll have to take all this wet shit off,” I said. “I don’t want my couch to stink.”

“Am I fucked, Sarah?” He looked like he really had no idea at all. “Am I fucked?”

I lied to him and said that I *knew* he wasn’t fucked, that it would all be okay. But I still didn’t know if it was the right thing to say. When the hell does anyone know the right thing to say? When the hell does anyone learn how to fix what hurts the most inside someone else, or inside themselves for that matter? It’s a pretty preposterous thing to long for, if you think about it.

If You Can't Say Anything Nice

Since their neighbor moved out of the upstairs half of their duplex two weeks before, David and his girlfriend, Sloane, felt they could sit on the porch at nights without running the risk of having to talk to anyone. Their landlord mentioned in passing, arms full of sponges and Lysol wipes and a bucket, that the neighbor had gone back to her folks in Madison to get clean, again. David and Sloane never learned her name.

From the porch, David smelled something burning. Sloane agreed that, yes, something was definitely on fire. A squirrel scurried by under the streetlight across from their porch dragging a piece of pizza. David pointed and turned to Sloane. She nodded.

“This is why my time is precious to me,” she said, flatly monotone. “There’s just so much beauty in the world, you know?”

David pulled his jacket around him and leaned on the railing to look down the street. He sniffed. The smell of fire made him nostalgic for young nights on dirty beaches with stolen Old Thompson straight from the liter chased with warm, syrupy cola. The neighbors across the street were drinking beer on their stoop. They looked at him, down the street, then back at him and shrugged. A swift, cold breeze blew into David’s face. It was May, but that didn’t mean anything.

Sloane leaned on the porch rail next to him and turned her head, too. She jerked her hand away at incidental contact with David’s. “What are we looking for?” she said.

“Wherever the smoke smell is coming from,” David said. “Probably someone’s fire pit down the street.”

“My money’s on a house fire,” Sloane said. She blew a plume of smoke toward the porch light and dropped her cigarette in the empty coffee tin at her feet. She walked back into the

house, leaving the door open. A minute later she returned with two beers and handed one to David. She sniffed toward the dark street before sitting back down on a lawn chair with a damaged leg, one of two salvaged from the curb. They were crappy and they were free.

“How many is that?” David said, motioning toward her beer.

Sloane cracked it. “For me or you?”

David turned back toward the street. “Just asking.”

“You’re the one with work in the morning.”

“I know.”

“So don’t worry about it.”

“I won’t.”

The smell of smoke got stronger. David felt like time had bent and compressed around the two of them. The last five months together lugged baggage equal to the previous five years together. Sloane, he thought, felt the same, and maybe even more so. Even their work schedules, incidentally, jibed with this, him serving brunch and lunch at the Niche Café, her bartending evening and graveyard shifts at The Sidebar. Sloane had begun to separate her laundry from his. They’d been bickering with increased frequency about everything: money, work, sex, intimacy, alcohol, communication, families, friends, Milwaukee, a million little things assembled into something monolithic. David, for one, didn’t have whatever it took for open war. He didn’t mention the laundry.

An argument started to gather steam in the upstairs apartment of the house next door. David listened intently but pretended not to notice, keeping his eyes on the floor as he sat in the chair across from Sloane. She lit a cigarette and rubbed smoke from her eye and took out her phone. The voices next door grew to shouts. When the window opened, the beer-drinkers across

the street watched as well, safe from view on the shadowy porch. David thought he heard one of them say, “Oh fuck,” and laugh.

“You want to see some shit?” a woman’s voice yelled from the next-door balcony. A picture in a frame hit the street. The broken glass tinkled like chimes. More shouts. Crash of dishes, a pair of boots thudded, and a series of collared shirts and colorful plaid boxers parachuted to the street. Sloane, back turned to the action, shifted just enough to see the street. David thumped his foot. He felt nervous, even scared, but wouldn’t say so, and definitely wouldn’t look away from whatever it was he was witnessing.

The woman’s voice: “Motherfucker!” A bicycle came tumbling down end over end. David watched Sloane jump reflexively when it hit the sidewalk and curled into a sad looking shape, yogic and devastated. The chain dangled from the sprocket like a necklace.

When the woman stormed out the front door, David and Sloane turned away. Keeping carefully side-eyed, David saw a small tabby cat sticking its head out of her tie-dye backpack. She walked in lunges to a Corolla on the opposite curb, got in, started it in heaving chugs and ripped down the street. David felt very relieved that he never had to get to know her.

Sloane raised her eyebrows at David. “And you keep saying we should get a TV.”

“Why is it funny?”

“I don’t think it is.” Sloane finished her beer and dented the can before putting it down.

“Why? You wondering what they were fighting about? Where she’s going? What they’ll do?”

David drained his beer and turned the can in his hand. “I mean, how could we know? But we should be, right? Curious?” He noticed that the porch across the street was now vacant.

“Yeah,” Sloane said, “me neither.” She walked toward the door and said she was going to bed.

Inside, David checked for something to eat in the fridge, which was near bare as usual. He'd sneak something during brunch tomorrow. He walked into the bedroom and turned off all the lights. Sloane changed into her sweats and crawled into bed. David kept his sweater on and removed his pants and crawled in, too. They each curled into balls on opposite sides with their backs to each other, at no risk of touching.

"Night," she said. It sounded to David less like she was wishing him a goodnight and more like a routine confirmation of what time of day it was.

"Yep. Night," David said.

Soft red and blue lights flashed in strobes outside the closed curtains of the bedroom some time later. The two of them slept okay.

*

The next morning a U-Haul truck was parked behind David's car. The day was bright and cloudless. The bike and clothes were gone, but a few leftover shards of glass glimmered in the sunlight.

A tall, handsome middle-aged man in a North Face fleece stepped out of the back of the truck carrying a cardboard box. David noticed that the door to the upstairs apartment was open. The man walked up to David with a smile that wrinkled subtle crow's feet near his eyes. He reminded David of a Kohl's mannequin.

"Hey, neighbor," the man said, too loud for the hour of the morning. He reached out one of his hands while holding the box with the other. He had a firm, confident grip. "Ben. Ben Simons. Really, really nice to meet you."

“David.” They pumped hands for what felt, to David, like too long. He could see an antique clock, a French press coffee pot, and some copper cookware in the box. There was also a book: *The Ultimate Guide to Trading Options*.

Ben jostled in place. “Gosh, you know, I just love this neighborhood,” he said. “I’ve been living down in the Third Ward in a converted loft for a while, but it just got too stuffy, ya know? This neighborhood, though. It’s *real*.”

“It’s something,” David said.

“And it’s a steal, too. Perfect time to downsize.”

David didn’t really know what that meant but knew it was a language he would never speak.

“Well, I’ve got to get going,” David said, “Ben, is it?”

“Simons.” Ben beamed and trapped David’s hand again. David tried his best to match Ben’s enthusiasm.

“Well, all right then,” Ben said. “Say, I’ve got some stuff overnighting here. You have a roommate or something?”

“Just my girlfriend,” David said. “Sloane.”

“Could you maybe set it outside my door if it comes to your place if I’m gone?” He faltered. “If it’s not too much trouble, of course. Sorry.”

“Sure. Not a problem.”

Ben gave him a thumbs-up. “Thanks, man.” He patted David on the back as he hopped up the porch steps, into the open door and upstairs.

David peeked into the moving truck on his way to his car: a leather loveseat, a chest of drawers, a coffee table that looked heavy as hell, more boxes, also heavy-as-hell-looking. David hoped like fuck that this guy had friends.

When David got to the Niche Café, he took his time clocking in. It was half an hour before brunch service, and the place was a blur of crisscrossing servers and scurrying cooks. David slowly tapped his digits on the screen. A thin server with raccoon eyes bumped him carrying silverware. The lights were on and the staff scattered like cockroaches with tattoos and alternative haircuts. Tammy, a server David got along with, and whom he'd actually met through Sloane, got his attention and waved him back toward the walk-in. When David met her there, she had two plastic cups of orange juice and, hopefully, something better than orange juice. She handed him one.

"Cheers," Tammy said, "to the new bartender who doesn't know the rules yet."

"May he be new forever," David said. They gulped the cups at steep angles. It burned better than orange juice.

"And cheers to it not snowing tonight," Tammy said.

"Are you fucking serious?"

"The hairpiece on TMJ4 seemed turned up about it," she said. "Climate change. Swish."

They chatted for a bit. Sloane pitched Tammy as an easy, low maintenance friend to David when they'd first met, and David grew to like her. Her combination of aloofness and tempered expectations aligned with David, as did her bad habits. But she was kind, disarmingly so for David. He cared about her, and what she thought of him, which was unusual.

"How's life?" Tammy asked.

“Living the dream,” David said. “Some guy, Ben, just moved in above us.”

“Cornered you coming out the door, huh?”

“Irritating. Do yuppies still exist? He seems like one. What are yuppies?”

“People not like you, evidently.” She laughed at him, but supportively. “Being judgey is fun, isn’t it?” she said. “And what do you care anyway?”

“Do I?” David asked. Neither of them answered.

“Everything good in paradise?” Tammy said. David assumed she was referring to Sloane.

“Yep. Paradise.”

Tammy clapped her hands together. “Mom and Dad,” she said. “Aw.”

“Paradise,” David said.

As the first customers were hanging coats over the backs of chairs David and Tammy walked toward the servers’ station. Tammy reminded David of her birthday party that night. “Sloane knows the details.” She walked toward a table leaving David at the servers’ station. Jangly acoustic guitars came through the speakers. David tossed his pen in the air.

Sloane texted a couple hours later: *how does this Land’s End catalogue model already know my name?*

David smirked. Sloane the smartass—when it was absent he missed it. He texted back: *Snitched on you.* David could see her indignant, wet-cat disapproval.

Fucker, she said.

*

The U-Haul was gone by the time David got home. Thick clouds obscured the formerly upbeat afternoon sun; the temperature was nose-diving. The beer cans on the porch were now stacked in a neat altar on their table. The windows upstairs, from what David could see, were

unlit. A group of neighborhood kids scurried by with candy from the corner store. Their excitement made David feel tired.

A USPS box on the couch sat on top of the afghan alongside a delinquent WE energies bill and a book of Pick N' Save coupons. The box was heavy in David's hands, as if something dense and expensive were inside it. The name on the tag: *Benjamin Simons*. The return address was on Ravenswood Circle, Wauwatosa. It sounded like one of those winding cul-de-sacs between Valley-abutting Story Hill and the flat sprawl of Brookfield west of I-41. The sender's name: *Delia Cynzki-Simons*.

David poked his head into the bedroom. The clothes Sloane had slept in were on the bed along with her laptop. Passing by the bathroom he heard the shower running. David stashed his shift meal in the fridge and grabbed one of the three remaining Hamm's. The kitchen was a mess of dishes and silverware, soaking pots and pans in the sink, discarded packets of tea and textural bits of crumb and dust. They'd had sex on the countertop the night they moved in, going on three green, elliptic summers ago.

David sipped his beer. He heard the pitter-patter of Sloane's bare feet before he saw her. He could sense her in his periphery like a dream not quite shaken off after waking up.

"How was the brunch game?" she asked.

"Gamed me," David said. "Tips were decent. Lots of mother-slash-son-or-daughter two tops."

"Graduation season or some shit," Sloane said.

Sloane was still in her towel. Her blonde hair looked deeper, a creamier khaki color when it was wet. It always did. David picked out three small beads of water near a freckle on her shoulder from a yard's distance.

“What are you looking at?” she said.

“I don’t know,” David said. “Just looking.”

She raised an eyebrow and pursed her lips. If David didn’t know her better he would’ve thought she was flirting. She walked away toward the bedroom. David almost called after her but instead just burped when she was out of the room.

Sloane yelled something from the bedroom that David couldn’t hear. From the doorway he saw she was in white cotton underpants and digging for a bra in a dresser drawer.

“Yeah?” David said.

“I asked if you saw that package for Ben on the couch,” Sloane said. “Is he home?”

“Oh,” David said. “I don’t know. I didn’t see him.”

“He asked me to make sure he got it, “ she said. “Said he told you, too. Said a great deal actually. I’d describe him as ‘talkative.’”

“He’s curious,” David said. “He came here from a converted warehouse loft in the Third Ward.”

“He told me that, too. I asked him if he just wanted to trade places instead.”

“How’d he respond to that?”

Sloane gave David a mocking, over-the-top smile and a thumbs-up.

“Maybe he’s just an ordinary person,” David said. “I don’t know.”

“Too many of him around,” Sloane said, “and we’ll get priced right out. But yeah, nice enough or whatever.”

Even though David felt he’d sized Ben up, David was still intrigued by him. Something about Ben’s smile was too big, the thumbs-up too rehearsed, like he’d fallen from a different

planet and was just parroting human shit he'd seen on sitcoms. It'd be easier if he were nothing else, just a rich guy moonlighting for kicks in what, to him, were the teardowns west of Holton.

Sloane started the hairdryer while squinting at herself in the mirror.

"I'll take that upstairs I guess," David said. He walked away before he could tell if she'd heard him or not.

The downstairs door to Ben's place was unlocked. An impulse David didn't understand took him up the stairs. David leaned the package against the door. He stared at the doorknob before putting his hand on it. A gentle twist revealed the door was unlocked and one gentle push swung it open. David just had to see, and he didn't care to rationalize why he needed to see inside Ben's apartment. The impulse was strange and anxious. He picked up the package and walked in.

The loveseat was arranged around the coffee table along with a single folding chair. Two glass French doors that were probably fancy once were open into a bedroom. The mattress inside it was bare. The dresser had the antique clock and some pictures on it. One of the pictures was of a young woman, not much older than high-school age, bent over laughing in an ankle deep pile of mauve and rust colored leaves. Other than that it was just boxes and boxes and nothing more. The whole place was a work in progress, not unlike the home he and Sloane had once stepped into, christened with spontaneous, unrestrained sex and big plans. David stood there in perfect silence, afraid that if he moved his trespassing would become real.

"This isn't quite what I pictured," Sloane said. David's heart leapt and froze.

"Christ," he said, "I didn't hear you."

"Clearly."

“The door was unlocked and I...I don’t know.”

“Sure,” she said. “I know.”

She paced around the apartment, soft heel-toe, looking around. She seemed to David like she was appraising the place for a move with an inquisitive attention to detail. The quiet became oppressive.

Sloane walked over and put her hands on the package David was holding.

“Whatever it is,” she said, “it’s heavy.”

She looked up at David, something having charged behind her eyes. Sloane took the box from David’s hands and set it on the floor. She put her arms around David’s neck and brought her flushed face close to his. David put his hands on her hips, carefully. They pulled each other closer. David felt the metal of their belt buckles forced together.

“Sloane,” David said.

Whatever mischief was in Sloane’s expression left. “What are we doing?” she said.

David didn’t have an answer for that. The antique clock ticked and ticked.

“We need to get out of here,” she said.

Sloane didn’t move and neither did David; they stayed there, close enough to feel each other breathing, in the blank, quiet room meant for someone else’s fresh start.

A slammed car door on the street snapped both their heads toward the door. David and Sloane scurried out on tiptoes, and David turned the knob while he shushed the door closed, as if trying not to wake someone sleeping. As he set the package down and they started walking away, Ben rounded the landing on the stairs.

“Oh,” Ben said, “hey, gang. What’s up?” The bags under Ben’s eyes were pronounced under the buzzing 30-watt bulb. The crinkles next to his eyes were routes on a map of deep lines

and creases only now visible in the artificial light. David recognized the tag on his shirt as a visitor's pass from Columbia St. Mary's. Ben caught David looking at it.

"Ah, yeah," Ben said, "my daughter. She's getting some tests done and..." he trailed off. He locked back into that default smile and crossed his fingers. "We're sure she's fine. Precaution and all that."

"We?" Sloane asked. "Sorry, I just didn't know you had someone moving in with you."

He chuckled, but it came stumbling out, a thing practiced but not yet perfected. "No, no, nothing like that. My ex-wife. I think that's from her, yeah?" He pointed to the heavy package at the foot of the door.

"Sorry," David stuttered, "it came to our apartment, and we were just leaving it here. Hope that's okay."

"It got here earlier," Sloane added. "I forgot to bring it up. That's my bad."

"Of course," Ben said, "that's okay. Thank you, really, that's a big help."

The three of them stood there, face to face to face in the narrow hallway. David couldn't tell if they all were acting, or if whatever needed to be concealed was in the open air anyway. It was unclear who knew what and why it mattered, or who knew whom and why that mattered. It occurred to David all of a sudden that he didn't really give a shit what was in the box.

David glanced at Sloane, who was doing everything she could not to meet anyone's eyes before she looked up at him. "Tammy's party then?" she said.

"Oh, yeah." David hoped he hadn't sounded too excited. He coughed. "Right."

"Party, awesome." Ben bobbed in approval. David mirrored him as he and Sloane squeezed by.

"Have fun, gang," Ben said, "and thanks so, so much again."

“You, too,” Sloane said. “Oops. I mean, yeah, will do.”

David turned back to Ben from the landing of the stairs before he knew what he was going to say, and that he had to say it.

“Ben,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“If you ever need anything,” David said, “just, I don’t know, holler if you need anything? Don’t be a stranger.”

The thumbs-up. “Right on. You, too.” He opened the door to his apartment and disappeared behind it.

Outside, the evening had purpled and braced into a tighter, colder interlude. The air was thin. A few May snowflakes, no bigger than specks of confetti, had started to fall.

“No shit,” David said.

Sloane stretched out her hand and caught some of the falling snow.

“My thoughts exactly,” she said.

Inside the apartment David and Sloane stepped into the bedroom to grab their warm clothes from the only closet they had. He handed Sloane a navy thermal, a UWM hoodie and her thrift store windbreaker. David grabbed a flannel and a canvas Carhartt. The two of them stood on their respective sides of the bed and added layer after layer. When they’d adjusted and settled on what they were going out in, they switched off the bedroom light.

In the front room Sloane stared into her phone and said Tammy texted her. They were all at the bar. Sloane’s face reflected the pale blue light from the screen. David fiddled with the curtains and rearranged things that didn’t need rearranging before he and Sloane finally faced

each other. They were almost touching middles. Sounds of Ben moving around came through the ceiling from upstairs.

“Are we going to talk about what happened?” Sloane asked.

“We can’t be sure he knows we went in,” David said.

“I meant with us,” Sloane said.

David considered what it was that happened to them. A million little things.

“Do you want to?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Not now. Okay?”

“Sure. Okay.”

Some furniture shifted and groaned across the floor upstairs. Music started to play. The footsteps through the ceiling paced back and forth.

“What do you think he’s doing up there?” Sloane asked.

David hugged Sloane. She leaned into his chest and asked again. David said he might be dancing. How do you talk about so many things at the same time? Begin at the beginning?

“Let’s get going,” Sloane said. “We’re already late.”

David and Sloane shivered through Kilbourn Park. The falling snow didn’t amount to anything on the ground. They bumped each other now and then, and David tried to linger in it. Eventually the warm neon afterglow of the bar bloomed through the dark. A half block away, the noise inside the bar becoming clearer, David and Sloane took a hand each from their pockets and joined them. They walked in and kept their layers on. Everyone was happy to see the two of them. When Tammy asked what they’d been up to, they said *nothing* in almost perfect unison.

The Cleaning Lady

The first time Clara watched the Morrisons have sex was an accident.

It happened in May. Milwaukee was browngreen and thick with bugs and dripping from the spring thaw. Clara had worked as hired cleaning help for the Morrisons for the past year, one of a handful of clients. She arrived at their big, antique Tudor house on Lake Drive early. Just a little. They were supposed to be out on their boat like every Monday morning, a sports cruiser they named “Now You Sea Me.” The Morrisons were *that* kind of rich. Clara just wanted to get out of the house, clean the Morrison’s, and get home before Danny. She relished the opportunity for even just a few, uncomplicated, autonomous moments—to be Clara, in control, unmonitored.

That first Monday was sunny and quiet. Clara pulled up in front of the long, green lawn of the Morrisons’ at 9:00 AM. Clara ignored a text from Danny and read an email from another client on Wyoming Place. Yet Danny was on her mind anyway, or hanging over it, rather, something cumulus and constant. He was in the mood for performance this morning. Clara knew he made sure to wake up before her and make as much minor noise as possible. He stressed the click and clang of razors and toothbrushes in the bathroom, setting the coffee pot, the commotion of pans for his breakfast. He poured food into Louie’s bowl loud enough to know she would hear it. Didn’t exactly *slam* the cabinets, which was too obvious—just didn’t close them with care. A veritable clinic in domestic passive aggression. Body language so cold and disaffected it was almost lethal. Clara missed when they used to just fight.

At the front door, the security camera under the tan awning was poised at its usual angle. Clara swore she could always feel its lens tighten into focus on her.

The door was unlocked. This was unusual. Clara always had to unlock the heavy deadbolt assailed by the droning beep of the ADT security system and rush to the keypad to ward off police and fire and ambulance. This time the door almost opened itself, slid ajar without a creak.

“Hello?” Clara said. Her voice echoed in the broad, vaulted ceiling of the foyer, the only answer she got.

“Is anybody home?” she said a little louder. Echo.

The kitchen seemed unused; no cold half pot of coffee, no pans or plates, no tip on the counter, just a bouquet of red roses in a vase on the table, snipped from the garden thorns and all. Everything was, otherwise, dry and clean. Clara walked back to the foyer, to the foot of the stairs. She called up the stairs, entertaining the idea that the Morrisons might be sleeping in.

After taking the first few steps normally, Clara slowed halfway up the stairs, the sound becoming a little clearer with each step. Bed sheet motion, the squeak of bedsprings, the heave of moans in call and response, near shouts. Even closer yet and Clara could hear the heavy, amplified breathing of sex with nothing to hide. Todd and Elsa Morrison.

Clara crept down the long hallway to the master bedroom without thought. She knew she should say something, or just leave, or go downstairs and start cleaning there, or anything. She should walk away from their door, which was open, just a crack. Clara reached the door and rested her hand gently on its face. Her heart thumped in its rib cage. She leaned in. She watched.

Todd Morrison’s back was to her, positioned over his wife of fifteen years. Clara felt herself passing a threshold. Her hands were wet and cold. She was partly disgusted, and ashamed, but the exhilaration and intrigue to watch someone, someone else, in their most private moment, swelled over her. Clara wondered what was wrong with her. But she knew that she

would no more look away than not take another breath. They were alone, and this was a secret. Theirs. Now hers.

The moment of truth arrived. Todd squeezed his wife's neck. Elsa gasped and choked. Moans became groans. Once finished, he fell into her. Then the crying began. He cried and cried, cried into her shoulder as if frightened. Clara never imagined him so vulnerable. Todd Morrison, the hedge funds manager: sports cruiser yacht, European suits measured in thread counts, trips to Caribbean islands named after Anglo saints. "When we have to get away from it all," he'd once told Clara. Now, here he was.

They panted and whispered to each other before Todd sniffled and shifted a half turn, almost facing the door. Clara stepped back out of sight. She noiselessly turned and paced down the hallway, back down the long stairs and straight out the front door, closing it softly. Birds tittered and chirped in the bordering maple trees.

In her car, Clara rubbed her clammy, shaking hands over her face. Clara caught one little hair on her chin between her thumb and forefinger, plucked it, and winced before she drove off down the street, flanked by looming mansions with open windows.

After driving without direction for fifteen minutes, Clara returned to the Morrison's house. When she parked the front door was open, and the Morrisons were standing in the doorway. They waved and smiled.

"Good morning!" Elsa said cheerily as Clara walked up.

"Morning," Clara said. She felt as if she had never made eye contact with either of them before.

Todd smiled and looked up at the clear blue sky. He whistled. "Can't ask for a better day than this, right?" he said. "Dynamite."

Clara forced a laugh she hoped sounded casual and innocent. “I guess not.”

Elsa looked to Todd and wrinkled up her nose into a cute button, offset by modest crinkles.

“Well,” Elsa said, “we’re off to the marina then. Everything’s where it normally is.”

“Right,” Clara said. “Have a nice day.”

“Off we go!” Todd said. His excitement was childlike. He put his arm around his wife’s waist as they strolled around the house to the garage.

Clara entered the house and watched their Lexus pull out and away. She closed the door and stood in the empty foyer. The house was dead silent.

Clara vigorously cleaned the kitchen, bathrooms, bedrooms, living and dining room, and basement. When she was done she cleaned them again. She broke a sweat. It took all day.

*

When Clara got home that evening, Danny’s car was parked in front of their small split double like a dare. He was home from work at the brewery early.

Louie, their Irish terrier, began barking immediately as Clara turned the doorknob. This was his daily ritual. He ran up to her and jumped and put his front paws on her thighs. He panted and wagged. He hopped down and ran to Danny in the kitchen, back to Clara and back to him and back again between them, darting his eyes to her, to him. It was as if he were making an introduction. This is you, this is him.

Clara tossed her purse on the couch and slipped off her shoes. She told Louie to shut up.

“That’s enough, Louie,” Danny said.

Clara could hear his voice but could not see him fully, just a sliver of his back from behind the fridge. Louie circled the rug twice and sat down. Clara slipped into the bedroom to

change out of her work clothes. She heard Danny ask her how her day was from the kitchen. She called back that it was fine.

Clara got her hoodie halfway on before she noticed Danny in the doorway, drying a plate with a hand towel. He had a pronounced, boney jaw line peppered with a light two-day stubble. His nose had a bump from where he'd broken it playing pond hockey as a child. He had very thin eyebrows. Clara couldn't help but fix her attention on a small pimple beginning to come to form on the side of his neck.

"How are the Morrisons?" he asked.

"I don't know," Clara said. "They're always gone on Mondays." She ran a brush through her hair. "Fine I assume."

"I'd be fine too if I could spend Monday mornings at McKinley with a sports yacht," he said. "Must be fucking easy," he added as he walked away. She heard the dish hit the rack with more force than necessary.

"They're not evil," Clara said, hoping he might not hear her. "Just out of touch, maybe."

"Huh?" Danny called. He walked back to the doorway. "I couldn't hear you," he said. "The sink was running."

Clara could tell he was trying to control himself. The fact that she knew he felt like a hero for doing so was the worst part.

"They're not bad people," she said.

"How's that?" Danny asked. "Doesn't he manage one of those funds downtown where they fuck investors out of their money?"

"You don't know how all that works," Clara said. "Neither do I," she corrected before he could.

Danny narrowed his eyes. “Why are you defending them all of a sudden?” he said. “You complain about them all the time.”

“I work for them,” Clara said. “They annoy me sometimes. There’s a difference.” Clara fixed her hair into a messy bun. “You don’t even know them.”

“Do you?” Danny asked.

Clara pulled the sleeves of her hoodie over her hands and folded her arms. “No,” she said. “I guess I don’t.”

Danny started to walk away before Clara spoke again.

“But you’ve never even *seen* them,” she said.

She heard him stop. He came back to the doorway.

“They’re full of shit, Clara,” he said. “They’d never so much as talk to people like us if we didn’t work for them.”

Danny eased up, as if he was satisfied with his point and now he just wanted the snipping to be over. This meant, of course, that he had nothing left to say on the matter.

“I’ll get started on dinner,” Danny said.

Clara emptied her phone and wallet and keys from her purse onto the TV tray she and Danny used as a bedside table. She glanced out the window next to the bed and saw their neighbor, an older woman with frizzy gray hair, on her tiny concrete patio sitting beneath the patio light. She had a thin tube attached to an oxygen tank inserted in her nose. Clara watched the old woman start talking to herself. The old woman shook her head as if she were breaking bad news to someone, tapped her finger on the table as she illustrated points. Clara watched her talk and talk. Clara felt a small pinch of guilt. She knew the old woman lived alone, spent her days alone, save for a middle aged son who came once every week or so with bags of groceries and

left with hampers of laundry. This lonely moment wasn't for Clara's eyes. The Morrisons weren't for her eyes either. But she had to watch, and she did, intently.

Clara heard Danny coming toward the bedroom. She hurried to the dresser and opened the top drawer, pretending to be looking for something.

"Hey," Danny said, walking into the bedroom. He held out a Milwaukee Brewing Company pint glass half full of red wine. Clara took it and thanked him.

"You coming yet?" Danny said.

"What?" Clara said. "Where?"

"Dinner's almost ready," Danny said. "What's keeping you?"

"In a second," Clara said. She dug back into the open drawer full of tank tops and long sleeve shirts, odds and ends. "I'm looking for something else to wear."

"What's the difference?" Danny said.

"Exactly," Clara snapped. "What's the difference?" Clara glanced back toward the window before continuing to dig through the drawer. "Can you just give me a second?"

Danny stood there completely still. Clara could feel his eyes on her.

There was a hint of smoke from the kitchen before fire alarm beeped. Danny let it continue a moment before leaving the bedroom. Clara heard him curse and tell Louie to get out of the kitchen.

Clara closed the drawer. Out the window the old woman was gone. The table and chairs sat empty, casting shadows under the weak patio bulb. Clara sipped her wine and kept watching. Louie appeared at her feet. Clara scratched his head and waited to see if her neighbor would reappear. Louie panted and wagged.

*

Three or four days went by without incident. Danny became busier at work and only wanted to sit in front of the TV and scroll through featureless content on his phone until he fell asleep. Any pressure or interrogation from him was half-hearted; it was little more than questioning her schedule details, or here and there a sour look across the trench of a room that lingered a little too long, his cheeks sucked toward his tightened mouth. Each day Clara got home from work, and he was there. The front room light was always on, open like an eye.

Clara's watching was the only real change. It increased and intensified. She cleaned other houses, as usual, the same clients as always, but with a new kind of attention. At the Stapleton's she looked through every photo in an album; at the Gomez's she ate a spare pistachio muffin while searching what the family had saved in their DVR; and at the Oakley's, whose condo was on the top floor of a complex overlooking the river where the A.F. Gallun tannery once was, she watched out the window as the Edelweiss party boat glided by. It was a wedding party, family and friends in tuxedos and cocktail dresses drinking wine out of stemware. Clara watched the bride and groom squish together to take a selfie, allowing several attempts to adjust the angles. She nodded in agreement when the newlyweds settled on the more flattering light from the starboard side.

Clara studied people on the street more intently. She wanted to see their blemishes and mistakes and asymmetry. Their potential for secrets consumed her. On Monday she watched a teenage girl singing in her car at a traffic light, holding a fake microphone. On Wednesday a man picked his nose in the corner of a Starbucks. Clara's days were full of strangers.

On Friday she stopped at Walgreen's for toothpaste and shaving cream. In the parking lot, she sat in her car and watched a mother with three kids walk to an adjacent car carrying three heavy bags. When one of her bags broke the kids laughed and ran around the minivan as she

knelt over and picked up each item, red faced, pleading with her children. Then, seemingly by chance, the woman made direct, unflinching eye contact with Clara. It was only a split second, but the exposure was excruciating. Clara quickly started her car and drove away. In the rear view mirror, Clara watched the woman watch her drive away as the woman's children ran around her in wild circles.

Elsa Morrison called Clara that Sunday. Danny flipped channels while she sat on the other side of the couch blankly leafing through a magazine. When her phone rang, Clara glanced at Danny and got up to leave the room. When she got to the kitchen, she turned and saw him staring at her before fixing his attention back on the TV.

Elsa said that she and Todd had had a little get together the night before and the house was "an awful mess." She wondered if it wouldn't be terribly inconvenient if Clara could come the next day to clean even though she wasn't due for another week.

Clara could not help but think of the Elsa and Todd Morrison she had witnessed previously: bodies contorted, muscles shivering, Elsa's gasps, Todd's tears. Clara observed Danny from the kitchen. He appeared vacant, but she knew he was listening to her half of the conversation. Clara felt the tension between them like a tight wire. It begged to be cut.

Elsa asked if Clara was still there.

"Yes," Clara said. "Sorry."

"So you can come tomorrow?" Elsa said. "That's no trouble?"

Clara watched Danny roll his head around to crack his neck. She told Elsa it was no trouble at all.

Back in front of the TV, Clara took her place on the couch opposite Danny. He continued to flip channels indiscriminately. Clara put her phone on the armrest; moisture from her hand had condensed on its black exterior.

When Clara climbed onto Danny's lap and straddled him, he furrowed his brow like he was trying to crunch the calculus of something so sudden and capricious. Clara had no thoughts. She kissed him breathlessly and he, eventually, reciprocated.

Louie jumped up on the couch next to them and cocked his head. Clara caught his ponderous stare out the corner of her eye as she removed her tank top. She put Danny's hands on her hips.

"What happened?" Danny said.

Clara didn't answer. As things escalated she grabbed Danny's hand and put it on her throat. He squeezed weakly at first; she demanded he squeeze harder. She held his wrist and tried to coax him. Clara squeezed with abandon.

"Clara!" Danny said sternly. Clara returned as if from a fugue and regarded Danny's face. His mouth was open, his eyes incredulous. The two of them were winded and sticky.

"Sorry," Clara said. "I just thought..."

"No," Danny said. "It's, it's fine. It was just..."

Neither of them finished their sentences. Clara remained straddled on top of Danny. The position suddenly felt like the least sexual thing she'd ever done. Clara said she was sorry. Danny asked her why she apologized.

In their bedroom Clara cooled off in front of a box fan and drank from a glass of water on the TV stand next to the bed. Out the window, Clara looked at the old woman's empty patio.

Danny came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. He rested his chin on her shoulder.

“What are you looking at?” he asked.

*

The next morning it was raining when Clara arrived at the Morrison’s. It was almost June, and the first thunderstorms of summer were starting to trundle in with their humidity and quarreling pressure systems. Clara ran up to the front door, unlocked it, and hurried into the house. She disabled the alarm that sounded as it always did. The house, to Clara’s surprise, was more or less perfectly clean, as if no one had been in it since she’d left.

From the foyer, Clara heard noise upstairs. It was the same as before, only louder. She climbed the stairs.

The hallway seemed so long, as if she was going somewhere very distant, and at the end she would be somewhere she’d never been. Clara, of course, knew where she was going. The door was open just enough. Her heart raced. She leaned.

Elsa was on top this time. Todd was handcuffed to the broad oak headboard, arching and twisting his back. When Elsa reeled back and slapped him across the face, Clara jumped at the whip-crack sound as much as the sight. It was loud, almost pealing. She slapped again, harder this time. Todd grunted. Elsa slapped him again. When she closed her fist and swung, the sound was a quieter, duller thud. She swung again. He groaned and twisted away. Elsa started laughing. Todd revved and groaned before laughing, too. Elsa swung again. They laughed. Elsa swung again.

Clara tripped and almost fell as she scurried down the hallway. Her legs faltered as she missed the bottom stair. Clara had wanted to watch, wanted to see. Now she'd seen. Todd and Elsa Morrison.

Clara stood in their high-ceilinged kitchen and caught her breath. To distract herself, she reread a text from Danny asking her to pick up a couple of things from the grocery store on her way home. Clara responded that she would. She sent another text: *is that it? Is there anything else?*

"Clara!" Elsa Morrison stood beneath the vaulted kitchen entryway in a silk robe. She grinned. "I didn't hear you come in," she said.

Clara froze. "Yeah," she said. "Sorry. I, I just got here."

"Of course," Elsa said. Elsa walked into the kitchen and grabbed a glass from next to the sink. She opened the fridge and filled her glass from the Brita pitcher. She chugged the water in gulps and set the empty glass and the pitcher down on the counter.

"We were worried that the rain was going to keep us in the house all day," Elsa said. "Seems clearer now, though."

Clara wanted to ignore the truth. She wondered, though, if there was some part of her that knew all along. Elsa strode toward her and put a hand on Clara's shoulder. Her reddened knuckles looked thin and sore.

"Thank you, Clara," Elsa said. "For *all* your help."

Clara didn't meet Elsa's eyes. "Does he know?" she asked.

Elsa smirked coquettishly. "Does he know what, dear?"

It dawned on Clara that there were a lot of things she didn't know. She wondered if she herself had ever really had her guard down. What might she not know about the people closest to

her? And, then again, maybe there were things she didn't want to know, discoveries that couldn't be unmade.

Clara straightened up and looked Elsa in the face. Clara had never noticed how bright and icy blue her eyes were.

"You know," Elsa said, "If you ever want to..." Elsa tilted her head in the direction of the stairs. "Todd and I would entertain that. No one would ever know." She seemed amused.

"I think I'll get started with the living room today," Clara said.

"Great," Elsa said. "That'll be just great." She grabbed a second glass from the cupboard, set it next to the other one on the counter, and filled both.

Elsa started to walk away but stopped short as if just remembering something.

"Oh," Elsa said, "and I already changed the filter in the vacuum cleaner. So you don't have to worry about that either." Then she rounded the corner, carrying a glass of water in each hand. Clara heard the echoes of a tune Elsa hummed on her way up the stairs. It was lovely.

Clara put the dripping Brita pitcher back into the fridge. Danny texted back that they didn't need anything else from the store, and that he'd see her when she got home.

The shower upstairs turned on and Clara listened to the water rush through the pipes somewhere in the guts of the house. She gathered her supplies and began to clean. The Morrison's looked very nice when she was done.

Something at the End of the Day

I held the lit match to the burner with one hand and turned the dial on the stove with the other. The stove clicked and clicked, a staccato *tsk-tsk-tsk* of disapproval. I turned the burner off and tried again: no fire. The match got smaller. The flame on its end grew and waved in a lopsided triangle. Jill, my girlfriend, would be home from Alderman Kaminski's fundraiser any minute. Dinner was mine tonight. It was the least I could try to do, having let the day slip away in another wash of apathy. They (whoever they are) say cynics usually hate cynics before they become one, or something.

But fuck that, not for me. Not for Jill. I swung for a minor victory, any small thing that I thought I could fix. I gritted my teeth and tried another burner. I lit another match.

Soon I heard the front door open. A wash of frigid air came into the kitchen.

"Cal?" Jill said.

"In here."

Jill walked into the kitchen and pointed to the stove. "Still out," she said, definitively not a question. She unraveled her heavy scarf from her neck. She was in her tailored navy blazer and white cotton oxford, boots and the least salt stained of her jeans. Her face was red and tired, her green eyes offset by small, bruise-colored bags. The water heater coughed from its closet in the adjacent hallway.

"How was saving the world?" I said. "Or at least our happy little corner of it."

She rolled her eyes and hit me lightly on the shoulder. "Easier than cooking dinner, apparently." She hung her purse over a chair and took off her blazer. The outfit was a necessary uniform for networking at her boss's fundraisers. She interned at city hall for Milwaukee's two-term Third District Alderman, a job she described as being 'an aide to a legislative aide.' Getting

coffee, maintaining social media facades, and sneaking home break-room bagels in her purse whenever she could. The gig paid nothing, naturally. But, I mean, *work experience*, right? She worked her ass off anyway despite the tall odds, one of her best qualities. She refused to disengage. We'd met as political science majors in college four years earlier; now I bartended four nights a week. Jill walked dogs and picked up shifts serving at a Japanese restaurant. She kept after politics, though, even more so since November's cosmic farce. It energized her. I supported her but kept my doubts, and my ego, in tact. Called it pragmatism.

I let go of the dial on the stove. Jill smiled and shrugged. I kissed her on the cheek and asked her whom she met with tonight.

"Run of the mill," she said. "A lot of his East Side constituents were there, some Sixth District folks."

"The entire Algonquin round table."

"Supporters," she corrected. "Yeah."

"Let me guess," I started to say, grabbing yet another match. For some time now, the Third District, once a Polish enclave, had been a hive of savvy young professionals waiting for real estate speculators to spearhead condos on Prospect and white, liberal-minded millennials like Jill and me. Kaminski would continue to cruise. He knew which green initiatives to push, which developers to pander to at the zoning committee, where and when to be photographed riding his bike to work. I wondered if Kaminski railed against WE Energies' last "rate restructuring." The burner clicked.

And there stood Jill, making lemonade. I told myself to move in her direction.

"Yeah?" Jill asked, her tone narrowing into a graphite point.

I blew out the match. “Nothing,” I said. Jill was waiting when I pivoted from the stove. “Sorry.”

“*Come* next time,” she said. She motioned to the stove. “We can order out.”

She was right, of course: compromise. I wanted to meet her in the middle, the warmish center—but how? What was waiting in that middle ground? The news was on every screen, every day, never out of earshot. In those first days after the election Jill and I drafted letters to senators on the back of short grocery lists, installed reminders on our phones next to delinquent Internet bills. We marched with the demonstrating crowds downtown while angry commuters honked their horns. We assembled in Red Arrow Park and listened to tough talk through megaphones.

But now it was 2017, and I was tired. It seemed we were so sick and with so much at stake. I opted for dignity in disavowal and washed my hands of caring. Jill was much braver than I was.

When our food arrived we ate half and saved half as the wind picked up outside. I stood on the sidewalk and smoked after dinner, bouncing in place against the cold. Jill joined me in her sweats and thick parka. She reached into my breast pocket and pulled out a cigarette. She held me by the chin and lit it off the one in my mouth. We both shivered.

“So, anyone from WE Energies at the fundraiser?” I asked.

“No such luck,” Jill said. “And you know that’s not how it works.”

“They’re talking about potential rolling blackouts. That on Kaminski’s docket?”

“Customer service,” she said. “Ours is one stove, Cal.”

“It’s not about the stove. You know that. It’s about...”

I didn’t finish. She didn’t ask me to. It was getting late.

"I'm going over there tomorrow," I said. I blew some ash off the end of my cigarette.

"Where?"

"WE Energies headquarters. I think it's on Michigan."

"Cal," Jill said. She shook her head and smiled. "It's always all or nothing."

"You don't think it's worth going down there to talk to somebody?"

"To whom?" Jill said, putting her hood up. "'What're you going to do, grab an executive's lapels and make him fix our stove?"

I felt silly, and a little irritated at Jill for causing it. Maybe it was. "I'm just going to try to talk to someone. A person, face to face."

Jill put her arm around my waist and her head on my chest. "Okay," she said. She kissed me on the chin. "Go raise hell."

After a minute the subject changed to work and paydays. We'd both be working tomorrow night and the next and the one following and the one following. We shared the mirror and the sink in the bathroom and talked routine. Our toothpaste spit mixed in the porcelain. As I undressed and dressed in warmer layers for bed, I listened to Jill gargle Listerine and wash her face. Things seemed to lighten up.

*

It was only when I stood in front of it late the following afternoon that I realized I'd never even considered that WE Energies *had* a headquarters. The whole company was just voices over the phone, graphs and stock photos on a website, or foreboding notices slipped in the mailbox. But here it was, brick and mortar. And it was pretty: art deco nuances, the whole nine. It wasn't all that tall. It looked old.

A chandelier hung above the lobby. Everything looked like it was made of marble, but I didn't know. The wide stairs led up to a more dimly lit second floor. On the floor, an intricate tile crest read, in all caps, "PUBLIC SERVICE." It was well heated.

The man behind the counter to my left looked at me as if he thought I was in the wrong place. I began to get the impression that I was.

"Can I help you?" he asked. He had a white moustache and was bald save a horseshoe curve of white hair from temple to temple.

"I hope so," I said. I pulled a stack of bills and notices from my inside coat pocket, thinking they might want proof of address.

"Are you having trouble with your utilities?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "The gas. My stove has been out, and I haven't been able to..."

He was plainly confused, or pretending to be. He furrowed his brow and clicked his tongue. It sounded like my stove.

"Here's the thing," he said, "and on behalf of WE Energies, I'm sorry for the inconvenience regarding your service. But we don't really handle...this kind of thing here. I *can* give you the number to our customer service line—"

I gripped my stack of envelopes. "I've called customer service," I said. "Several times."

He looked at me with pity. "I know it can be frustrating, but with the weather this time of year, our field workers can get overextended."

Our conversation was loud, or it seemed loud against the hush of the marble lobby. It was only loud because everything else was so quiet.

I couldn't find words to say. How fucking stupid was I?

"So there's nobody here who can help me?" I asked.

“Here,” he said. He licked his finger and picked up a stack of pamphlets. He opened one up, circled two or three phone numbers, and handed them to me. He talked about each one as he circled them. I didn’t listen.

“Who works in this building?” I said.

“I’m sorry?” he said.

“Who’s the CEO of WE Energies?”

The man backed up from the counter. “Well, WE Energies is part of the WEC Energy Group, standing for Wisconsin Energy Corporation. They own several energy companies around the Midwest. In fact, after the 2015 merger—”

“Who’s the CEO?” I asked again.

“Sir,” he said. He glanced at something behind me. When I turned a security guard stood with his hands clasped in front of him.

I turned from the security guard to the mustached man, seething.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Have a nice day, sir,” he said.

I glanced up to where I imagined a top floor boardroom would be. I didn’t know if that was true. It didn’t matter what I knew to be true or not.

My car took five turns of the engine to start. The cold made the steering wheel feel shrunken and fragile. I pulled into traffic behind a cloud of bus exhaust.

*

I put my political science degree to use behind the bar at Flanagan’s that night. The Tuesday crowd was the chapped regulars, five or six of them. They were hungry and listless, and I was hungry and listless. Jill had said she’d bring home soup and stashed noodles from work. I

Googled ‘we energies ceo’ but couldn’t find any contact information. I switched to my Facebook feed and scrolled without looking at anything.

Flanagan’s was, whether de facto or by policy or just collective will, just about the most apolitical space in the known universe. It was a popular third-shift bar back when there were enough warehouses and plants in Walker’s Point to employ a third shift. It’d been a place for thick Carhartt gear, Gore-Tex gloves, and watered down 8 AM beers. Business slowed a little as the neighborhood changed and updated aesthetics. No one would have ever used a term like *aesthetics* to describe anything about it before. Even still, many locals stuck around, and the place persisted on its terms. Conversation was optional. It was, in that way, a nice kind of place where one didn’t have to feel much of anything, save lethargy, some irritation and, eventually, drunk. I told myself I liked that nice kind of thing about it.

One of the greying regulars shook the ice cubes in his empty glass at the end of the bar. A Budweiser neon of a tree frog to his left made him look greenish. I filled his glass. The ten o’clock news came on one of the two muted bar TV’s. The chief of police stood at a press conference in his full get-up. Lieutenants, middle management types, flanked him. The closed captioning about the investigation into a recent double murder on the North Side lagged on the screen after the program returned to the anchors, already talking about something else. A blonde college kid at the end of the bar looked down at a quarter he was spinning. He picked it up and spun it again and again.

A middle-aged woman with short grey hair shuffled into the bar, red from the cold. She pulled out wadded bills and smoothed them out on the edge of the bar. I asked her how she was. I pulled a Miller Lite from the cooler and poured a shot of rail whiskey.

“Goddamn WE Energies,” she said. “Heat’s out, and I can’t get a goddamn nod of recognition.”

“Fuck,” I said.

“When I was a kid,” the man at the end of the bar chirped, “we’d boil pots of water on the stove when the heat was on the fritz.”

“How long ago was that?” I asked. I was bored and expected to rile him up.

“Before you were swimming in your daddy’s nut sack, that’s how long ago,” he said. The flushed capillaries on the end of his nose looked raw.

“Quite a system,” the grey-haired woman said. She drank her beer bottoms up.

I asked her how long her heat had been out. She didn’t hear me, or she didn’t answer at any rate. I thought about telling her about the headquarters, but I just sloshed some tumblers in the hot, soapy water in the well. When I looked back, she’d lifted her shot in the air like a prize. She looked around the bar as if to offer cheers to the entire place. Nobody noticed. I took an imaginary glass and clinked hers. She drained the shot without a flinch and waved away the change I tried to give her.

“Keep it, kid,” she said. I somehow knew she needed it more than I did. I kept it anyway.

An American flag wipe went across the screen. It brought text: Trump’s first week. There was a still image of our president, smirking. The screen cut to Trump as he walked along the White House lawn waving at people off screen. The man at the end of the bar grumbled under his breath. The shorthaired woman pointed to her shot glass without taking her eyes off the TV. “Pretty please,” she said. She nearly picked it up before I finished pouring. The TV showed a screenshot of the president’s Twitter feed. One week.

“Still doesn’t feel real,” she said.

“It’s real,” I said.

“Smug bastard,” the man at the end of the bar said. “I’d knock his fucking teeth out.” He stifled a burp and leaned his gut into the bar.

“If you could stand up, that is,” the grey-haired woman said.

“Get over it!” someone shouted from the pool table. I watched the three of them puff their chests. They shouted some more; they looked a lot like everyone else in the bar.

“Fuck yourself!” the man at the end of the bar yelled. He stood up and bumped into someone coming out of the bathroom who told him to fucking watch it. Everyone grew slowly out of their barstools like inflatable Halloween decorations and tottered toward each other. Some stumbled forward, and others put their bodies in the path of their motion. Soon the back-and-forth dissolved into a chorus of groans and aimless profanity. When the crowd at the pool table stepped outside to smoke, the energy left the place as quickly as it had come. The man at the end of the bar leaned on his hand, more or less asleep. The grey-haired woman, having never gotten up in the first place, stared at a commercial for a very big car.

The TV switched to people marching in thick, buzzing droves. Picket signs waved, and steam billowed from mouths chanting, their faces hot with voltage. This was followed by the omnipresent Twitter screenshot.

“I mean, look,” I said. “We’re demonstrating, active, it’s...” I looked around and saw that no one was listening. The bar was dim and dimming like a deep exhale before sleep. “It’s just started,” I said, not knowing quite what I meant or what the hell I was talking about anyway.

A weather report came on. The Doppler radar over Southeastern Wisconsin was all deep purples and pinks, cold advisory temperatures. Subzero absurdity. The weatherman pantomimed shivering, arms folded, shoulders hunched. I wanted to feel it, or just to leave the room. I put a

cigarette in my mouth, tied the barely filled trash bag and headed out the side door to the alley. I trusted the people in there to mind the bar; they knew me; I knew them.

I fixed myself against the wind and lit up. The shears of bitter cold felt perfect and bottomless.

I thought about Jill and all her hours, her dedication to good people with good ideas, her trust in the system. What were drops in a bucket? I called myself an asshole out loud and leaned against the rough brick of the bar. I pulled out my phone. The screen lingered after an attempt to unlock it, the cold making the phone almost useless. Once I found the WE Energies customer service line I typed it in one thumb at a time. The chipper voice offered me a menu of options before telling me “Sorry, all our operators are currently helping other customers. If you are reporting an outage please hang up and try again.” I hung up and didn’t try again.

A little later my phone rang while I was loading a case of High Life into the cooler. It was Lenny, our upstairs neighbor.

“Listen, man,” he said, “I know you’re not home, but I just walked in the door and figured I’d call and let you know.” The whole goddamn block, he said. Dark. Well digger’s ass. Icing on the cake. The gas and electricity had apparently been out for hours. He mentioned that the pipes raised hell when he tested the icy faucet.

I thanked Lenny and hung up. When I texted Jill, she answered almost immediately, saying other servers had been getting word as well. Neither of us would be off work for two hours. Jill asked if this was for real. I told her I didn’t know.

*

I walked into the house and immediately slipped. The light switch did nothing. The water heater was, finally, silent. I held onto the wall and helped myself up. I pointed the light from my

phone at the floor. From wall to wall in our one-bedroom apartment the layer of dark, murky water that covered the floor had, over the hours, turned into an almost flawless sheet of ice. I forced a croaking laugh, desperate for noise to fill the air.

Stepping gently I used the wall for support and slid across the floor on my way to the water heater. There was still a small trickle of water, bubbling out from the heater like a charming creek over mossy rocks. When I got the landlord on the phone, his first sleepy words came as if from outer space: “Holy shit there, guy.” He instructed me step by step on how to turn off the water supply line. I turned the valve clockwise, clockwise. Next he told me to go to the breaker box and switch all the power off. With one hand holding the phone to my ear and the other on the wall I shuffled down the short dark hallway. Pictures and posters fell from the wall. I held my phone to the breaker box in the kitchen. The landlord’s voice came disembodied through the phone: “You there yet? You got it yet, guy?” Once I switched the power off, I let myself fall to the floor. “Yep. I’m there.”

My eyes adjusted. Under our new skating rink were the frozen shoes and books and guitar picks, papers and policy pamphlets, press releases and memos from City Hall, leaflets from protests, dropped crumbs, years of dust unattended to. I wanted to know what the fuck we were supposed to do. I wanted to know why this had happened and how to fix it, all of it.

I called WE Energies again, even though I suspected they wouldn’t do anything. The same mechanical voice asked me to press two on the keypad if I was reporting a blackout. I pressed it as hard as I could, as if that was how to argue with a recording that couldn’t argue back.

“WE Energies, how can I help you?” The voice was female and elderly and wearied.

“Finally,” I said. I wanted so bad to just scream into the phone. She was a stranger, and I wanted her to know I was angry. I wanted her to feel terrible. I was about to shout when she spoke again.

“I’m sorry, sir,” she said. “We’re doing what we can over here. Completely overwhelmed.” Her voice shook. “Just give us your address or account number, and we’ll add you to the spreadsheet.”

I quietly squeaked the information into the receiver. This woman was stuck in an emergency call center in the middle of the night across town, probably dying to go home. She wasn’t the villain. I could feel my back and ass getting wet from melted ice.

After some time Jill shouted my name from the doorway.

“Welcome home, honey,” I said. “I put in a skating rink. We’re upper crust now.”

Her breath’s cloud rose from her silhouette like a smokestack. She slid along the wall towards me and stood at my side.

“What are we going to do?” she said. She said it again. “Cal.”

“I don’t know, Jill. I don’t know.”

She helped me up, and we skated down the hall to the front room. I picked up two blankets from the couch and wrapped one around her. I wrapped myself in the other, covering my face.

“This is all so fucked,” I said. I laughed to try to make it seem like I was joking. “Everything’s fucked.”

“Nothing’s fucked,” she said.

“All of it,” I said. “Forget the fucking house for a second.”

Jill's hair was dry and frayed, coming out from under a wool hat. She hunched under the blanket.

"It's not citywide," she said. "Only our district and the sixth have big patches like this."

"I'm sure City Hall's phones are ringing," I said.

"They can't do anything about it."

"Have to yell at someone."

"*Someone*," Jill said. "Not anyone."

"Look around, Jill. Look."

She turned her head, pulled the blanket tighter. "Ice. I see ice. It'll melt." When I didn't answer she said again that it would melt.

"And freeze again," I said.

"Not constructive, Cal."

"He was on the TV tonight," I said. I gave myself permission to erupt. "Him. And then Kaminski, and all the fucking fundraisers and park cleanup photo ops and solar panel installations that get blackballed by WE. And then they oversee rolling blackouts and still nothing changes." I waved my hand around the room. "You want to know what happened when I went to the WE headquarters today? Not a fucking thing. The guy behind the counter looked at me like I was insane for asking for help. Bided his time until security pressed me to get out and leave them the fuck alone. I looked up the CEO at work. Do you have any idea what his net worth is? How much does Kaminski make in a year?"

Jill wouldn't look at me; she kept her eyes on the ice. She looked like she was waiting for a bus that she knew deep down she'd already missed.

"Look at this shit," Jill said.

“Right?” I said. “Right?”

“Maybe you are,” she said. Her voice cracked and cut out like a shoddy cell connection.

“I mean, what’s the point?”

Jill’s eyes began to well up. She used a single chapped finger to clear them. She didn’t start to cry, but I could tell she was resisting it.

“Yeah,” I muttered. “Hell of a question.”

I suddenly wanted her to fight with me in that moment, to tell me I was wrong. But Jill just slouched in place as if asleep on her feet. The shellshock and defeat in her expression broke me. It broke me more to think I might have helped break her, tugged her into my self-made closed circuit of fear and pessimism. Brave Jill. If she and I couldn’t help keep each other together, where did the rest of it stand?

“It’ll work out,” I said. “WE sent crews out. They’ll get to us.”

“Eventually,” Jill said. “Maybe.”

I used my toe to dig at the mud-colored ice. “Definitely,” I said. “Eventually.”

“We’ll see,” she said.

“We will,” I said.

Neither of us said a damn thing. Our breath made little clouds that faded pretty quickly. Then Jill wiped her eyes and leveled her posture. She shivered but kept her poise.

“At least I get to go to City Hall in a few hours,” Jill said.

“Sure,” I said. “That’s something.”

“But then again,” she said, lowering her voice several octaves, “maybe we’re all *doomed*.” She held the blanket up with her outstretched arms like wide wings. She flapped them.

“Poor *us*. *Doomed*.”

Jill snorted as she laughed. She was making fun of me. It felt right.

“Could be,” I said. “Who knows? Doom’s pretty hot right now.”

I shuffled toward Jill in the dark and put my arms around her.

“Everything’ll be okay?” I said, unintentionally curling the statement into a question.

“We’ll deal with it,” Jill said. “I don’t know how or when it’ll melt, but we’ll figure it out.”

That wasn’t what I meant, but I said that of course we would. I looked around the frozen room. “It’s just stuff.”

When I shifted my balance and slipped, my back hit the ice. Jill skated in place, waving the blanket with her arms and fell on top of me. It was cartoonish. Inch by inch we used each other for balance and stood back up.

Without saying anything we both walked out to the front porch. No street lamps were on, no lights in any houses. Wind whined over snow and ice and darkness. The only bit of light was from a bright sickle of moon and the glow of light pollution from the city underneath it.

Jill reached out from her blanket and into my breast pocket. She pulled out my pack of cigarettes. It was crumpled and nearly flat. The cigarette she pulled out, the very last one, was itself flattened and broken at the filter. It looked worn out and defeated. Jill, void of any expression at all, dangled the pathetic-looking thing in front of my face.

“Sure,” she said. “Why not.”

And for some reason it was so funny. We leaned into each other and laughed in deep, raring heaves for what felt like a very long time because fair enough. Fair enough. Tomorrow we would start to get our house in order.

North of Almost Everything

Alex arrived at the airport in Milwaukee three days before the wedding of his friends Darren and Mary. Alex texted Paul to confirm, again, that Paul was on his way to pick him up. He knew Paul well enough to know it never hurt to make sure. The busy concourse was full of travelers lugging baggage or children with dripping noses. Airport security looked bored, walking with uniformed German Shepherds and coffee cups. The voice from the intercom squawked a departure time. The place smelled, as usual, like old carpet and fried dough. Alex held his phone in his hand and waited to feel a buzz.

Outside at passenger pick up Alex joined the other people crowded at the terminal entrance waiting on rides. Alex's phone still didn't buzz; he checked it again and again. He had not come home from graduate school in Florida since he left a little over a year earlier. This was, for a while, intentional. Alex only recently started to feel homesick. When he first left, the thought seemed absurd and cloying. But even just standing there at passenger pick up in the simmering June humidity, Alex felt excited to recapture his feeling of home, and to escape the pressures of his work back in Florida.

After half an hour, Paul finally pulled up in his same ramshackle green Saturn. The basketball-sized dent on the front left bumper stood out like a shiner. Alex had been riding shotgun during the fender bender responsible for the dent. He grinned at the sight of it. Paul was on the phone when Alex shifted some fast food wrappers and empty packs of cigarettes from the seat onto the floor and got in the car. Alex also recognized a couple of wrinkled envelopes from the landscaping company where Paul worked. Alex worked there once, too. Paul's tools, as always, were in the back.

Paul moved the phone from his ear and reached over and gave Alex a half hug.

“Welcome back, man,” he said. “College boy.”

Alex said it felt good to be back. He noticed that Paul’s beard was shaggier than it’d ever been.

“Sorry,” Paul said, “hang on a sec.” He put the phone back to his ear as he tore off from the terminal and got onto the highway. The cheer vanished from his face.

“Yes,” Paul said into the phone. “Yes, I *know* that. I’m fucking trying, all right? Tell Dad that I’m taking care of it, since he’s clearly not taking my word for it. I *know*, okay?”

Alex tensed up. He figured Paul was talking to his mom, whom Alex had met several times over the years. She was, Alex recalled, pleasant and jocular, heavy on the homespun Midwest manners. Pleasant at all costs. She always referred to Alex as “one of her boys.” She and Paul had always gotten along well.

“Jesus Christ, okay. I’m done with this,” Paul said into the phone. “I’ve got Alex in the car. Yes.” Paul turned to observe Alex. “He looks fine, the same. Okay, goodbye. *Goodbye.*” Paul hung up the phone and threw it into the cup holder as they passed the giant statue letters staggered on the grassy median: *M, K, E.*

“What’s all that about?” Alex asked, pointing to the phone.

Paul rolled down his window. The wind hit his hair in a way that made it look like an animal was making a nest in it.

“Just some bullshit,” Paul said. “Nothing crazy. So how’s everything, man? How’s the sunny South?”

“Hot as balls,” Alex said. “But it’s all right. Keeps me busy.”

“Thawing you out.”

“Something like that,” Alex said. “It’s good to be back though. Looking forward to hitting some of the old haunts.” Alex tried to read Paul. “They’re all still there, right?”

Paul revved the engine and swung into the left lane to pass a semi. “More or less,” he said. He tapped an arrhythmic beat on the steering wheel. “Run afoul of any alligators yet?”

“Already made one into shoes,” Alex said. “You sure everything’s all right?”

Paul drummed on the wheel and didn’t answer for a few seconds. “Definitely,” he said eventually. “You know how it goes.”

“I’ll drop it,” Alex said.

“Nothing to drop,” Paul said.

Alex leaned back and looked out at the city as they neared the Marquette Interchange downtown. The familiar landscape greeted Alex: the arching Hohn bridge, the high smokestacks and factories, the tobacco-colored tanneries and creaking heavy machinery along the port. The sign on top of the Miller building downtown still revolved. Boats tacked lazily beyond the breaker in Lake Michigan. Alex settled into the scenery outside the car and mentally itemized what he wanted to see again, all the familiar, comfortable turf he thought he’d never miss when he left. Soon he and Paul talked about the wedding.

“Apparently Mary’s hired a school bus to drive us all out to her family’s farm in Thiensville,” Paul said.

“Nice touch,” Alex said. Alex had never been to Mary’s farm and only vaguely knew that she grew up there. She’d mentioned stables and a barn, presumably for horses. That was about it.

“Less hassle I guess,” Paul said. “I can’t imagine anyone would be sober enough to drive.” There was a slight wheeze when he laughed.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Alex had tried to cut back drinking when he left Milwaukee, one of the ways he wanted to create distance from the place. He dove into old books and critical theory; he occupied himself with other people's ideas, scholars and authors that thought they could cure everything from poverty, to dying ecosystems, to broken heartedness. It made Alex feel like he was solving something, or at least that there was something to solve.

But now Alex was home. Nice, he thought, to leave that shit down south.

"What about Darren and the rest of them?" Alex asked. "I never really hear from anyone."

"Darren's on a leash," Paul said. "No surprise there." Paul craned his neck to check the lane to their right and swept over. "The rest of them are the same. Everyone's alive." Paul pulled off onto the exit ramp. "You'll see everyone tonight at the bar."

The itinerary was that most of the wedding party, many of whom were old friends, would meet for drinks that night. Alex looked forward to it as a homecoming occasion for him as much as a function of the wedding. He daydreamed about a warm welcome back to a place that wasn't the same without him. He told Paul that whatever everyone was doing would be fine.

When Paul parked in front of his apartment building, his phone started to ring. It rattled the loose change in the cup holder. He grumbled to himself as he stuffed it in his pocket.

"It's cool if you need to take that," Alex said.

"Nope," Paul said.

They stepped out, and Alex grabbed his duffle bag.

"Need help with your luggage, madam?" Paul asked.

The floor of Paul's studio unit was spattered with clothes and shoes, newspapers and food wrappers and creased boxes from microwavable dinners. Most of it had clearly been stepped on. The Goodwill coffee table was stacked with empties and an overflowing ashtray. Across from Paul's twin bed was a small sofa. Paul cleared the sofa of debris.

"This'll be you, if that works," Paul said.

"Yeah," Alex said, "that'll work."

Paul went to the closet and grabbed a thin blanket and a pillow. He arranged them on the couch with care, fluffing the pillow a little before resting it on the sofa.

"How's that for service with a smile?" Paul said. He didn't smile.

"Kind of looks like your maid got sent up state," Alex said.

"Currently incarcerated," Paul said. "Bad rap."

Paul scratched the back of his head and looked around the room, as if to see if there was anything else he could do.

"Man," Alex said, "I know you're not, you know, the tidiest. But this place is a fucking dump." Alex intended for this to be a joke.

"Yeah," Paul mumbled. He went to the fridge and returned with two beers.

"You sure everything's okay?" Alex asked. He took the beer that Paul held out to him.

"I mean, yeah," Paul said. "It's just been, I don't know, a weird week." Paul lit a cigarette and cracked his beer.

"Weird?" Alex said. He held the sealed, sweating beer.

"Elric suspended me a week and a half back," Paul said. "I've just been, I don't know, decompressing."

Elric had once been Alex's boss, too; he was nice, and lenient. Alex had worked the same job with Paul for two years before he left for Tallahassee. Alex and Paul sleepily carpooled to job sites in the blue dawn hours together. They laid sod and dug garden beds, grouted Quikrete between earth-toned bricks. At the end of the day, the whole crew sat on upturned paint buckets and bags of mulch and drank cheap beer so cold it tasted like a goddamn miracle.

"Bad rap?" Alex asked.

"Put the frame on me," Paul said.

Alex didn't know whether to keep joking or to press him. He had questions, but only asked one, something easy. He had just gotten home.

"Planning on mending that fence?" Alex said.

Paul waved his hand as if swatting a fly. "It'll be fine."

Alex didn't act on his instinct. He hadn't come home to do detective work, to unravel the gone-south bummer of his best friend's life. He trusted Paul inherently. He didn't want to feel any more disconnected from the place that raised him and the people he loved. He cracked his beer and sat down next to Paul on the couch.

Alex brought up the time when someone smashed the windshield of an Explorer outside of Alex's apartment. It had been after midnight three summers ago. Paul corrected that it had been four. Both of them remembered watching from Alex's third floor window as cops and neighbors gather in the street. Neither could remember if they caught the guy who did it.

Paul tuned the radio to the Brewers, an afternoon game. Alex considered that the roof of Miller Park must be wide open.

*

Alex and Paul walked up to Farwell's, the agreed upon bar for that evening. Darren and Mary had selected it. Everyone had been there a thousand times over many years. It had been next to the bright, art deco marquee of the neighboring theater for, Alex assumed, decades. Two places, Alex decided, that would likely be here forever, or as long as forever would be for him.

The night was smooth and muggy and just a little windy. The forecast called for a lake effect storm overnight. A small crowd of friends was gathered outside smoking. Alex didn't know all of them. Mary's friends, he imagined. The bouncer burst through the door and yanked someone back into the bar and shouted to the crowd that glass needed to stay inside.

Paul and Alex walked in and down the long stairway toward the bar. The sign at the landing read: "Underground City." This, too, Alex assumed had been there forever. He and Paul passed the adjacent arcade and bowling lanes to the nearest of two barrooms. Darren and Mary were smiling at the bar surrounded by bodies tilted toward them. Alex was glad to see everybody together and laughing.

Alex made his way through the crowd and hugged Darren and Mary. He congratulated them. They thanked him and said they were glad he could make it.

"Wouldn't miss it," Alex said.

Paul came behind Alex and patted Darren on the back. "He looks ready, doesn't he?"

Mary turned away toward the bar and stretched her neck to look for the bartender. Darren twisted and put an empty beer on the bar.

"Yeah, man," Darren said. "Seems about time."

"Comes a time I suppose," Alex said. He turned to Mary and got her attention. "Everything ready at the farm?"

She crossed her fingers. "Fucking better be," she said, faking serious.

“So, Paul,” Darren said. “How’s everything going? I feel like I haven’t seen you in...” he trailed off. “A while.”

“Can’t complain,” Paul said. He raised a finger to get the bartender’s attention.

Mary came back with three beers and handed one to Darren and one to Alex. The three of them drank together. Mary whispered into Darren’s ear. Alex noticed that she glanced over at Paul as she did. Darren whispered back into her ear and shook his head. She rubbed his back and kissed his cheek. Darren asked Alex how he was set up at Paul’s.

“It’s not the Ritz,” Alex said, “but digs are digs. I’m not fussy.”

“I’m sure plenty of people would put you up,” Mary said.

“Yeah,” Alex said. “It feels good.”

“It’ll be nice to have you around,” Darren said. He quickly added, “You know, for everyone.” He drank some more beer. “Everyone’s missed you, man.”

Paul turned back from the bar with two shots and handed one to Alex. “Two more on the bar,” he said to Darren. “His and hers, so to speak.”

Mary asked the crowd if anyone wanted hers. Eventually a warm body surfaced, and the four of them drank to the bride and groom. It felt funny, Alex thought, like an inside joke. Mary squealed and walked away to hug other friends who had shown up. Alex watched Mary show them pictures on her phone that he couldn’t see. Alex turned back and tried to get Paul’s attention, but got drowned out by the jukebox. It played a pop song that suddenly seemed very loud.

The night went on. Alex turned down some drinks, but still drank more than he had in months. He became warm and comfortably drunk.

People moved in and out of concentric circles of friends, not staying attached to any one conversation for long. Alex loved the locality of the talk: the reopening of the Pabst brewery, the drama of the Slender Man trial, the proximity of someone's dad's farm to where Ed Gein once lived, the shitty fishing beneath the bridge in Caesar's Park.

This, he thought, felt like being home again, where he grew up, like falling back into a pocket of frozen time.

Alex lost track of Paul towards the end of the night. He checked both bars, the arcade, even the lanes of the bowling alley. Alex stood in the empty alley and listened to the quieting background noise of his friends leaving the bar. He followed the arrows of the lanes that led to the empty end for the pins. The lights started to shut off in there. Alex heard the bartender's voice from behind him. He said it was time to leave. He waited, hands on his hips, until Alex stumbled out.

Outside Alex found Darren and asked if he'd seen Paul. The night's mugginess had closed in. It had gotten damp and breezeless.

"Fuck," Darren slurred, "who knows. I can't keep track of him anymore."

"What's that mean?" Alex said.

"You got out at the right time," Darren said. He patted his pockets, front and back, looking for something.

"Have you seen Paul?"

"Definitely pays to get out." Darren burped. "Get out at the right time."

Alex tightened. "I didn't run away."

"I didn't say you did," Darren said. "But good for you. Guy like Paul, thing is, a guy like Paul. I mean how long's he been out of work? A couple of months?"

Alex wanted to mention that Paul had told him that he'd been suspended, that it had been a week. "So you haven't seen Paul?"

"I'm surprised he was sober enough to pick you up honestly," Darren said quietly.

Alex turned and looked around the neon-washed street. A few cars passed by blaring radios. An old man slept across the street at the bus stop.

"I don't even want to get married," Darren said. "But shit."

"There you are!" Mary said as she came around the corner. Her face was flushed and bright. "Let's go home. Our cab's around the corner."

"Hey," Darren said to Alex as he tapped his pockets, "you got a cigarette?"

Mary shook her head at Alex. "Don't give him one." She put her arm around Darren and grinned. Their foreheads touched as they rocked back and forth on their heels.

"He's looking for Paul," Darren said.

Mary said she hadn't seen him anywhere. "But look, Alex, you should just—"

Alex watched Mary's eyes widen to something behind him. When Alex turned Paul was leaning on a parking meter with his forearm, his head rested in the crook of his elbow. Alex walked over and asked Paul where he'd been. The answer didn't come.

Mary called a cab for Alex and Paul. She thanked him for taking care of Paul. It made Alex angry that she thanked him, like it was charitable for him to do so. But it dawned on him that it might actually be.

As Mary and Darren walked away, they called backward that they'd see him at the wedding. He stood there under the bright lights with Paul slumped heavy on his shoulder.

When they got out of the cab, Alex dug Paul's keys out of his pocket for him. Paul was snoring fully clothed on his bed before Alex could ask him if he needed anything.

*

Alex woke up mid morning to the clamor of garbage falling into the back of a truck. He made coffee; it surprised him that Paul had any. Paul woke up a half hour after Alex and went directly to the bathroom. Alex listened to Paul vomit in the toilet while he looked for something for them to eat in the kitchenette. He scraped together a couple of eggs and scrambled them and split it between two pieces of toast on two plates.

Paul stepped out of the bathroom and into the kitchenette. Alex handed him his plate and a coffee. They sat down on the couch and ate.

“You didn’t have to do this,” Paul said.

“No worries,” Alex said.

“No, I mean, I could’ve made it,” Paul said. “I should’ve.”

Alex sipped some coffee. “It really doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me.” Paul finished his breakfast in three bites and lit a cigarette. “It’s just,” he started, drank some coffee, and coughed. “Did Darren and Mary tell you to take care of me?”

“No,” Alex said. “Why would they have?”

Paul finished his coffee and set the mug at his feet. “Sorry about last night. That’s my bad.” His eyes were glassy and bloodshot. They looked like they hurt. “Whatever I did.”

“You just disappeared for a bit.” Alex scraped some egg from the plate with his toast. “You were only gone for a bit.”

“K,” Paul said.

“How often do you do that?”

“Disappear?”

“Black out.”

“Oh,” Paul said. He leaned back on the couch. “Not often.”

“That’s good,” Alex said.

Paul didn’t speak for a long minute. “Anything you want to do today?”

They decided to walk to the art museum later on. Alex said he missed it, and Paul said he missed it, too.

Paul turned on the TV. There was nothing on, but they scanned the channels for a while anyway. Dr. Phil, Maury Povich, Montel Williams. It didn’t matter. They smoked Paul’s cigarettes and drank more coffee and eventually the mood unwound. Alex just wanted to laugh again, about anything, with a friend who wasn’t in trouble in a place that was the way he remembered it. He allowed himself to pretend for a while. Someone on Wheel of Fortune won an all-expenses-paid getaway to an island resort. The stock footage was calm and colorful.

Later that afternoon, after Alex and Paul had showered and decided, in agreement, that they felt better, there was a knock on the door. The TV was muted. The person knocked again. Paul put his index finger in front of his mouth. The two of them stepped into the kitchenette. The person knocked again. Alex shifted in place. He felt like they were kids again, trying to avoid authority on the other side of the door. After a minute there were muffled gripes from the hallway before an envelope slid in from under the door. Paul crept over to pick it up. He put his ear against the door before creeping back to the kitchenette.

“Landlord?” Alex whispered.

Paul nodded and put the envelope on the counter. “I still have some time.”

“How much?”

“Couple of weeks I suppose.” Paul put the envelope in a drawer. “You still want to go to the art museum?”

“We definitely don’t have to.”

“Nah,” Paul said. “Let’s get out of here.”

Alex moved toward the door before Paul stopped him.

“In a bit,” Paul said.

The two of them stood in the kitchenette and whispered.

“You remember that time we had to hide from the cops behind a dumpster?” Alex asked.

“Sophomore year, after that house party?”

“In high school?” Paul said.

“Yeah.”

“Honestly,” Paul said, “no. I don’t.”

Alex lowered his voice even further. “Yeah,” he said. “It was a long time ago.” Alex counted the years in his head. Paul scratched at his scraggly beard and rubbed something from the corner of a bagged eye.

Eventually Paul stuck his head into the hallway. He looked both ways before they stepped out, and he gently closed and locked the door. Alex followed Paul to the backstairs and out the backdoor to the alley. It was near dusk.

They walked down to the lake and along the park until they reached the museum. It was designed in the shape of a bird with broad, spiny beams arranged in the shape of wings. There was no movement in and around it.

Inside, an employee said the museum was getting ready to close. Paul tried to argue with her. A janitor walked behind them with a buffer and polished granite floors the color of the

moon. The radio clipped to his belt loop echoed indistinct music Alex couldn't make out. A security guard appeared around the corner and asked if they needed help finding an exit.

"I'm sorry, Al," Paul said.

They stood against the railing along the lake. Small, weak waves pushed up against a stack of algae-covered rocks below.

"Don't worry about it," Alex said. "I've been there."

"If we didn't have to duck the landlady..." Paul said before trailing off.

"Yeah, maybe."

Alex's sense of nostalgia began to fully fade away in that moment. He'd never felt angry at the passage of time before. He'd clung to the past like some slippery, elusive thing while stepping into the future just gradually enough that he thought he wouldn't have to let go in order to take another step. He could cling to an illusion as long as he didn't cling too hard.

The wedding was tomorrow, followed by his flight the day after. Then he was gone again, and this place would be behind him, morphing into a past tense he didn't recognize.

"Let's not get shitfaced at the wedding tomorrow," Alex said. He said it so fast that he didn't even think about it. "Let's both try that."

Paul kicked a pebble into the lake. "Shit."

"I'm not going to lecture you, man," Alex said.

"What time is your flight back?"

"Early."

Paul lit a cigarette and took two puffs before passing it to Alex. "Okay," Paul said. "You think all of Darren's family will be there?"

Alex was confused by the question. "I don't know. Probably."

“Grandma?” Paul said.

Alex held his hands up. “Sure.”

Paul took the cigarette back from Alex. “She single?”

Alex felt like he might be faking it, but he felt like laughing, so he did. Paul pitched his cigarette butt into Lake Michigan. It bobbed like a gull.

*

A long yellow school bus picked up the wedding crowd at a nearby park around noon the next day. Many of the people who piled into the bus were at the bar two nights before. Alex didn’t recognize some of them dressed formally, clean in daylight.

Everyone on the bus was in high spirits. A group of women in floral print sundresses Alex didn’t recognize sneakily passed a bottle of wine around near the back of the bus. Others had flasks and cans of beer they nipped at from purses and blazer pockets. The bus’s air conditioning blew halfheartedly despite it’s dramatic clattering. Alex sat next to Paul near the middle of the bus, across from some friends who were asking if they’d been at the bar a couple nights previously. Paul rubbed his clean-shaven face and said they were there.

The bus roared up I-43 and eventually exited onto an Ozaukee county highway. Alex had never been out this far before. They passed expansive green and dirty blonde fields hemmed in the distance by patches of woods. Cows occasionally dotted the landscape. They stood absolutely motionless as if painted there. Alex hadn’t been on a school bus since a field trip so many years back he couldn’t remember. He felt awkward bouncing in the seat. He fussed with his tie and wiped some sweat from his forehead. Paul turned down a sip from a flask. The stranger who offered seemed surprised.

Eventually the bus pulled onto a country road and turned up a long driveway. Next to the ranch house was a large area with tables under a white tent adjacent an assembly of folding chairs. A barn and a corral stood just beyond a small pond behind the latticed vine branches of the wedding arch. A single piebald horse in the corral ate a carrot from an old man's hand. Geese honked along the banks of the pond.

Alex noticed the seating arrangements had him and Paul sitting at different tables. There was a bar set up by the tables. Paul glanced at the bar and back at Alex. They went around to the back of the house and found a group of men smoking cigarettes and cigars. Someone played tug-of-war with a bandana-clad yellow lab locked onto a rope toy. Alex and Paul approached Darren, who was speed walking back toward the house.

"My man," Alex said. "Nice little set up."

"You look dashing," Paul said drily.

"No *you* look nervous as shit," Darren said. He passed by them on his way to the back porch, where an older man was waving him in.

The ceremony went by as Alex assumed it would. There were groomsmen, bridesmaids, a minister. Darren walked to the arch, then Mary. They kissed, the crowd cheered, and the newlyweds skittered down the aisle and out of sight behind the house.

Back at the tables the caterers served dinner. Alex made small talk with people he vaguely knew that were sweating through suits and loosened ties. He glanced over at Paul every now and again. He was always seated still and nodding with a rehearsed smile on his face. Alex's table was next to the bartender, who was kept busy, frantically mixing cocktails and uncorking wine bottles, stashing ice into grass-stained coolers.

Eventually the DJ made his proclamation for everyone to get on the dance floor. Alex left for the bathroom and a bummed cigarette. Paul was gone when he got back. Alex looked toward the bar but couldn't distinguish him in the throng.

He'd be at the front of the line anyway, Alex thought. He scanned around. Alex doubted whether anyone else would do this when he was gone. He resolved to get as drunk as possible if Paul turned up hammered. It occurred to Alex that maybe that's what he wanted, really. Paul would forgive him and vice versa. No one in their small circle of the city would judge them, at least not out loud.

Alex asked the people at a nearby table if they'd seen Paul. They said they didn't know who that was.

Just as Alex started to approach the bar he heard an old lady squeal behind him. He turned to see a table fall over. There was a flutter of wings and then another and soon the rest of the gaggle of geese were flapping through the tent and across tables. They honked in a round as the yellow lab chased them, bumping into tables and barking. Women clutched their purses and darted; men spilled their drinks onto rented suits and howled. Another table and then another got knocked over as the geese and the dog wound through the makeshift dining room. Awash in his own lightshow, the DJ yelled for someone to grab the dog over a Fleetwood Mac song.

Darren wrangled the dog outside the tent and held him down. It looked like he was murmuring a secret in its ear. The geese flew away over the tree line. Alex couldn't help but find it funny.

When Alex swiveled, Paul was behind him with a Coke in his hand.

"Too bad," Paul said. "I was kind of pulling for the dog."

"Not his day," Alex said. "I guess something had to go wrong."

“Things tend to,” Paul said. “Fuck it.”

Darren walked by dragging the dog by the bandana. He couldn't seem to hide a small smile. The guests all moved to clean up the fresh mess. They righted tables, swept food off the dance floor, picked up glasses. When Darren got back, everyone was handed a champagne flute and a toast was made over the steady whirr of cicadas. Alex and Paul clinked glasses and drank the champagne slowly.

When night fell, the bus came back and everyone loaded onto it. One woman used a wedding program to fan her face. Another used a tissue to dab a wine stain on her dress. A guy behind Alex and Paul fell asleep almost immediately. The rest jabbered in a choir of nonsense.

It occurred to Alex that Paul might fuck up his life as soon as Alex was gone. It also occurred to him that he might fuck his own life up someday. He didn't know. From the bus window, Alex watched the piebald horse run circles in the corral.

Back in the city, the bus hurtled down North Avenue. Alex noticed that the Blue Room, a favorite bar of his, was shuttered and dark. He thought of the bartender there he dated years ago. She had a dime-sized birthmark on her hip that was a near perfect circle. He wondered where she was now.

“When did that happen?” Alex asked Paul.

Paul didn't hear him over the commotion in the bus. Alex nudged him and pointed in the direction of the bar they'd now passed blocks ago.

“When did that happen?” Alex asked again.

“When did what happen?” Paul said.

“The Blue Room,” Alex said. “It's closed?”

“Oh, that,” Paul said. “Yeah, I don’t know, a couple months back maybe? I kind of forgot about it.”

“Huh,” Alex said. “Too bad.”

“Plenty more where that came from,” Paul said.

“Plenty more,” Alex said.

Alex speculated what would be the next to go. Any number of places could change up at any time. Nothing was waiting on him. The next time he came home, Alex would see that more of what he knew was gone, and it would seem to him that the changes happened overnight.

Vita

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