Sometimes the Bear

Summer Wood

University of New Orleans, wood.summer@gmail.com

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Sometimes the Bear

A Thesis

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Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing Fiction

by

Summer Wood

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These stories are for Kathy Namba.

And for the bear.

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Sometimes the Bear

The thing about building, I'm trying to tell you, is that it’s less about glory and more about backbreak. Sure, it might look like magic. A house rising up out of nothing? But look closer, and you’ll see sorry-ass fools like me working our way through endless piles. Heaps of dirt where the backhoe left it when it sunk its teeth into the flattened pad and trenched for the footings. Mountains of gravel to bed the septic or backfill against the stem walls for drainage. Stacks of lumber, layers of sheet stock, heaps of insulation—all those mounds make a big mess going where they ought to go, and somebody’s got to deal with that crap, too: stack it and sweep it into smaller piles and load the pickup and haul it all to the dump.

That’d be me.

Glamorous? No. But at least it’s reliable. Other parts of my life, not so much. When my first wife left me I figured it was just bad luck. Could happen to anybody. What did we know? A smarter person might have seen that her boss at the shipping company was up to no good, but—hey. Live and learn.

When my second wife quit I did some serious soul-searching. I was beginning to make out a trend. I couldn’t reject the possibility that I’d had some role in the demise of both of my marriages, so I went to some effort to figure out what to fix in myself.
When my third wife left, I thought, Oh, fuck it. I’m just no good at this kind of thing. So I gave up with the marrying, which was less of a sacrifice than it may seem since times have changed between the arrival of my first wife and the departure of my third, and now marrying a fellow isn’t something that most women seem in a hurry to do, and certainly no necessary precursor to going to bed with them. I do a lot of tryouts. It makes me feel like I’m auditioning for a sports team.

I’m not all that athletic, but second string beats the hell out of sitting in the bleachers.

What I am good at, let me just say, is moving these piles around. Even at 54 my back doesn’t squawk if I have to lug two dozen sacks of redi-mix from one end of the site to the other. I tear the edge-strips off the pairs of five-eighths ‘rock and carry each sheet singly, but only because Amy, Her Royal Highness, makes me do it. On account of she can’t carry the drywall doubled up. Boss lady's wingspan is barely long enough to stretch across the four feet of panel stock and get a good grip. I’m guessing she can’t weigh much more than those 94-lb. sacks of portland I’ve seen her hump from the ground to the tailgate of the truck. It’s not a pretty sight, but she’ll buckle down and do it. She'll do anything to avoid looking weak. Doesn't want us to have anything on her.

Quit horning in on my work, I’ll gripe at her. Go back and swing a hammer or something. Put together that Simpson order so we’ve got the right hangers for the glue lams. You’re working me out of a job.

She’ll do what I tell her if I say it right. She must get tired of ordering us around all the time, and need an occasional change. Some days when something’s eating at her or she missed out on her second cup of coffee or, who knows, the sunshine’s picking on her alone in some mysterious way, I’ll see her crumble a little. She turns into a start-and-stopper. Loses track in the
middle of something and shifts to some aimless task. Those rare days I make her ride shotgun
with me, let her unload at the landfill, breathe in that special dump aroma, shout back at the trash
birds circling the piles. If there’s time we’ll stand there and chuck glass just to hear it shatter.
Nothing like some good destruction to realign your synapses.

When she’s on, though, I swear, there’s nothing like her for turning our crew into a
monster of a machine. Amy’s the brains, I’m the broom, Jackson is brawn plus poetry in motion
when it comes to wielding a hammer. That big boy is dumb as a box of Cheerios, but if she lays
out the wall plates for him he’s faster framing with a hammer than any known human being with
a nail gun. Comes time for trim, we follow around behind Amy and give her what she calls for.
Sand this, plane that, biscuit those edges and clamp up some cabinet doors. This one day, Amy’s
got hunks of prime white oak jointed and glued up for stair treads. Jackson had slammed together
a temporary stair, open riser, a couple of unmortised stringers with two by eight treads through-
nailed into the sides—beats huffing up a ladder every time. He'd been out four days since then
with the flu and we were enjoying the comfort of his handiwork in his absence. So when THE
BEAR strolls through the back entrance, when THE BEAR hazards first his big furry head in for a
peek and then pops his whole body through the opening to look around, first thing we do is
scramble up those stairs double-time to get away from him.

Then we watch. And wonder. What are the chances of a bear climbing these makeshift
stairs and making us lunch?

Making lunch of us, I mean. Ain't about to go preparing us sandwiches, buddy.

* * *

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By the time I get a grip on myself, we're hunkered down side-by-side, Amy and me, peering over the couple of low boards I’d nailed up to advise us not to plunge down into the framed stairwell. My first impulse had been to scramble out the bedroom window, slide down the lower roof, and drop from the eave to the pile of sand I knew was down there at the southwest corner of the house. I checked myself because I wasn’t certain I could outrun a bear on the flat and there was a pretty good stretch between the house and where we’d parked the vehicles. Not to mention that there was a little matter of shit-scared muscle paralysis to deal with first.

Let me just say it, okay? I’m not that hot in the woods? Fifteen years in Taos but I came for the skiing, which is an outdoor activity but doesn’t really have anything to do with survival. The truth is, I’d never actually seen a bear in the wild. Not that this was the wild, exactly. His paws were leaving big dirty smears on the Sturdifloor panels I’d just nailed over the floor joists. But he was definitely a wild bear. And even with him downstairs and me upstairs it was closer than I’d ever wanted or planned to be to one of those beasts.

He was a big bear. Huge. I may not have much to compare to, bear-wise, but he would not fit easily into the cardboard carton a refrigerator comes in. Stretched out, I think he’d be longer than the standard bed of my pickup. I snuck a glance at Amy. She was squatting with her arms folded across her chest, paying very close attention to him. If I had to place a bet, I’d say this bear weighed more than four Amys put together. I got a little queasy watching the muscles roll across his back as he propelled himself from the entry toward the windows in the living room. He could give Amy a ride on those shoulders and hardly register his cargo. He could eat her and still be hungry for dinner.

He could eat me, but I’d rather he didn’t.
“Peeeeeyouuuu,” Amy breathed softly. She was right. Though it could have been me, sweating like a son of a bitch. The bear harbored a rank combo of mushrooms fermenting, the peaty stuff that’s under tree bark on a downed log, and the slightly acrid outdoor stink dogs get when they run around chasing something.

A jangling sound startled us both. The bear was scooting something on the floor in front of his snout. When he extended a paw and pinned it still, I glanced again at Amy. That was her tuna can. We keep an opener at the job and she’d used it to ratchet open the tin and borrowed my medium chisel to scoop tuna onto crackers, ate them distractedly while scrawling figures for drip edge in a notebook. Upstairs, a look of horror crept across Amy’s face. She lifted her hands, mimicked wiping fish on her jeans.

Tuna juice? I mouthed, and she nodded.

Crapsteaks. I thought back to that half-an-old gal they found remaining in her kitchen in Mora, defending what was left of her homemade wild plum jam. The other half of her turned up three miles away in the belly of a black bear they tracked from her doorstep. I figured Amy was a goner, for sure. And then that feeling faded with the realization that I was closer to the stairs than she was. If that bear came for us, I was first in line. Furiously, I replayed my recent encounters with food. If I didn’t smell edible and I looked big—and, let’s face it, at 54 I already looked stringy—any credible bear was going to aim straight for Amy. She was smaller, younger, and she smelled like fish.

Below, the bear had opened the door to the little dorm-sized refrigerator we use to store lunch items. With one big sweep of his paw he scraped everything from the shelf to the floor. The bread was easy enough to tear open with a swipe. The peanut butter and jelly were still in
their jars, and it didn’t take long for him to bite into the plastic jar and devour the peanut butter right there.

“Goddamned Jackson. Where is that boy when you need him?” Amy muttered.

My leg had cramped from squatting in that position and I surreptitiously shifted my weight to offer it some relief. The heel of my boot bumped the hammer that swung from the loop of Amy’s toolbelt. I reconsidered my strategy. If I flung that hammer at the bear’s head, would it knock him out? If I missed, would it whack the wall and scare him off with the noise? Or would he get riled and figure out that it’s really no trouble at all to climb those makeshift stairs and take a bite out of the troublemakers raising a racket up here?

Before I could make up my mind to act, the sound of a vehicle coming down the drive captured the bear’s attention and sent him back in the direction of the entrance. Amy and I took the opportunity to sprint for the window in the bedroom. We watched as a brown UPS truck pulled into the driveway and the driver leapt out. He carried a package in his arms and walked briskly toward the front door. Amy threw open the window and waved frantically at him. And then I saw it. Good Lord almighty, it was another bear. A smaller one, not much bigger than Amy’s Pyrenees dog, but still plenty big enough to do some damage.

“Oh, shit,” Amy croaked. "Her cub." A chill ran up my spine. We weren’t just dealing with any bear downstairs. It was a mother bear, a hungry mother bear with a cub in tow. “Wait.” Amy frowned deeper. The cub had been lingering near a big shrub in the front yard, but evidently he’d changed his mind. He made a beeline for the UPS van and leapt in the open door.

All this happened faster than we could properly react to. If we were not chickenshit cowards we would have shouted to the UPS driver. Do not enter that vehicle!!! The words were on the tip of my tongue, I swear. But I could not get them out, and those delivery people are
speedy. He had dropped the packages on the porch, turned, and half run back to the van. Without breaking stride, he leapt in the same spot.

And then, like a cannon ball flung from a barrel, he exploded back out.

There is nothing funny about someone else’s misfortune. What kind of an asshole do you think I am? If he had been hurt—if the cub had followed him out and set upon him, say, or if the mother roared out to rescue her cub at his cry of distress—we would surely have recoiled at his poor luck. We might even have been driven to help him. But he appeared unharmed, if overwhelmingly startled, and he picked himself up and took off at an even higher speed toward the neighbor’s house some distance away.

A small sound emerged from deep in Amy’s abdomen. Her face had turned red and she was shaking with great, racking sobs of hysterical laughter. She managed to keep the volume almost completely muted but the effort of that made tears spring to her eyes. It was funny, I thought, but not *that* funny—until I, too, got caught in it. I laughed so hard so silently for so long that I pissed myself. Just a little bit. Not enough that anyone would notice.

When we finally got done laughing our behinds off we were still stuck with the problem of what to do about the quarter-ton behemoth that had returned to shuffling and snorting downstairs, trying to get into every last scrap of snack she could find. We grew increasingly sober with the understanding that the stairs would do shit for us if the bear decided to charge up them in a snit. *Bears climb trees.* It’s a fundamental fact of life. And I was secretly, sleazily happy to note that, upon our return to the stairwell, Amy was closer to the head of the stairs than I was.

I glanced her way. Something was different in her face. Maybe the laughing jag fortified her, took the edge off the terror, or maybe it was just her impatience. "Somebody's got to take the
bull by the horns," she said. She rose from her crouch and lifted a two by four from the stack behind us. "Back me up. I'm going to scare her away."

I squinted at her, thinking, just what do you plan to do with that stick, girl? Joust with the damn thing?

Amy started down, one, two, three steps, when holy shit the bear turned its myopic flat-faced gaze and caught sight of her. It raised itself to standing and a sound came out of its chest and it faked left and faked right and Amy dropped the stick and high-tailed it back up the steps to where I waited on high alert to see if this bear was planning to follow her.

I couldn't remember if a bear was more dangerous standing up like that, or if we had more to fear when it was down on all fours, like it went back to being once Amy removed herself from its sphere of attention.

Instead of standing out front, all queen of the castle and shit, Amy had sidled to the rear of me, her reserve of courage exhausted by those few tentative steps downstairs toward Bearville. At this point there was no question about her nerve. She was using me as a human shield. Literally cringing behind me. Right about then was when it occurred to me I might have a little bit of leverage, so I went, "Boss. I've been thinking."

"Don't strain yourself," she huffed, so I knew there was some part of her that wasn't too terrified to parry.

I made my case softly, humbly, but with conviction. At that very point, I said, I was not convinced that I would continue to work for the company if and when I was ever freed from the situation we found ourselves in, but if I did, I said, I would certainly need to make more money. I said something close to that. Maybe I just said, "You ought to pay me more."

"A raise?" she squeaked. "You're asking me for a raise? Now?" And she laughed.
I laughed, too. We understood each other well enough. Because she thought it was funny, but I was dead serious.

I wonder if you know what I am saying because a bear is REALLY BIG when you are standing close to it and it may be getting ready to go all apeshit on you.

She said something like you took that wage when you came on and I reminded her that I did not agree to any life-defying business and we crouched there at an impasse, her hair hanging down in long bangs over her eyes because she was too lazy to go get a real haircut.

I was a gentleman. I would give her a little time to think about it before I slowly eased myself over to the other side, the non-bear-side, of her.

We didn't hear the car come up. Marta, the client, drove one of those fancy newfangled ecoelectric thingamajigs that don't make sound when they're in glide mode. Nobody had a Prius back then, only the true granola types. So we didn't realize that Marta had come to take a look at the progress until she was standing in the middle of the kitchen in her high heels and hose, her business skirt and classy blouse, waving her hand at the bear as though shooing a neighbor's unruly tomcat.

When the bear swung its massive head to face Marta, I felt my mouth go suddenly dry. The bear gave a vigorous full-body shake as though a chill had come over it, and it dropped its head, a bull fixing to gore that foolish human in its path. A bitter dread prickled my skin. There was nothing funny about it, now. This would end badly, I was sure of it. Beside me, I heard Amy take a sharp sudden breath, and without a second thought I grabbed her by the tool belt just in time to prevent her from flinging herself down into the fray. She scrambled for traction, but I held on tight.

And the bear shooed, just as easy as that.

Marta looked up at us. Her eyes were twinkling when she said, "The two of you thinking of coming down anytime soon?"

I turned toward Amy. I'd gone bug-eyed at the sight of that bear in docile retreat, but what I saw next floored me even more. Even if you've never quite experienced the feeling yourself, any fool knows love when it's written all over a face.

I could tell Amy was just about beside herself with the need to descend that staircase to Marta. I still had her fairly well immobilized by the grip I'd maintained on her toolbelt, and letting go I said softly, teasing, "About that raise," and she named a figure, under her breath, and I real quick counter-offered two dollars higher and she came back lower and I said "Split the difference" and she said "Deal" and I moved to the side so she could get by.

Oh-kay, then, I thought. So that's the way this business works.

*   *   *

I've been working for Amy for six years since this happened. Every Christmas I get some extra little bonus, a hundred bucks more than what the other guys get in a little felt stocking with some plastic replica bear scat in it or a videotape with a National Geographic special set on Kodiak Island or a pair of salt and pepper shakers in the shape of bear cubs. One time it was a Smokey-the-Bear cap, furry all around the crown and with two muffin-shaped bear ears sticking up. The crew thinks it's hilarious.
We have our holiday party in that same house. After the bear incident Amy and Marta stayed up late talking and got into that kind of funny business people do when they're overly relieved to be alive and a person of good looks and fine temperament and the preferred gender is standing next to them and maybe there's a little bottle of wine, even if the Harry and David gift box of yuppy fruit has been made off with by a hairy bandit. It took two years and some kind of mail-order fertilizer arrangement for their first offspring to come along and get christened Smokey by one of their freewheeling ministerial friends down in the Rio Grande, with yours truly standing up for him as my godson. He's got a little sister on the way, which slows Amy down a bit on the jobsite, makes her quit climbing ladders and such.

We still go through the piles quick enough. I got shoved off the mountain of gravel by a kid who came up out of high school and wields his shovel like a pitchfork. Sumbitch looks like he's tossing hay for all the effort it takes him. We've got two guys besides Jackson steady employed to form and frame and a girl who's a crackerjack trim carpenter. I drive around in the pickup hauling loads from here to there. It's not too bad an operation.

And at the end of that holiday party each year, just before we all filter out to our trucks to try to dodge the battery of DUI stops and random shopping-frenzied or candy-cane-martini-fueled nutso drivers on the road, we raise our last toast to the bear. May she live long and prosper. May her children be blessed. The bear was hungry, that's all.

We say this, but we know the odds aren't with her. A bear who's been inside a house isn't apt to live long. We never called Fish and Game to report her but no doubt someone else would; they'd send the warden out to round her up—tranq gun and a big cage—and they'd cart her off to some godforsaken territory where she'd never have another chance to make a peanut butter sandwich. And her cub? Good luck, buddy. Learn fast or die young.
But we toast to her, anyway, and to the idea of her, and to her kind, all the wild things out there still fierce enough to make us shit our pants. The things still big enough to eat us, if they wanted to. We don't want them to eat us, but we want to know they could. To range just outside the boundaries of our awareness, scaring the crap out of us.

This year, when we lift our glasses to join that toast, Amy catches my eye. And Marta beside her, she's in on it, too. Smokey's in my lap, finally, after climbing on all of the carpenters in that monkey way he's got—we gather him in at the same time, and here's Mrs. Number Four, making a fair dent on the champagne next to me, and the little one swelling Amy's midsection, and any more who are out there waiting to join us, big or little, whatever way they come. Come on, I think. Plenty of room.

This is what I'll tell my godson, when he's old enough to understand. It's good to share a moment together when a cross between Sasquatch and Rocky Raccoon gets all up in your face with a primordial hunger. The truth is, don't nobody want to be first in line for a hungry bear. It's a good thing to know about the world. But it's just as good to see how lines etch themselves across another person's face over the years. It's okay to be the guy who moves the piles. Who shows up the morning after anything, showered and shaved and on time for work. A man who's got standards.

Me, I know what I'm made of. I wouldn't trust myself with the care and feeding of a houseplant. But I've got a god-kid to look out for, now, and this crazy-ass thing that feels closer to family than any other random group of humans I've seen.

It's not all peaches and cream, no sir. I won't lie to him. Sometimes you eat the bear, little Smokey, I'll tell him. Sometimes the bear eats you.

That bear just wanted to eat.
I'm sorry I couldn't oblige her a little more thoroughly.

And then I look around the room at the lot of 'em and think, well, *that's* a load of bullshit.

Smokey wriggles off my lap and makes a run for the bowl of chocolates and my Mrs. Number Four leans in close to whisper something in my bum ear. I don't catch the first part but the meaning of the back half's unmistakeable. We'll have to take our leave. Got a little business of our own to satisfy.

And for that I am not sorry. I'll not lie to you. No. I am not sorry in the least.
Stuart can't stand purple but it's Melissa's favorite color, and he's got to do something to make things right. He'd said a couple of things last night that he wished he hadn't. She'd fired a few choice comebacks, herself, but that's the way their fights were going these days: start tense, get worse. It wasn't like the old days when they could fix anything with sex. The things that needed fixing had gotten bigger and the sex had tapered off, which left both of them polite and testy, and neither one good at that. They'd been good at sex. So: purple. Or, as the chips he's chosen declare: Dusky Lilac and French Lavender.

The clerk mixing paint behind the counter could be fresh out of high school. That's how they hired them here at the home center, run them through fourteen minutes of training and cut them loose on the floor. The kid looked down at the chips and then back up at Stuart. He cocked an eyebrow. "Dude," the kid said. The lifted brow sported a tarnished gold stud. "Really?"

Stuart fixed his gaze on the kid's name badge. "A gallon of each. Interior latex. Best quality. Eggshell." He paused. "Ricky." And then, because he couldn't help himself, he tacked on, "For the wife," and when the kid did that thing with his mouth that guys do when they pretend to commiserate but really they are mocking you, Stuart thought, Punk-ass. Just wait. Blink your eyes and you'll be forty years old and standing in Home Depot with twenty-five feet of garden hose and a terracotta strawberry planter in your hand, planning to spend the weekend painting the
bathroom and fixing up the yard so you can climb back in your wife's bed and good graces. The thought seemed too dismal sitting out there alone like that so he forced himself to add: *if you're lucky*. Which Stuart was. He checked his watch. "Could you get a move on?"

The kid aye-aye'd him, and then took his sweet time mixing it up. He dabbed the color on each lid and dried it with the heat gun. "There you go," he said. "French Lilac and Dusky—"

Stuart grabbed the wire bails and hoisted the cans off the counter. Yeah, Stuart thought, turning his back on the kid, thanks and no thanks.


Melissa's car wasn't in the driveway when Stuart pulled up to the house. They'd bought kind of a run-down split-level in a decent neighborhood of Las Cruces, close to good schools for the kids they'd planned but haven't yet managed to produce. That's what the fights are about. Stuart's willing to keep trying. Melissa's—well, Melissa's stuck on another idea, and Stuart's having a hard time coming around to her point of view.

Most times, most things, Melissa's decisions are sound. She can see both sides of a situation. It's got her where she is in her career; that and hard work. He'll give her that. Hell, he'll give her anything. Nearly. She started in the HMO a dozen years ago and now she's just a level or two down from the top job in employee relations. The only bad thing is it's a bitch of a commute, an hour each way and more if she doesn't get out before rush hour. Fridays are the worst. Stuart checked his watch again. She might have got held up. A quarter to six. Melissa bought him the Rolex when he moved up to partner in his father's plumbing business a year ago. They had friends coming over at seven thirty for dinner and to crack the top off a few bottles of Stuart's latest batch of home brew. He calls this one Mountain Stout; even though they're stuck in the flats he likes the sound of it.
Stuart took his time in the shower. It was a big day for him at work. They'd closed on the contract with the new business park development team to provide total plumbing and HVAC for the offices going in—ninety thousand square feet plus an in with the fastest growing developers in the county—and he had pretty much finessed the whole thing, convinced them their company was poised on the cutting edge, state-of-the-art technology along with an old-style approach to craftsmanship and customer service—blah blah but they bought it at a price Stuart is convinced will carve them a tidy little profit. He's got his eye on a diamond ring he saw in the window of a jeweler downtown. It's their fifteenth anniversary in May, and he's ready to splurge a little. He toweled off after the shower and stood at the sink to shave for dinner, kept one ear open for the sound of her rustling around. When he stepped out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped about his waist he could see that her space in the driveway was still empty. Must have hit some bad traffic. Six thirty meant he still had time to take a nap before he got dressed and started the grill. He checked the voice mail to see if she had left him a message but it was empty.

Stuart let the towel drop to the floor and sprawled on the bed. His knee had been bothering him since he took that spill from the ladder last summer, and the over-30 basketball tourney he won for the team two weeks before didn't do it any good. He'd promised Melissa he'd make an appointment with the orthopedist as soon as he had a little time. They could go free to the HMO—her insurance covered them both—but he's been going to the same bone doctor since he crushed his femur playing around with his dad's pipe threader when he was five. That doc has patched up every sports injury Stuart or his brothers had sustained through all those years, and Stuart figured why change a good thing; the doc's old but he knows a lot. Maybe it's not a sports injury, Melissa said, and Stuart said, Oh yeah? What else could it be? Repetitive stress, she said, and he waved her off. I'm only thirty-nine, sweetheart, he told her. I'm not falling apart yet.
Not falling apart, not forty, but Jesus things hurt worse than they used to. Stuart rolled over on his back and offered a clear target for the evening sun pouring in the high windows. The bedroom's the most finished room in the house. Stuart had put in a hydronic baseboard heat system, central air, new hardwood floors, replaced the old aluminum windows with good looking double paned Hurds. He traded his buddy Alex some plumbing labor for finish work, and Alex trimmed it out super nice. Melissa and Stuart went together to get a new bed. They'd been sleeping on a series of futons since college days and they went all out, bought a king-sized Posturepedic with a fancy oak frame, bookcase headboard and the works. They'd bounced on them all to see which one they liked best and Stuart got a boner watching her lay there sexy on the showroom beds, the windows to the street and that studious look on her face she doesn't know is irresistible. It seemed like a good thing for their relationship. A year after that he put the mirrors on the ceiling—he knows what people think but these are simple, tasteful—since they'd decided that nothing was wrong with more of a good thing.

The sun warmed Stuart's skin and he dozed there, waited to hear her car engine and her steps up the walk. Now and then he opened his eyes and caught a glimpse of himself. Maybe not the best body—he never got as tall as his younger brothers—but it's not bad, either. He still pumps iron four times a week at the gym, and he's stronger than anybody he knows. Melissa's always liked that, how buff he is. She's just a slip of a girl, ninety pounds maybe after a big meal. He was lying there thinking about how he was going to paint the bathroom, lilac on the walls, lavendar for the ceiling, and if he got really ambitious maybe he would rip out the linoleum on the floor and lay some tile in there—and kind of hoping Melissa would come home in time to lie down with him, just fifteen minutes before they had to get up for their guests—when he fell asleep.
When Stuart woke, the house was dark and the doorbell was ringing. He jumped out of bed and grabbed his robe and was at the door before his eyes even focused. He yanked it open and Boz and Julia were turned and going back down the steps.

"Damn, Stu," Boz said. His jaw had a way of not closing completely so he looked like he was smiling even when he was dead serious. "We can come back another time."

"Did we get the date wrong?" Julia: thin and angular, high strung like a horse, funny as hell when she's drunk. A pediatrician for Melissa's HMO.

Stuart switched on the porch light and rubbed his face. "Wrong? No. Forget it. Come on in. What time is it? Christ, I was supposed to light the grill half an hour ago. Sorry. Come in. Sit down." He walked them to the couch. "Let me get you a beer."

"The new batch?" Boz said, and eyed the label appraisingly when Stuart brought it. Julia looked at Stuart and laughed.

Stuart looked down at his worn terrycloth robe. At least he had it tied. He lifted his arms and pirouetted in a dull stab at humor. "What," he said. "You don't like?" He left them there and went to the bedroom to change. He stood in the middle of the bedroom floor and wished he could ask Melissa which shirt she'd prefer: the blue or the brown. But Melissa wasn't home. Melissa was—Wait. What? He was suddenly exhausted. Stuart saw the bed there, and couldn't help but lie in it.

*   *   *

Melissa kept the folder with the pictures of the girls open on the passenger seat beside her as she drove. They were three-year-old twins, identical, but Melissa had studied their faces so long she was certain she would be able to tell them apart. The placement worker would give prospective
parents their pictures but wouldn't tell them their names until they had signed the papers and paid the adoption fees. Lily and Lucy, Melissa called them. She didn't know many Chinese girls' names but she would start to find out. There was a lot she didn't know about China. She had been raised in Iowa City, for god's sake. But she had a degree in communications with a minor in anthropology and she could damn well find out. The girls would need to know their heritage, after all. Stuart was wrong. It was fine for Chinese babies to be raised by white parents but the placement worker had said it was important to keep the children connected to their own culture. They would do that. She would cook Chinese food and they would celebrate Chinese New Year and surely there would be other Chinese people in Las Cruces that Melissa could befriend who would serve as extended family for Lily and Lucy. It would take some effort but Melissa was sure she could do it.

What was it the placement worker had said about why the girls were available for adoption? She'd been an older woman, tired-looking, with a rash of hives that discolored her chin and lower cheek. Melissa had wanted to take her aside. She knew a good remedy for that. Melissa got a tiny patch of hives once a month, like clockwork, two weeks before her period started, and on the day they appeared she ate only plain yogurt with brown rice and used a special cortisone cream under her makeup. They rarely lasted more than a day after that.

What had she said? Their parents couldn't keep them. That didn't mean their parents didn't want them, did it? Melissa knew that couldn't be true. Anyone with angels like these two—look at their perfect faces! their jet black hair! their cautious smiles!—would never give them up. There must have been a tragedy in the family.

Parents not want them. And suddenly, gripped by a rush of emotion too violent to drive through, Melissa noted a freeway exit just ahead and steered the car up the ramp to a stop.
Boz and Julia gave Stuart until the end of their second beer each to come out. When he still hadn't, they went in after him.

   Julia snapped into professional mode. "Did you take something?"

   Stuart pushed himself up with his hands. The light was bright and Julia was peering intently into his eyes.

   "Did - you - take - something," Julia enunciated. She had plenty of practice talking to two year olds. "You know. Pills. Drugs. Something."

   Stuart tapped her upper arm reassuringly and swung his legs off the bed to sit up. "Take something. No. But I'm starving." He turned to Boz. "Shit. I've got to get the steaks on."

   "Only say the word, good buddy," Boz said, and Julia gave him a knowing glance.

   "Right. Cook. Cocinar. Yo cocino. In a little while, yo cociné—what's the word for steaks?"

   Stuart looked at him in a daze. "Tú," Boz said, pointing at Stuart. "Mas cerveza." And he retreated to the kitchen to begin cooking.

   Stuart looked at Julia for elucidation. "He's taking Spanish lessons," she said. "He's decided, since my mom's family is from Salvador, our girls should speak their ancestral language."

   "You speak Spanish?"

   "Not a word. So if he wants them to learn, he's got to teach them. Come on, Stuart. You look like a bum." She opened the door to the closet and selected a shirt and a pair of trousers.

   "Those are work clothes," Stuart said. "And I'm not dressing with you in the room, Julia."
"Good. That was a test. I would have known you were on drugs if you bared your hunky body to me with my husband in the next room. Where's Melissa?"

"She's supposed to be home by now."

"She didn't get home from work?" Julia's forehead furrowed and she paused on her way out the door.

"I keep expecting to hear her car," Stuart said, feeling stupid.

Julia frowned deeper. "Get dressed, Stuart. I'm calling the highway patrol."

* * *

Melissa had never taken this exit before—it wasn't to a town, just a county road that meandered through the last agricultural lands left in the area—and between the sun going down and her tears she missed seeing that instead of a shoulder to the road there was a steep ditch that ran alongside. She felt the right front wheel scramble for traction and then the car lurched to the side and there was a thud and a long scraping sound. She snapped forward but the seat belt caught her and she was unhurt. When she pressed the accelerator, there was the clatter of thrown gravel and the bad smell of rubber, burning. She stopped doing that and reached into her purse for her cell phone. She didn't expect to have service here in the nothing between cities, but she stared at the flat face of the phone for a minute and willed the bars to rise. No such luck. She got out of the car.

The sun was an orange blob melting between a barn and a house in the distance. Neither structure seemed to have been repainted in a very long time. Melissa eyed the front of the vehicle. The weight of it rested on the metal thing that ran down the middle and the passenger side tire was spinning aimlessly but none of the tires looked flat. This was good or bad, depending on how you looked at it. Good, because it's never a good thing to have a flat tire. Bad,
because a flat tire was the only car trouble Melissa knew how to fix. She had taken an auto repair course once—a kind of take-control-of-your-own-life class for women—but left after the second session. It was clear that auto repair entailed more grease than Melissa was comfortable dealing with, and with Stuart around to take care of their minor maintenance and breakdowns she felt sufficiently in control of that portion of her life.

This trouble was of a different order. That wheel was not getting out of the ditch unless someone picked the car up or towed it out. Melissa closed her eyes and mentally gauged the distance back to the highway. Then she considered her chances of being picked up by a good Samaritan versus the off chance of a psycho in a pumped up pickup truck. There were many more good Samaritans than psychos, she was sure of it, but her luck had not gone great today and maybe the chances would be affected by something like that. She opened her eyes and looked at the car. She looked at the house in the distance. Too scary. The car was a little Japanese model, very lightweight. She had never tried to lift a car but she had exemplary stomach muscles and Stuart always said that half of lifting weights was having strong abdominals. And besides, there had been plenty of documented cases of people under stress lifting many times their own weight. Was she under stress? Oh yes. No doubt about that.

The water in the ditch was running. Melissa had to get her shoes wet or go barefoot. Since they were her best pumps for work she removed them and tucked them under the seat of the car. She was wearing an old skirt suit and resigned herself to ruining it. She stepped down into the ditch and turned her back to the car, squared herself to it, and wedged her fingers under the bumper. Then she breathed out, tightened her stomach muscles, and lifted.
The car rose by several inches. Then she had to let go, and it returned to its original position. She turned to face it. This time, head on, she put her shoulder to the fender and grabbed hold of the bumper and lifted.

Again it rose. This time, though, she could see she was only lifting the chassis above the frame. There was probably that much play in the suspension. If she wanted to move the wheel back onto the road she would have to lift the whole weight of the car and reposition it and that, it became clear to her, was fucking impossible.

Although Stuart could do it. And for a moment she became absolutely furious with Stuart. Because he was not there, because he could not help her, because he would not agree to take the girls, because he could not give her children, because he was strong and capable and kind and everything she looked for in a man and she was going to have to leave him.

* * *

Julia had talked to the State Patrol—no accidents that involved a small red Toyota, although they'd keep an eye out for it—and none of the hospitals in the three-county area had a new patient that matched the description Julia gave of Stuart's wife. That was the good news. But Melissa was still not home.

Boz had broiled the steaks in the oven and whipped up some mashed potatoes with the help of the microwave. He set it all on the table with fresh beers for each of them when Julia hung up after the last phone call. "I have the feeling," she said, looking straight at Stuart with a mean glint in her eye, "you're not telling us something."

"Julia!" Boz hushed her. He worked as a family counselor for the high school and knew it was never wise to directly confront a person so obviously in crisis. Better to feed them.
"I shit you not," Stuart said, slurring slightly. He had just downed three of his new brews in rapid succession and determined this to be the best batch yet. "Melissa is not home because Melissa does not wish to be home."

"You're still too sober to get away with solipsisms," Julia snarled. "Where is she. And why doesn't she wish to be here."

"I broke her heart."

Julia stared at him. Boz cut into his steak and listened while chewing. There was no sense letting the food get cold. Something like this could go on all night. "How," Julia said.

Stuart snapped the cap off his fourth bottle of beer and drank it without pausing. "She wanted lilac and lavender," he said. "I said no. But I was wrong, wasn't I? Wasn't I wrong, Boz? I should have said yes."

"Yes to what?" Julia was impatient. She was used to things that hurt in specific places and could be reasonably well repaired.

"Yes to the Chinese girls," Stuart said, and lowered his head to his plate. When he lifted it again he had mashed potato stuck to his nose. Julia reached over and wiped it with a napkin.

"I think I have to go to bed," Stuart said.

*   *   *

Melissa struggled with the car for a long time, not because she continued to hope that she'd be able to move it but because she was furious with Stuart, and then furious with herself, and finally furious with the kind of world that would refuse to give her children and would instead make her choose between the decent, reliable man she wished to spend her life with and two small, beautiful, jet-haired girls across the world who, were she willing to pay an agency thousands of
dollars and sacrifice most of the happiness that had come her way so far, were willing to become her daughters.

"Fuck this," she said, finally, and collapsed, exhausted, into the ditch.

She huddled there for a while. She would think of something to do but in the meantime focused on an erratic beam of light that bobbed slowly toward her from the direction her car was facing.

What made the beam was a man holding a flashlight. He paused when he saw the car and let the light play over it. Melissa remained in the ditch. Psychopathic ax murderer or roving good Samaritan, she was too tired to deal with either. But the light shone onto her face and remained there and she lifted her hand to block it from her eyes.

"Hey," she said. "Cut it out."

The light remained a moment longer and then shifted to her feet. Still the man didn't speak. Melissa considered her muddy bare feet and decided she'd had enough of the ditch. "Look," she said, standing and reaching her hand toward him. "Help me up."

The man took her hand and lifted her from the ditch. "Who are you?" he said. His speech was slow and Melissa wondered if he was drunk.

"Who are you?" she said back. When he didn't answer she took the flashlight from his hand and directed it away from his eyes but close enough to illuminate his face.

"Andrew," he said, like this: an-DREW.

"You're a kid," Melissa said.

Andrew laughed. He was man-sized and well built in his t-shirt and overalls but his face was as open as an eight-year-old's. When he opened his lips to speak Melissa watched his tongue move thickly in his wet mouth.
"What's your name?"

"Melissa." She paused. "Andrew." He looked at her and grinned. He was goofy, this one. "AnDREW. Pick up my car."

He didn't need to be told twice. He stepped into the ditch and took hold of the bumper and lifted. The car rose higher this time but still not high enough to put the wheel back on the road. Melissa made a sound in her throat that was half disgust, half resigned failure. But AnDREW got out of the ditch, circled around to the front of the car and opened the driver's door. He did something to the controls and then he returned to the ditch and half-lifted, half-pushed the car and it rolled backward and he gently set it down on the road.

"Okay," Andrew said.

Melissa watched this in disbelief. Then she sputtered and raced around to the driver's side and got in. She started the car and sat there with the engine running.

Andrew stood outside. He was playing with his flashlight, tracing the outline of the car with its beam.

Melissa rolled down the window. "Andrew? Thanks, okay?"

The big boy made a happy sound. He made the light course in circles on the car panels. Melissa wasn't sure what to do. She saw her purse sitting on the back seat and reached in for her wallet and took out a twenty dollar bill. "Here," she said, passing the money out the window to the boy, but he turned away from it.

"No!" he said, agitated. "No!"

Melissa withdrew her hand and slumped against the seat back. She couldn't leave him like this. "Andrew," she said, gentler. "Do you need a ride somewhere?"

Andrew stopped shaking the flashlight and nodded.
"Okay," she said. "Get in." And Melissa carefully lifted the folder of the Chinese girls from the passenger seat and made room for Andrew to sit down.

*   *   *

When Boz and Julia were half an hour later than they'd told the babysitter they'd be back, and relatively sure that Stuart's maladies, though intense and painful, were unlikely to result in his doing bodily harm to himself or another person; when they had convinced themselves that Melissa's absence was the result of her having argued that morning with Stuart and not due to some mishap she might have succumbed to; and after having—with Stuart, who had not gone to bed after all but remained up to tell them the whole heartbreaking story—consumed every last bottle of the batch of Mountain Stout Stuart had brewed, Boz and Julia left for home. They lived two blocks away and had come on foot. Stuart would not have permitted them to drive in their condition.

It seemed then the perfect time to paint the bathroom. Stuart pulled out masking tape, brushes, the roller and roller cover and the two gallons of paint he had purchased earlier that day. He would cut in first and then paint the ceiling and trim. Surely Melissa would be home before he got to the walls. That was the part of painting she liked, and he'd be happy to share it with her.

*   *   *

It did not take Melissa long to realize that she had become thoroughly, reliably, and possibly inextricably lost with a large boy—Andrew said he was eighteen, but in the next breath he said he was forty, and then that he was four—who could not possibly function on his own without help. Even if she could find her way back to the freeway (which at this point was dubious) and
return to the spot at which she had first disabled her car, it would be unconscionable to simply
dump the boy out on the side of the road. What was that old African myth? Tarzan or George of
the Jungle, some childhood TV show: if someone saves your life, you are forever indebted to
them and must spend your every minute catering to their needs. Or the other way around; if you
save someone's life—forget it. It was a kid's show. Melissa is an adult.

"What now?" Melissa said, wearily. They had adopted the method of navigation by
guesswork. Melissa let Andrew guess. He took so much pleasure in it.

"Right!" Andrew said. They had gone right the last three times as well. He favored that
direction.

Melissa turned to the right and saw a gravel pullout ahead. She steered the car into it and
turned off the engine. She leaned back in her seat. Andrew looked at her with trepidation.

"Right!" he said again.

"Wrong, Andrew. I'm tired of this game. Aren't you?"

Andrew turned abruptly and looked out the window. He switched his flashlight on and
shone it outside. Then he shone it inside and laughed at his reflection in the glass.

Melissa watched him. He was tall and remarkably well-muscled and obviously strong.
Maybe as strong as Stuart. He resembled Stuart in some ways. The broad forehead, the bold
chin—he could be Stuart's son.

The doctor had said there was nothing wrong with Stuart's sperm. He said there was
nothing wrong with Melissa's eggs. When they asked him why, after trying for so long and
employing multiple technologies, they had still not been able to conceive, he lifted his shoulders
in a shrug and smiled an enigmatic little smile and said, *Only God knows the answer to that.*

For this they paid him several thousand dollars.
"Andrew," Melissa said. A wisp of hair had dropped in front of her face. "Andrew, do you think I'm pretty?"

Andrew stared at her. Then he turned to stare out the windshield. He made a sound that could have been yes or no or neither. Melissa gave a dry little laugh.

"Well, I think you are," she said, and it was true, in that moment she would have been proud to have a son like Andrew. She faced away from him and with her finger drew a circle in the condensation on the glass. She said softly, "Do you think I would be a good mother?"

Andrew went on staring out the window. In the distance a pair of headlights started small and grew bigger. Andrew waved his flashlight in crazy circles. "Lights!" he shouted. "Lights!"

Melissa wanted to cry.

The car pulled to a stop in the road opposite them. The driver rolled down the window and Melissa did the same. Maybe she could get directions.

"Everything all right here?" A man's voice inquired.

Melissa was about to tell the truth. No, everything was not all right. She was lost in the wilderness with a lunatic boy who was neither her son nor her husband but had found her in distress and lifted her out of it and now she had carried him far from his home and there were children in the back seat, her children, half a world and worse away and she was tired, she'd been looking for them for so long and now they seemed farther still, at her fingertips and gone for good, gone for good, and she'd thought—oh god, she'd thought—but Andrew in the seat beside her went wild with recognition, moving his flashlight with abandon and clipping Melissa a good blow to the ear, and shouted, "Papa!"

In the commotion Melissa heard a second voice cry "Son!" And then a matronly woman bustled out of the paused car and crossed the road quickly and flung open the passenger door to
Melissa's car and nearly dragged Andrew from it, the boy laughing gleefully, and smothered him in a wrestling hold, in an oppressive embrace.

The man carefully inched the car onto the shoulder. Then he, too, got out—Melissa could tell he was dressed in overalls the same as Andrew's, and walked with a limp—and walked over to put his arm around his son.

It was a manly hug. Nothing could have prepared Melissa for that.

Andrew's father left them and walked to stand beside Melissa's car. He put both hands on the open window frame and bent stiffly to look in at her. He looked nothing like his son but he had the same gentle bearing, the same—Melissa didn't know what to call it.

It reminded her of Stuart.

"I can't thank you enough, miss," he said. "For looking after our boy."

Melissa wondered how she could get away. She had her foot on the gas pedal but Andrew and his mother were in the way. "He—he was lost," she stuttered. "I didn't know how to find his way home."

Andrew pulled himself free of his mother's grip. "I helped her!" he chortled. "I helped her car!"

Melissa flinched as though she'd been hit. She watched as the matronly woman left her son's side and walked toward her. She forced her husband from his position and bent down.

*Now, Melissa thought. Now, the ax murderer. And I will have deserved it.*

The woman's large, square face filled the opening. Her hair was fixed in a rug of ringlets that fell, a failed permanent, about her broad cheeks. She reached in both hands and Melissa made herself remain in her seat. This is how it would be. They would find her on a dark county road, strangled. Would they blame Andrew? Could they run prints from her neck?
The woman cupped her palms softly around Melissa's tiny face. She leaned in further and planted a tender kiss on her forehead.

"Thank you, dear," she said.

Melissa slumped in the seat. In a watery voice, she said, "Can you tell me how I get to the highway?"

* * *

There was music playing in the house when Melissa got home. Stuart didn't hear her enter. She stood in the doorway to the bathroom and watched him. He had painted the window trim and the window sash and the glass of the window itself a hideous light purple. The same purple covered the ceiling and a good portion of it had splashed into the tub and dribbled over the toilet tank. Suddenly he felt something behind him and turned to see.

"Ah," he said. "You."

Melissa nodded.

Stuart turned away. He was still very drunk. With his paintbrush he gestured grandly toward the window. "Lavender," he said. "And lilac," and he pointed toward the unopened can. He turned back to her.

"I saved you the walls," he said.

She picked up the roller. It was several hours, still, until daylight. There was so much they could accomplish.
Dusk seeps into the back yard, collecting in the twinned canopy of the sugar maple and the cherry, pooling in the grass beneath the trees, staining the side of the two-story garage we’d dubbed the Fort, slowly, gradually, almost imperceptibly bedding the wild rhubarb below in its inky darkness. The sky is still too bright for the stars to emerge. Easton and I, both ten, stand at opposite ends of the mowed expanse and thread a Frisbee through the space between us. It sails out, solid and vivid as the moon, from his right hand to my left. Beneath it my dog Spot bounds happily, her eager bark and hoarse breath the only sounds apart from our occasional laughter or, beyond, the slam of a door or distant passing of a car. And then—this is how I remember it, though it’s been more than twenty years—darkness storms the yard in earnest and it grows too dim to see and I am the one who finally fumbles the catch, and when Spot retrieves it, grips it in her teeth, I slip to the grass to wrestle it from her. I lie back. Fireflies are brightening. In time the dark deepens enough for the first stars to show, and I shift to an elbow and push myself up.

Spot sits beside me, patiently waiting. I am her boy.

Her other boy is Easton, but he has gone home.

*   *   *

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**Boomerang**

Dusk seeps into the back yard, collecting in the twinned canopy of the sugar maple and the cherry, pooling in the grass beneath the trees, staining the side of the two-story garage we’d dubbed the Fort, slowly, gradually, almost imperceptibly bedding the wild rhubarb below in its inky darkness. The sky is still too bright for the stars to emerge. Easton and I, both ten, stand at opposite ends of the mowed expanse and thread a Frisbee through the space between us. It sails out, solid and vivid as the moon, from his right hand to my left. Beneath it my dog Spot bounds happily, her eager bark and hoarse breath the only sounds apart from our occasional laughter or, beyond, the slam of a door or distant passing of a car. And then—this is how I remember it, though it’s been more than twenty years—darkness storms the yard in earnest and it grows too dim to see and I am the one who finally fumbles the catch, and when Spot retrieves it, grips it in her teeth, I slip to the grass to wrestle it from her. I lie back. Fireflies are brightening. In time the dark deepens enough for the first stars to show, and I shift to an elbow and push myself up.

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Her other boy is Easton, but he has gone home.

*   *   *
San Francisco is a continent away from that Pennsylvania back yard. A lifetime away. Victor and I rent this upstairs flat on Waller Street, now. A big place, newly remodeled, with granite countertops and white oak floors and the kind of bathroom fixtures that go along with that. Victor cares about those things. I care that it's a brisk ten-minute walk to my lab at the medical center, and that the kitchen window overlooks the trees in Golden Gate Park. I've been keeping an eye on those trees for an hour, watching the light fade, passing my idle cell phone from hand to hand. It's November, and dusk comes fast this time of year. There's some trace daylight at the horizon, but it is dark, already, in the kitchen. I glance again at the phone in my hand. I shouldn't delay too long. My mother's on East Coast time, and I don't mean to keep her waiting.

When I speak to my mother, Easton's death will be real.

I hear Victor fit his key into the lock and push open the front door. His crisp footsteps echo in the hall. When he switches on the kitchen light I shade my eyes from the sudden brightness.

“Jack.” Victor takes a half step back in surprise. He makes a gesture toward the switch. "You want this off?" He eyes me as he pulls his arms from the sleeves of his suit jacket and carefully folds it over a chair back. He loosens his tie, slides the chair next to mine, straddles it. Then he leans in to kiss me. No matter how busy he is, he insists on kissing each time we are together again. His family is from Puerto Rico, where kissing is the national pastime. In Pennsylvania, where Easton and I grew up, kissing in public was suspect. Victor pulls back and gazes at me, a long look. “What?”

I'm still holding the phone. “My mother left a message.” How do I describe Easton to him? "A friend died." Victor makes a sympathetic sound deep in his throat, and waits. I should
tell Victor his name. *Easton Costello.* I should pay them both that respect. Instead I say, "A childhood friend. No one you know."

“You going back?”

I shake my head no. We can afford this place, but just barely. A ticket from San Francisco to Philadelphia, on short notice? “I’ll send the family a card.”

"A card," Victor repeats, his eyebrows knit.

I give a little smile. I tap the phone lightly, tell him, "My mother might go." Her message said she was thinking of making the trip—it’s two hours by plane from Florida—but I’ll try to talk her out of it. It’s too much stress at her age. And too many years since we were part of Easton's life, I think, but don’t say. I stand up, reach for the fridge. Vic’s got a meeting tonight, and he’ll have to leave soon to make it in time. “Get you something to eat?”

“I’ll eat later. I won’t starve.”

“Go shower. I’ll make you something quick for the road.”

When he steps out of the bathroom he is shaved and freshly dressed and handsome enough that even now, after ten years together, I still swoon a little in his company. I hand him a cheese sandwich in a sack as he heads out the door. “Drive safely.”

He studies my face. “I shouldn’t be late.”

I don’t care when he comes home, as long as he does.

*   *   *

I met Victor at my college graduation. He was the nephew of my advisor, back from a year off teaching English to kids in Uganda. He spoke Swahili with a Bronx accent. He wore expensive socks with his Chuck Taylors and flat-front khakis that hung low on his hips, and when he
undressed for me that first time the sight of his body whole, entire, took my breath away. He teased me about that, and what happened next made me sure. I don’t know how to be who I am without him.

My mother and Victor have a special bond. She taught English for years and Victor moved into educational administration. When I landed the postdoc at UCSF he got himself hired as superintendent of schools for a North Bay district. The position requires long hours and a daily commute, but he loves it. The two of them can talk for hours about educational policy in this country, and switch to cooking and talk for hours more. He is the son my mother deserves.

“It was an accident, then,” I say, choosing my words carefully. She’s told me that they found Easton’s car at the bottom of a highway embankment. Maybe he’d fallen asleep, or maybe he’d swerved to avoid hitting a deer. The animals were everywhere on the roads in the fall, driven out of the woods by hunters and filling up on what browse they could find. His car had rolled several times and his body was mangled. It must have been quick, at least.

“He was doing so well, Jack,” she says, her voice husky with sleep. She’s on East Coast time, and I’ve woken her. When my father died she moved from Pennsylvania to Florida to avoid the winters. Instead she braves hurricanes, volunteers part time to save the manatees, and worries about the people she left behind.

“That’s what you said. The kids,” I say. “The new job.” She’s told me these things, offered casual reports as they arrive from Sister, the only one of the Costello family to survive without visible scars. I want to dig down to the heart of it—to what happened with Chet and Easton’s father and with Easton himself—but I know she won’t have it.

“We loved him,” she says, and I can hear her weeping softly.
This is as close as she will come to mentioning that time. “I know, Mom,” I say, and regret having called so late. She’ll be up for hours, now. She turned seventy-four in the spring and her health has been a little rocky. I turned thirty-two this year, twice as old as I was the last time I saw Easton. My father would have been seventy-six, if he had lived.

Chet was seventy-six when he died. My father did not even make it to seventy.

* * *

Easton Costello and I grew up in a town full of swing sets and picket fences, painted trim, little sisters. The trash truck rumbling down the road once a week before the fleet of sedans left for work. Baked beans and potato salad. In Grantsville the old country of our grandparents hovered as an ancestral memory, a savory but hard-to-pin-down spice in a sturdy stew. We had barber chairs, a children’s library, an old lady who hoarded everything. We believed in something short of excellence but nothing so inexcusable as failure. And suicide, in there. An ambulance dispatched, its angry wail splitting the night.

There were things we talked about, Easton and I, and things we never said. I would not reveal that I preferred the company of most animals to all humans; that I felt most at home hidden in the bramble in the overgrown lot that backed our house and ran until the mowers took a hard line at the parking lot beside the police station. To sink my hands in the humid rot of a log was to feel myself acknowledged. The animals were wild and did not show themselves often, but I knew they were there. I had learned their signs. As I somehow understood that they knew mine, and did not object to my occasional presence. It was the place I would go when I wanted to be away from everyone. Even Spot knew better than to follow me there.
Spot joined the family, a puppy, just months before I was born. My father had named her for the black patch that covered her left eye and cheek. He was a man of great imagination but he couldn’t buck the universe, he said. He’d tried different names—Sally, Crackers, Pal—but none of them stuck. Everyone who saw her called her Spot, in a bow to the obvious. It was almost a joke, how aptly the name fit her appearance, and the affection it inspired for her rubbed off, to some slight degree, on me. I was John, and while my mother sometimes called me Jack or Jackie around the house, to nearly everyone else I was simply John, Marcus and Eileen’s quiet boy. I might have gone completely unnoticed but for Spot.

Even Easton, I believe, liked me because of Spot. His house was small and his father was in the Army Reserve, which meant he had to go away for weeks at a time for training each year. With her husband gone so much, Easton’s mother refused to consider a dog. Easton and his siblings—he had a brother, Anthony, five years younger, and a new baby girl everyone called Sister—were too much to handle in his absence as it was. A dog would put her over the edge, she claimed. She had nerves. Easton knew better than to press. Instead, from first grade on, he became a regular at my house, taking up position beside Spot’s opposite shoulder to watch cartoons after school, or riding bikes together slowly enough for Spot to trot alongside.

I could offer him Spot’s company, but I needed Easton, too. As an only child of older parents, I understood early how vital it was to have an ally in the small skirmishes that took place in the classroom and on the playground. Easton didn’t require much by way of conversation. He liked dogs and so did I; when he grew up, he said, he wanted to train them for undercover missions. Dogs could smell explosives in microscopic amounts, he reported. They could tell if someone had cancer before the best blood tests could. I liked dogs because they were willing to sit beside me without the expectation that something would be accomplished. Just sitting,
shoulder to shoulder, was enough. I knew early on what kind of a child I was and what kind of adult I would become, and I was not wrong about that. In later years, Easton’s interests would shift and he would become a different kind of man than I could have predicted, but in the fourth grade he had thrown his lot with the animal world, and with me.

We were ten, the three of us, that March when Easton’s mother died.

I’ve never been ordered in my thoughts or my behavior. I find protocols comforting because my mind does not naturally create them. Perhaps this is why I’ve become a scientist. I needed a protocol, a custom that would let me speak to Easton after the worst had happened. Not to make things better: that would be foolish. Just to breach the silence that had accrued like a gossamer bubble, expanding around him. His mother had killed herself and this moment had arrested Easton in his forward motion and committed him to a brittle isolation. He followed the rote patterns of each day: bus, school, bus, home. I watched him emerge from his front door every weekday morning and tread the sidewalk to the bus stop, his shoulders canted forward to determine his direction and his body obediently following. He walked the same way in reverse each afternoon, up the steps to his door and inside. Weekends, he didn’t come out at all.

It was my mother who created the opening for Easton. After his mother died she went to Easton’s house to offer her sympathy and support to the family. Easton was welcome to stay with us while his father figured out how to care for his three children. Richard Costello rebuffed her. He had hunkered down, fortified, in his grief. But my mother was persistent and returned like clockwork, a new casserole in hand each week and a new idea to offer.

I wonder, now, what that must have cost her. My mother disliked Easton’s parents, and while she never let on to him, she made no attempt to conceal her contempt for them from my father or me. She thought Easton’s father was a brute and his mother weak-minded. To her mind,
Easton was that rare thing: a child unaffected by the excesses of his parents. She meant to keep it that way. At last she settled on a plan Easton's father agreed to consider. Anthony and Sister were small enough to attend day care. She provided him with brochures for the options in town, and provided her opinion of the quality of each. No such care was available to children Easton’s age, but perhaps he would come to our house after school for a snack, and Easton and I could play together as we always had. My father would drive Easton home in time for dinner. There would be no disruption of their family life, but Easton’s father could go back to work and know that his children would be well cared for until he returned home in the evening.

I can picture my mother doing this. She wasn’t one to mince words. She would frame the situation perfectly and then sit back to provide Easton’s father time to think through her offer. He’d taken a month’s absence from work and, while his employer was understanding, he couldn’t keep him on indefinitely while he stayed home and cared for his family. She would use words like leave and responsibility and supervised. She herself, she would confirm, would be available to Easton the whole time he was at her house. She was home for the summer, anyway, and would be able to ensure his safety. It could be a temporary solution, and Easton’s father could make changes for his family any time he saw fit. For the time being, she would have stressed, it could provide Easton some continuity.

In this way, Easton came back to us. He was quieter than he had been. My mother spoke seriously to me. Give him time, she insisted. Don’t make him do anything he doesn’t want to do. He’s been through something terrible.

As if I ever told Easton what to do. As if I didn’t follow his lead in nearly everything.

*   *   *
We grew up knowing Chet Dunkirk in the way we knew the Methodist church or the shop that sold propane gas and repaired appliances: as a fixed spot on a map, a static and reliable element of the landscape. Chet had driven school buses when the parents were young. Not mine—they were in between generations—but Easton’s, and the other kids in the class. He was long retired and bustled about town before dark with his errands and his volunteer work. He shelved returned books at the public library and pulled weeds in the flowerbeds out front of Town Hall. He’d had a spell of tiny strokes that prevented him from driving, but he was fit enough to walk wherever he had to go. If my parents saw Chet walking, they would pull over and offer a lift. He rarely took it, but they believed him when he said he appreciated the offer.

My father and Chet Dunkirk were friends. In retrospect this seems unlikely—Chet a decorated veteran, my father a conscientious objector so committed he had spent time in federal prison for his principles—but, as a boy, the question of whom my parents chose to befriend was no concern of mine. His house was right behind ours, adjacent to the bramble and fronting the street, a long wild block away from the police station. His parents had left him the property. He had a niece in Florida who visited once a year with a brood of noisy, angry children. They stayed in the Holiday Inn the next town over. I had played with them once but my parents didn’t make me do that again. She drove a big, brand new Suburban with enough seat belts for all of them to fit.

One or two evenings a week, Chet and my dad would sit on our back porch and smoke. Chet stank of pungent cigars and would not come in the house. In the bitter cold of winter when they needed to wear coats and mufflers and to stamp their feet to keep from freezing, on sweltering summer nights with mosquitos working their ways in through the tears in the screen, they retired to the porch to smoke. I would watch the glowing ends of their cigars or cigarettes
trace arabesques as they gestured. I never followed what they talked about; they were adult
conversations, and boring to me, but I liked to be near them. I liked the deep sound of their
voices and the dark shapes their figures cut against the softer night.

I resemble my father. Like him, I’m built on a compact frame, medium height, medium
weight, medium brown hair. I have my mother’s eyes. Dad’s were a cool gray and accustomed to
squinting. He had ruined his vision reading law books in dim light, he said, and insisted I switch
on the lamp whenever he saw me absorbed in a book. My mother thought that was foolishness.
Presbyopia, she said. Old eyes. She had a word for everything.

Chet Dunkirk was a big man, not fat but large, and he carried his bulk benignly in the
way strong men often do. He was robust and fit in spite of his age. He had a thick shock of white
hair he wore longer than most older men did, a sturdy crop of nose hair, and a thatch of white
curls that climbed above the rim of his undershirt and were visible when he left the top button of
his twill work shirt loose. My mother called him chivalrous. Rumor was he’d been a good shot in
his youth, a marksman in the military and a renowned hunter. My father didn’t go in for that kind
of thing at all. Hunting for sport was cowardly, he said, although he made allowance for the
fathers who harvested an animal to feed their families. That’s what he called it, “harvested.”
Easton’s father hunted and I dreamed of going with him, just the men sleeping in a tent, waking
before dawn, wearing camouflage and silently stalking our prey, squeezing off that perfect shot
to penetrate the heart and bring down an animal without pain, without suffering, in a kind of
noble honor.

It was never like that, my father said. There was always pain and suffering.

Chet and my father communed often on the porch, and Easton and Spot and I played in
the yard, and my mother shuttled back and forth between the two groups of us, just to be near us,
I think, but never to interfere. I watched my mother closely that whole season after Easton’s mother died. She was older than the other mothers, and less full of the kind of frenetic energy the others possessed. I watched her closely for signs of decline.

It didn’t cross my mind to watch Spot. She was my age, and I was young.

*   *   *

We found her in August, on the fourth day after she’d gone missing.

My father wouldn’t let me see her. She’d eaten something bad, he said, and went off to heal herself, and when she didn’t heal she was glad to be alone when she died. That’s what animals did, he said. They left the pack to die alone in the wild. They needed some time to be with their bodies.

“Buzzards got her,” Easton said bluntly. He’d stayed away a few days when I was wild with grief, but had begun visiting again. His face stayed strangely passive.

“No,” I said. My hand was poised over a small pile of twigs. I was preparing to light a fire. It was something I did, then: gather things in small, controllable stacks, and set a match to them.

“I saw.”

I had to fight back an urge to throw myself at him, to pin him to the ground with an arm at his throat and press hard enough to prevent him from speaking. I wouldn’t have been able to do it. Easton was bigger and stronger than I and any advantage I might have marshaled with surprise would be quickly outweighed by his skill in fighting. Easton’s father had begun teaching him self-defense. I’d seen him practice on other boys in the schoolyard. There was something feral in the way Easton fought.
“Forget it,” he said. His face darkened and he turned to leave.

I couldn’t look at him. “When. When did you see her.” My voice caught in my throat and came out muddy and tear-slicked. I hated myself for that, and hated Easton for hearing it.

“With your father and Chet, when they found her. I was helping to look for her. We all were.”

But she was my dog, not yours, I thought, but did not say. And my father is my father, not yours. You are a boy who has no dog and no mother. But I could picture them standing there, Easton between my father’s compact shape and Chet’s somber bulk, blocking my way to Spot. And I could not stop myself, though I knew it was wrong and that I would regret it. “She was my dog,” I said. “Not yours.”

Easton shrugged, and walked away.

It wasn’t even true. She had been Easton’s dog, too. The one he hadn’t been allowed to have.

But I wouldn’t grant him that. I wanted my grief to myself. I wanted to let the bubble expand and gain strength until no one could enter. Not Easton. Not my parents. Not even Spot.

*   *   *

It was never the same between Easton and me after Spot died. My father brought home a new puppy and we played with it and taught it tricks but it was too wild to live in town, nipping our ankles and whining whenever it was shut inside, and had to be sent to a family with more acreage so it could run free. I didn’t want another dog. I haven’t had one since. Sometimes Vic and I talk about it. He wants children. I would trust him with them but am not sure about myself.
Even the thought of a pet seems too big an undertaking. I still love animals but I am happy for them to be wild, and responsible for their own well-being.

To compensate for my meanness, I took Easton with me to the secret place in the bramble behind our house. I had meant what I said—can still feel what it felt like to say it—and couldn’t retract it, but I wanted Easton to know that I was sorry. It wasn’t fair that his mother had died, or that his father was so angry, or that he himself was turning into a boy none of the other kids wanted to be around. He had a shy smile he still used with adults, but with kids, he had begun to snarl. He would lift his lip scornfully and mutter something under his breath. He looked the way an animal looks when it is cornered and ready to fight back. Most kids left him alone. He would win any fight he entered, and he hit harder than he had to. There was too much fury there, siphoned into whatever limb was delivering the blow.

Sometimes I think it was his mother’s fault, tossing him away like that. Sometimes I blame his father, who transferred his own rage to Easton and twisted his son’s grief into something solid, something that clamped down on him and wouldn’t let him move forward. I know it was wrong, whatever Chet was doing with Easton. And for a very long time I blamed my father, who was not home when I needed him to be, and when I stopped blaming him he was gone, too, lost to the cancer that got into his bones.

*   *   *

It was in the bramble that I came upon them. We were twelve by then, and Easton didn’t visit much any more. I had discovered chemistry and had got it in my head that I was going to become a scientist, and I spent most of my free time fooling around with the beakers and test tubes and reagents and litmus strips my parents provided to bolster my budding interest. Easton was intent
on turning his body into a machine for inflicting damage on others. He watched Bruce Lee reruns and practiced flying kicks and roundhouse punches. He’d been barred from fighting with the kids at school and he took lessons at the aikido gym on the gravel-paved road down along the river, battling men twice his age. I was stretching but it only seemed to emphasize how skinny I was; Easton, meanwhile, tried hard to bulk up with protein drinks and weightlifting. Kids said he could bench press a hundred pounds. That was more than I weighed, and it made me uncomfortable to think of it.

What caught my eye, even before I saw them, was Easton’s shirt draped over the branch of the maple. I couldn’t think of why he would take it off before fighting through the berry canes that barred entrance to the little clearing. There was no way to get through without tearing your clothes, and going bareskinned through that thorny hedge meant a torso full of scratches. I grabbed the shirt and plunged in. If he had got past the hedge without it, he was going to need it coming out.

I wasn’t expecting to find Easton there with Chet. They stood in the center of the clearing, circling each other. Neither wore a shirt. Easton’s chest was bare and shining and Chet’s was covered in white hair so thick he seemed like a different kind of animal. There was something in the way they turned to face me that made me feel like the intruder: they shared some kind of possession of place, a wildness of being that qualified their presence and felt like a final crushing judgment on my status. They belonged there, and I didn’t. They fit the beauty of the place in a way I never would. I felt the bile rise in my throat and forced it down. None of us spoke. And then I turned and ran crashing through the brambles again—to my father’s office, and when I saw he wasn’t there, I kept running until I got to Easton’s house, and found his father, and told him.
Spot is dead, and my father is dead, and now Easton is dead. Easton’s father is still alive. He is serving life in prison for killing Chet Dunkirk. He will be eligible for parole in fifteen years.

I think about putting on a jacket, going outside. The lights of the bridge are visible from the kitchen window so I know the fog has lifted. I could walk the paths in the park and think about Easton in the open air. I don’t want to bring him into this apartment, into my life with Victor. Even dead, he is too much to bear. Especially dead.

How can he be dead.

There were sirens, and when my father finally came home he went directly to the hospital and sat by Chet’s bedside. Once they disconnected Chet from the machines that kept him alive my father went out talking to people, trying to keep the town from exploding into overheated gossip. Easton’s father had called the police from Chet’s house, told them what happened. In sorting at last through his dead wife’s things, Richard Costello said, he had come upon a letter to her from Mr. Dunkirk. The local paper reported it in an article on the front page. In the letter, Mr. Dunkirk had confessed to having sexual feelings for Mrs. Costello. Distressed, Mr. Costello had gone to Mr. Dunkirk’s house to determine the truth, and when the conversation grew heated, Mr. Costello reached out to grip Mr. Dunkirk’s arm. Mr. Dunkirk drew back, lost his balance, and fell, striking his head on the edge of the counter. The coroner determined he died of a brain hemorrhage.
The story came out significantly differently in the trial. It took place six months after Chet’s death, six months Easton’s father spent in the county jail and his children in foster care. Easton ran away from his foster family, stole their car and left it a hundred miles away by the side of the road when it ran out of gas. When they found him they put him in the boys’ home. He wouldn’t get out of there for two more years. When I saw him next we were going to different high schools, and he acted like he didn’t recognize me. Maybe he didn’t.

At the trial, Easton’s father changed his testimony. Chet hadn’t fallen; Easton’s father had shoved him. I overheard my father reporting to my mother, who refused to attend. Easton’s father spoke softly but clearly, my father said, and the courtroom was quiet enough for everyone to hear.

“Tell me exactly what he said,” my mother demanded.

I heard the catch in my father’s voice. “He said he shoved him. He said this. I believed he had bothered my wife and I wanted to hurt him.”


“The prosecutor reminded him that he had not merely hurt Chet, but killed him.”

“What did he say to that?”

“He said he had wanted to. He had wanted to kill him.”

I stepped into the room in time to see my father lay his face in his hands. It was the second time in my life I had seen my father cry. I would once more, when I told him about Victor.

* * *

* * *
My father seemed mild but there was a raw and rigid fury in him that could frighten people. It
never rose with me. I would hardly know it existed except for the formal respect with which he
was treated by people who faced him in court, or the way he spoke to my mother some nights. I
could hear him through the thin bedroom walls, pacing and ranting. That night I heard him
sobbing, and over the awful sound of that, soft and steady as the action of waves, the quiet
murmur of my mother’s voice, shushing and soothing him. She talked to me that way,
sometimes. It will be all right, she said. You’ll see. Let it go, sweetheart. You’ve done all you
can do. Everything will be all right. Just wait; you’ll see.

The next morning my father whistled when he showered, stepped off early—a kiss on my
mother’s cheek and a ruffle of my hair—for a breakfast meeting. When the door shut I turned to
my mother.

“Dad cried.” It came out of my mouth like an accusation.

My mother looked at me, a long and studied gaze. She seemed to be considering what she
would tell me, and what she should not. It was a measuring look, and then it turned to something
like pity. And then changed again. “Get ready for school, John,” she said, brisk, officious.
“You’re running late.”

* * *

I went back to help my mother when my father died. We gave his library to Hartford College,
where he’d been an undergraduate. The Salvation Army sent a truck to pick up his clothes. I’d
boxed them carefully, making certain everything had been laundered, pockets checked for the
scraps of paper and stray bills that tended to accumulate.
The trip home to pack my father’s things was the last time I was in Grantsville. My mother knew she’d be moving, too, before long, and we gave away everything she thought she’d never again have use for. Bereft of so many of the items stored up during their long marriage, my parents’ house seemed hollow and threadbare. When we finished our work each day we’d carry chairs to the backyard and look out across the jungle it had become since my father’s illness struck. Even with the changes, it was still beautiful to me. I told her that. Maybe more beautiful, I said, in its wildness. She didn’t smile, but her eyes crinkled a little and she nodded her head. I’d always been one for the wild, she said. “Your father feared for you, with that.”

I asked her what she meant, feared for me.

She gave a little sigh, and I could hear the sorrow in it. I knew how deeply she would miss him. But then she shook her head and said, “He was wrong.”

“Wrong to fear?”

Wrong to fear that, she said. She seemed to be struggling to find the right words. Language mattered to her, and it took her longer, the older she got, to find the precise expression to convey her meaning. Finally she said, “He thought we should control our wildness. Our urges.”

I shook my head, confused, and then the look on her face told me what she meant and I almost laughed out loud. “Those urges?” I asked. “You’re not telling me Dad was gay?”

She chuckled softly then, too. “God, no. Not your father.” She reached over and squeezed my forearm, and then she lifted her chin toward the backyard. Her expression grew pensive. “Chet, though. Chet had feelings for men.” She glanced over at me. I could tell she felt she had to explain. “It was a different time, Jack. People thought different things. Chet grew up believing
it was a personal burden, something he had to resist. Deny himself.” She shook her head again.

“He might have been happier if he had let himself find somebody.”

“He did,” I said quietly. “Find somebody.”

My mother caught the bitterness in my voice and looked at me closely. Her eyes widened and her hand flew to cover her mouth. “Oh, no,” she said. “Jackie, no.”

“No, me, Mom,” I said quickly. “I just—I had heard.” I hesitated, and then, because the mask of grief she wore was unbearable to see, I added, “It was a rumor. Maybe it wasn’t true.”

I couldn’t tell her that Easton was the one Chet had found. I could tell from her face that she had no idea.

But my father had, I believe. Earlier that day, at the bottom of a drawer of sweaters my father never wore, I found Easton’s shirt. It was the same one I had lifted from the branch and neatly folded to bring to him. I had carried it under my arm in a snug roll as I tunneled my way through the hedge, and I remember clearly that I kept it with me when I fled the clearing. I ran first to my father’s office but I had not left it there. I carried it the five blocks I ran to Easton’s house, and I gave it to Easton’s father when I told him what I had seen.

I can’t stop thinking of that, now. What had I seen? If my father had been there, I would have told him the simplest truth. Chet and Easton were together in a way that felt wrong. I could not have said to him that there was something they shared that I wanted. Something between them that should have belonged to me. By the time I reached Easton’s house, it came out of my mouth in a jumble. Chet. Easton. Naked. Clearing.

And then what happened, happened, and we could take none of it back.

*   *   *
When Victor comes home it is late and he is tired but voluble, full of stories of the day’s successes. He chats away, removing his clothes, brushing his teeth, climbing under the covers to join me in bed, and I listen to him and ask questions to show him I’m interested. It was a public meeting of the school board and the community members who showed up came prepared to object, but he’d carefully engaged them, showed them what he hoped to accomplish, brought them around. He explained all this and then he fell asleep.

Victor is good through and through. He has suffered his share of setbacks. Has had his heart broken. But he enters the world each day to do battle for good, and I support him in this, do what I can to ease his worries and lift his spirits when some turn of events or another’s act of malice or carelessness impedes his progress. Although the truth is I am the one who needs most often to be lifted, to be bolstered. I fear the day he tires of this. I know him well enough to know how it will go: he’ll turn a quarter turn—not fully, not with discourtesy—and I will gradually come to understand that the full stream of his attention and affection will not return to me. And I, cold, heartless, capable, will be the one to end it.

When Victor slumbers he gives himself wholeheartedly to it, stepping off the precipice of wakefulness and plunging thoroughly into sleep, but tonight he shifts, turns toward me, and his eyes flutter open. He is a beautiful man and I spend a moment gazing at him. I want to kiss him and I do.

“Did you call your mother?”

“I did.”

“Is she well?”

“She is. She sends you her love.”

His eyes close again, and I feel his body slump with release.
Victor wasn’t the first. But when I met him I knew for sure, knew full well I’d have to tell them. Victor is no experiment.

My parents have no prejudice around this, or any other difference between us. Still, it wasn’t easy for them to hear. My father nodded gravely. My mother, game as ever, smiled, asked encouraging questions. Her eyes welled two or three times but she brushed the tears aside and kept on until they stopped coming. My father hugged me and told me again how much they loved me.

No matter what, he said.

Later, we stood alone on the back porch of the house and looked out toward the yard. My father was smoking and I thought of Chet’s cigars and how the two of them stood here those nights and watched us play on the grass. What did my father know? What did he refuse to know? Was he willing to overlook Chet’s actions because of their friendship? Did he think his friend incapable of causing harm?

Did he miss him?

I never did tell my father what I had seen. I would have, had he been there. That was my intention. But when I found his car gone and the office door locked I thought only to stop whatever was happening in the clearing. I wanted to rewind the world, restore the clearing to my sole possession, return Easton to the pocket of my friendship, raise Spot from the dead, stay Easton’s mother’s hand when she shifted forward to turn the ignition of her car in the garage.

I wanted to hurt them: Chet and Easton, both.

Things happened so quickly, after that. My father was away from the house except to fall exhausted into sleep, and Easton’s father so firm in his story that I almost believed it myself.
Victor sighs in his sleep, and throws one arm above his head. The lights are off and the moonlight streams in through the curtainless window and spreads across our bed. Even with Victor beside me, even with this life we’ve constructed and the beauty of what we share, I carry Easton on my shoulders, and don’t know for sure what’s stronger: my guilt, or how searingly I loved him.

It was a mistake, Victor would say, if I could trust myself enough to tell him. Or not even. You did what any twelve-year-old would do. You found an adult and told him.

But I won’t tell Victor, for exactly the reason I love him. Because he believes that the world is an accommodating place, a place where courtesy and warmth and—this part is his vanity, which I also love—and beauty are rewarded, and the bad things that happen can be avoided with a well-placed word, an affectionate touch, a simple sharing of good feeling. For him, it’s mostly so.

On that porch, my father did not look at me when he spoke. His eyes filled and the tears glinted in the little bit of light that lingered to the west and he said, Son. Are you certain? Is this really what you want?

Victor makes a sound in his sleep, a long sigh, and turns his head away from me to rest his cheek against the soft pillow of his bicep. His bare chest shines in the moonlight and the twist of his clavicle rises from its smooth plane. I place my hand there, on the slight knob that lifts, resolute, above the lovely living muscle and sinew that move him through his days. If I lay my head there I will hear his heart pump. Slow and steady. Convinced of its own direction. Unconcerned at the way that what we throw out into the world can double back on us, return to us our own dark gifts, and with something not entirely unlike mercy, bring us to the ground.
How They Look at Us

He’d gotten himself back to town.

No, that wasn’t right. She’d brought him back. Which was a decent thing for her to do, given that she’d been as smacked-down drunk as he was. He, Billy Shaw. Master of fucked up. King of it. But she’d lifted her arm, which still miraculously harbored that fancy diamond-studded (fake diamonds, she’d confessed) banker’s watch, and swung her long legs from the bed to the floor, and told him to get dressed. They had to get back to Western. She had to work in the morning.

They’d been gone three days. Billy glanced up from his beer at the calendar posted on the wall at the end of the bar. Three days, three nights, leaving the hotel only long enough to find something to eat and a place to pause to top off their blood alcohol levels. She drank Wild Turkey, rocks, and his mouth stung with it when she kissed him. They’d stumbled back each time to the room, holding each other hard, the woman—Mollie, her name was, Mollie, he was nearly sure of it—reaching one hand between the buttons of his shirt to weave her fingers into his snarl of chest hair, gripping the swell of his ass with the other, making him rise before he could even fit the key card into the lock and wait for the green flash and stumble through the doorway to the dark room with its drawn shades, its tangled sheets smelling of the two of them and of whiskey.
He glanced across the table at her now, and then let his gaze slide softly to the side.

It was Monday night. She’d shown up unannounced at the chain-link gate outside his building site at five o’clock Friday, and Billy had pulled open the passenger door of her spiffy little silver Honda and lowered himself inside.

She couldn’t be older than thirty. Thirty-five, tops. Closer in age to his children than to himself. Billy was fifty-two the month before, and the suggestion of risk that number dangled before him – why not, Shaw? Take a chance – alternated with the sense he had of having been as shuffled by life as a well-worn deck of cards. With this girl, things could go either way. All of life was a crap shoot. But she had driven to him. She had idled her engine in the rutted dirt drive of the half-built house, lowered the car’s window, and did not say a word. Her eyes stayed hidden by dark glasses.

There was something both vulnerable and resolute about the guard she kept. She didn’t chatter. When she did let some revealing bit of information fly—that she’d been married, once, and wasn’t any more; that she came from a family of nine and was the middle child—she buttered it quickly with that arresting laughter. Husky. Diverting. Inviting, even. Although the question of who, exactly, had invited whom, was up for debate.

He’d met her a couple of weeks before. She was new to the bank, working as a kind of junior loan officer, and new to the area, too. Her husband had been in the Academy at Springs. Got his wings and flew off. She’d made sad little flapping gestures with her hands at her shoulders, and twisted her mouth to convey irony. And then she’d laughed.

Billy wasn’t wired to register irony. What he saw was pain, and a small mouth so delicately formed he wanted to put his lips to it. Ears modestly adorned with little silver studs shaped like stars and gently tooled: cowgirl earrings on a bank officer. She wore her dark curls
drawn back off her face and fastened in a bun at the nape of her neck. He was sorry, Billy said. He met her gaze and held it. About the husband.

    Good riddance, she’d said, but her voice cracked and she looked away, embarrassed.

    Billy had stood, then. He was tall enough to look threatening, but he’d shrugged, and grinned, and lifted his hands in a gesture of surrender, and it made him look boyish, instead. Comical enough to elicit from her a little laugh. And he’d lifted his chair and moved it to the other side of the desk adjacent to hers and stood behind it, and then he leaned over the chair to give her a friendly and noncommittal hug. Anyone could see she was a woman in need of a little sympathy, and he’d made sure the hug was appropriately distant and professional. Warm. But. And she’d held on just a little too long.

    Well, Billy thought. Okay, then.

    When she released him he sat in the chair and rolled up his sleeves to indicate he was ready to get down to business. They sat side by side and went over the figures on his loan papers. It was a simple request. He needed to increase his line of credit to prepare for some upcoming contracting expenses, but he had adequate collateral and a strong record of past performance. She didn’t see any problem with his application. He’d satisfied all her questions, she said, but she would have to run it by her V.P. for final approval, and would he just wait there.

    Sure, Billy said. No problem.

    It wasn’t until she stood—Mollie? Wasn’t that what she’d said?—that he noticed the small hole in the back of her stockings. It started on the rear of her right leg, not far above the crease of her knee, and the run traveled up and was hidden by her skirt.

    Billy stood, too. He was still standing when she returned. He’d been looking at the photographs on the walls. He should have moved his chair back to the proper side, but he hadn’t,
and he could tell that it made her uncomfortable; so he gestured, a question, and she shrugged and said it didn’t really matter, and they sat again, adjacent to one another. She explained the terms of the loan, which she said were standard but which she was required by law to review with him, and while Billy watched her face and nodded intently and picked up the pen and signed where she showed him to sign, he could not stop himself from dropping his other hand beneath the desk and letting his fingers softly rake the nylon of her stocking back until they found the hole, and the tip of his finger touched skin.

She gave a little cry, then. Barely audible. She had started when she’d felt his hand first come in contact with her body, but she hadn’t moved away. His hand worked its way softly up the back of her leg to its intersection with the chair seat, and then he let it circle around and stroke the inside of her thigh through her skirt.

She dropped the pen she’d been holding. She stooped to retrieve it, and when she returned she carefully pointed out to him each place he had to sign, each page he had to initial, and he focused his serious attention on the documents, while his free hand traveled the new access she’d allowed him.

She shifted forward on her chair until only the edges of her ass bones held her there and he was able to reach one, and then two, and then three fingers inside her.

It hurt his hand to bend it like that. He couldn’t do much more. She managed the rest, her hips shifting slightly while her upper body remained rigid, and when she came her muscles gripped him so fiercely his hand felt like it was being crushed, and a small, ragged breath escaped her delicate mouth. He wanted to kiss her. Instead, he put the pen down and withdrew his other hand and laid it, slick with her wetness, on her own hand, and gently stopped it from its urgent motion.
It’s okay, he said. I’m okay. She met his gaze with a dazed and frightened look in her eyes. Really, he said, and nodded. I’m good for now, and he smiled to assure her and she removed her hand from his lap and placed it in her own.

He gestured to the pages. You know where to find me. He watched a thin smile pass over her lips. And then her eyes welled and he was sharply afraid that she would cry.

Hey, he said. No. Now, come on.

She shook her head and straightened her skirt. Will there be anything else, Mr. Shaw?

And he wasn’t sure. With this one, he wasn’t sure at all.

*   *   *

They hadn’t talked for the whole ride back to Western. Not twenty words. Hungry? Mollie had asked, around Trinidad, and Billy shook his head.

Tell me if you want to stop.

He’d smiled. He was thinking that he couldn’t tell if he wanted to sit in this woman’s silver Honda for the rest of his life, letting the countryside speed by and listening to her silence, knowing it meant her thoughts were whirling around in her head and she did not trust him enough to share them with him, or whether he wanted to grasp the door handle right then and roll out onto the blur of pavement and be rid of her. Of himself. It always came down to this. He’d had his fill of sex and then the black would descend on him, soak him like spilled gasoline. And he would want to be held, comforted by the one woman who did know him, who had trusted him, or he would want to ignite. Flame like a torch and leave nothing behind.

I’m okay.

You look tired, she said.
I guess I am.

She let him off at the site. His truck sat where he had left it. He got out and went around
to the driver’s window of the Honda. Billy leaned in to kiss her, but she pulled back. Another
time, she said.

I’d like that.

What?

I’d like there to be another time, Billy said. Something flickered quickly in her eyes and
she looked away. Hey, he said. He tapped her shoulder and when she turned back to him he said,
One more drink.

She smiled, and shook her head no.

One orange juice, then. It’ll take the edge off the hangover.

She followed him to the bar in Albertine. It was a straight three-quarters of a mile down
Main Street from his apartment and he was not even a little bit drunk any more. He was sore. She
had been more athletic than most of the women he knew, and even though he was strong and in
good shape, he was fifty-two. He was a grandfather. He needed a shower; clean clothes. He’d
been able to wash in the hotel, but had nothing to change into. He hadn’t planned to be away for
three days. He’d thought to leave work a little after five, Friday afternoon; stop at Gustavo’s for
a beer on the way home.

They eased into a booth at the small bar.

Whatever’s on tap today, Sez. He gestured to the barkeep, Gustavo’s boy Cesar, the same
age as Billy’s younger son. And then you’d better cut me off. Work tomorrow.

And for the lady?

She’ll have an orange juice.
Cesar filled the glasses and carried them to Billy’s table. What do you hear from Thomas? He wiped the table with a rag first and then set the glasses down.

They’re in Kandahar province. Wherever the fuck that is.

Aaron too?

Far as I know.

Cesar nodded. Someone gestured to him from the end of the bar and he turned to leave, but he turned back. He’ll be all right, ese.

And how the fuck would you know?—Billy wanted to say. But Cesar was a boy. He could not even grow a beard. Thomas could not. None of these boys could, yet. Sez was taking classes up at Western State while he figured out what he wanted to do. So what Billy said instead was, I hope to God he is, and he kept his eyes averted from the woman’s interested gaze. There were plenty of things he would talk with her about, but not this. To her he said, Sez’s father is a good man. He could use a loan to spruce up this place. If you’ve got any say at the bank, put in a word for him, and he watched her turn aside, her face slightly flushed, and he was sorry to embarrass her like that.

The bar door opened and a young man stepped inside and scanned the room. Even in the dim light, Billy could identify most bar patrons by their shape. There was something vaguely familiar about this one, the raw features, the jaw that looked like it had been broken once or twice, the massive, muscular torso—and he struggled to place him. The man seemed not to find whoever he was looking for, and his shoulders sagged slightly. Billy couldn’t tell if it was from disappointment or relief. He stepped closer.

Martin, Billy said.

The young man turned with surprise. Oh, he said. Who?
Billy Shaw.

Martin’s face brightened slightly. Sorry. I couldn’t see. He glanced at Mollie. Ma’am.

Holly, she said, and extended her hand.

Billy reddened. Martin works with me, he told her. My concrete sub. He turned to Martin.

Sit down. He watched the young man shift uncomfortably, and said, Somebody joining you?

My father. He’s supposed to meet me here.

Billy slid off the bench and Mollie—Holly—made room for him beside her. Go on and sit there, Billy said. You can see him when he comes in the door.

I was just leaving, Holly said, but she didn’t budge from her spot.

Your father live in the area?

Rock Springs. Haven’t seen him in eleven years.

Billy studied him. He was a quiet fellow, a good worker, strong and skilled, and as far as Billy could tell he ran an honest business. Paid his men on time and stuck to his side of the bargain. He had a nondescript face that looked blunted by something. Not drink. Shyness, maybe. He would look you in the eye but not for long. Eleven years is a long time, Billy said. How come? Martin shrugged. He didn’t bother to lie. That was a good sign, Billy thought. Your wife just had a baby, didn’t she? He coming down to meet his grandson?

And my wife.

You have siblings?

Martin shook his head.

Maybe he’s ready for family.

Maybe, Martin said.
Billy nodded. He glanced at Holly. He didn’t want her to feel trapped, but he didn’t
detect any urgency from her. He took a swallow of juice. Got much work lined up?

It’s pretty busy.

You bid on that gas station going up on the other side of the highway?

Didn’t get that job. They went with the low ball.

Guess they’ll get what they pay for.

They sat in silence for a while. A game was playing on the TV above the bar and they all
three looked at it. Every time the door opened Martin glanced that way. Still, Billy thought, he
doesn’t look like a man who expects to see his long-lost father. He cleared his throat and said,

There a reason you don’t think he’ll come?

Martin looked startled. He looked down at the dregs in his bottle and drained it. He
shrugged. Rock Springs is a long way.

Billy nodded slowly. He could feel the heat of Holly’s thigh against his own. He said,

Afghanistan is a long fucking way, too, but if my son asked me to come I’d be on a plane
tomorrow.

Martin looked at Billy for a longer time, and then he said, I fucked up some when I was
young. He shifted his glance to Holly and dipped his chin. Ma’am.

Billy caught Cesar’s eye and gestured for another round. I guess you’re the only kid who
ever did that. When Sez brought the drinks, Billy slid one orange juice to Holly and kept the
other for himself. She looked at him, and he didn’t look away. He leaned back in the booth and
let his arm rise to drape around Holly’s shoulders. He twirled a finger in her dark hair. You
didn’t grow up here, he said to Martin.

All over. Closer to Denver, mostly.
Your old man in construction?

Engineering. Martin looked toward the door. Was. Not any more. Quit that when I was a teenager.

Quit it for what.

Martin looked at his beer and shrugged. Drinking, mostly. I don’t know.

This kid must have left home early. A guy in his mid-twenties, as experienced as he was—he had to have gotten a head start. Billy knew a few kids like Martin. Rocky home life, no use for school. The lucky ones wound up in construction. As long as you had a strong back and could follow directions, you didn’t need a diploma to hire on to a crew.

It didn’t hurt to have someone look out for you, though. Show you the ropes.

I went to college, Billy said. Got my Master’s. Holly looked at him, eyebrows raised, and he nodded. Philosophy.

Martin smiled, then. I’m not surprised. You look like the kind of guy who could do some serious thinking.

Just for that, Billy said, the next round is on me.

* * *

The apartment over the hardware was sparsely furnished. Billy had lived there for fifteen years and had not yet gotten around to hanging pictures or putting up the curtains he’d bought at Walmart. The kitchen had room for a square wooden table. He ate his meals there. There were four chairs for when the kids came over, and the spare room he used as his office had a pull-out couch he had set up for them to sleep on when they were small enough to pile like puppies in the same bed. When they got older he bought them sleeping bags and set the boys up on the rug in
the living room. He let Liza, his daughter, have the bed to herself. Whenever he could he took them camping.

He didn’t bring women there. Or anybody else. He wanted his kids to feel comfortable dropping by his house. And now that John Wesley had kids of his own, he could offer to spell Monica and his son, let them drop the twins off and go out for the evening. They hadn’t yet, but they were warming up to the idea. When the kids were older, John Wesley promised. Billy didn’t press it. They thought he was unreliable. I never did a thing to hurt my kids, he wanted to say, and I’d never do a thing to hurt yours. It would do no good to tell them that.

Martin snored on the sleeper couch, each breath a noisy struggle. Billy had used his cell phone to dial Martin’s wife and tell her not to expect him home that night. Honey? Her voice was thick with sleep and edged with worry. What happened?

He’d explained who he was. They’d had a drink while Martin was waiting for his father, Billy had said. The father hadn’t come. Martin had drunk a bit more. He was in no shape to drive, and Billy had a spare couch at his place. He was sure Martin would be home in the morning.

He could hear a baby crying in the background, the sharp, high cry of a newborn.

He’d offered to drive Martin to the apartment he shared with his wife and baby, but Martin had begged him not to. Not like this, he’d said. He’d reached into the pocket of his jacket and produced a key. He’d rented a room for his father at the Starlight, he said. Billy was familiar with the raw string of rooms that clung to the edge of the creek on the south side of town. He could sleep there, Martin insisted. He just had to find the keys to his truck.

It took two of them—Sez and Billy—to support Martin out to Billy’s truck. He was more drunk than either of them had realized. Sez had locked the bar and then followed them down
Main Street. He’d helped Billy get Martin up the wooden steps to Billy’s apartment, and together they had dropped him on the couch. Sez wouldn’t take the twenty Billy tried to press on him. No, ese. He brushed it aside. You need help, you call me.

You’re a good man.

Tell that to my parole officer. When Billy looked at him sharply, Sez said, Just joking, man. Then his face changed. That chick you were with?

Holly, Billy said. You mean Holly.

Whatever. Sez ran the back of his hand across his chin. You just want to be careful, okay?

Of what?

What I been hearing—

Who you been listening to, Sez.

He shrugged. I don’t mean to talk bad about your friends. I don’t even know her. But people say her old man … Just watch yourself.

Holly’s divorced.

That what she told you?

Billy sighed. Life’s full of fantasies, he said. He reached out and squeezed the boy’s shoulder. Thank you, son. I appreciate your help. He gestured toward the spare room. I would’ve just had to leave him to sleep in the driveway if you hadn’t come along.

Tell Thomas hi.

I will do that, Billy said, and pulled the door shut after him.

* * *
Billy sat up at the kitchen table. The overhead light hummed with a faulty ballast and the refrigerator struck a different chord, lower and less irritating. He’d found himself a can of orange Fanta and enough milk left in the carton to moisten a bowl of Cheerios. He was clean, now. He’d had to shower when he got in, wash the sticky film of sweat and sex and Holly’s perfume from his skin. He’d shaved, too. It felt good to stand under the hard cascade of hot water. It felt good to be alone. He’d taken some time, toweling himself dry, running a comb through his hair, before he pulled on the white t-shirt and the ragged pair of sweat pants and walked barefoot to the kitchen.

Martin’s snoring had softened, the tone of it shifting from chain saw to squeaking hinge.

Since Liza—Liz, Billy corrected himself—had come home from college, his routine had changed. Tuesday nights he saved for her. She stayed at her mother’s house but she and Billy spent the evening together. Movies, and dinner out; or a meal they stayed home and cooked together, followed by a play or some music over at the college. John Wesley let them know if something was happening.

Some Tuesdays they did nothing more than hang around his apartment and watch an episode of Law and Order. They’d done that last Tuesday, and Liz kept herself busy framing some photographs for him as she watched the television. The photos that stuck to his fridge were ten years old, and Liz had rounded up some recent snapshots of her brothers and herself to replace them. They clustered in easel-style frames in a collection at the end of the kitchen counter. John Wesley and Monica and the twins, Isaiah and Isabella, two years old, stood under the oak tree at Azi’s house, one kid in each young parent’s arms. Liz had framed her commencement photo. Her expression was goofy and carefree, more relieved than proud—but Billy knew how much effort and persistence it took to drag herself across that finish line.
Billy lifted Thomas’s picture. His son was poised, looking serious, in the camouflage fatigues they’d issued the enlisted men. Brown and tan, fit for soldiers fighting a war in the sand.

Billy set it down again gently. He wished Liz had chosen a different shot. Thomas with his trombone lifted to his mouth, maybe, improvising a riff in his feverish way. Thomas polishing the brass horn with his spit rag, distant and pensive. Any photo that showed him as he truly was. A bird boy. A human whose ear was so tuned to song he’d chart the notes and patterns of the random noises he encountered over the day. No soldier. Each of his children was gifted in a particular way, and his younger son’s knack was not for fighting.

Except against himself. Sometimes against his father.

Billy stood and pushed back the chair and walked to the hall closet. He reached to the shelf above his head and brought down a shoebox full of loose photographs. He carried them back to the kitchen and sat again at the table and went through them, one by one.

The photos were fifteen years old. Azi had split the group when Billy had moved out, gave half to him, kept half for herself. There were no photos of her in the pile he’d received. He’d felt gut-punched when he first realized this, and then relieved. He could look at them all without those complicated feelings. They were photos of the kids, mostly. A few of him. A couple of old ones from when he and Gray were boys. Two or three from college. He wondered what she’d done with the ones that showed the two of them together. Stashed them somewhere for posterity, maybe. Saved them for the kids, for later. He hoped she hadn’t thrown them out.

He found the one he was looking for. Thomas at eighteen months or so. His older brother and sister each held one arm and were swinging the little boy through the spray of a water sprinkler. The expression on his face was both thrilled and terrified. He was screaming with such gusto it lifted off the photo and reverberated in Billy’s ears.
He could almost hear Azi’s voice, out of the frame: *Be careful you don’t yank his arms out of their sockets!*

He’d been the one with the camera, pointing it at his children, clicking to shoot.

* * *

Sometime after Martin’s sixth or seventh beer – Billy had stuck to orange juice for several rounds, switching to club soda when his stomach complained about the acid – it grew apparent that Martin’s father would not come, and that Billy’s job was to sit beside the man as he absorbed that fact and dulled it with alcohol.

He’d been fifteen years old, Martin had said, his voice shifting to a different tone.

Martin heard Holly take a soft breath beside him. He shut his eyes for a moment. Across the screen of his mind he could picture her face, the way her thin lips twisted in a grimace when she thought of something unpleasant, and then corrected, turning into a distant smile. Even there, though, sitting beside her, he felt her face begin to fade from his memory. He blinked twice and lifted his chin to look at her. Her gaze was fixed on Martin’s face, waiting for him to continue. She was a beautiful woman, and damaged in a way he didn’t understand.

We lived in Trinidad. Martin motioned to Sez for another beer. We’d lived there for over a year.

He’d been amazed by the soft skin on the inside of Holly’s thighs. He’d been unexpectedly, violently, aroused when she bit his shoulder. Billy had wanted to fuck her right there. Back her up against the brick wall of the alley and feel her want him. He had waited; of course he had waited. But it had scared him. He hadn’t felt this way around a woman for a long time.
I should have known better, Martin said.

* * *

They had lived in a house. Usually it was apartments. Martin and his mother and father. Every six months, every nine months, they would move. They moved so much because Martin’s father’s work was unstable and transient. This house, this stay, was some kind of a record. This time, Martin’s father stayed at the job during the week and drove home most weekends.

He’d have to get new jobs because he lost the old ones, Martin said. Because of—whatever. Drinking, I guess. My grandmoms was living with us. I guess that’s why we stayed so long.

Did you get along with her? Holly’s voice was reedy; tentative.

Yeah. She had her good days. But she had a lot of bad days.

Dementia? Billy asked.

I guess. She was kind of out of it. She didn’t realize they’d bought the house with her money. I didn’t know it then, either. He fingered his beer bottle and then looked up shyly. I knew she had spells. That’s why we had to go and get her.

The neighbors had complained, and Martin and his father had made the trip to Montrose to find out. She’d leave the hose on all night, they’d said; she’d feed the neighborhood cats, collect dozens of strays that moved in and behaved aggressively toward the pets that sunned themselves in her neighbors’ yards. When they went up to see, they found it a lot worse. A thick coating of mold on the shower curtain and the tub itself. Food left out to rot. If she didn’t have the cats, mice would have overrun the place. Martin’s father had made him clean. He’d hired a
local girl, a waitress at the diner, to help with it. And Martin had to stay with his grandmother while his father took the girl home.

   Did you bring her back with you? Holly was paying close attention.

   Martin shook his head. His grandmother had seemed pretty lucid, he told them. They’d gone home; checked in with her from time to time. But then she went out for a walk one day and couldn’t find her way back. The cops told Martin’s father to take better care of his mother. How was he supposed to do that? he’d asked them. Living two hundred miles away, in an apartment that was too tight for the three of them, much less one more. Move up with her, they’d suggested. Hire somebody to stay with her. They didn’t care how he did it. But if he didn’t, they’d have to call social services and have her sent to a nursing home.

   So he took me with him and we went to get her. Martin’s face looked younger, now, Billy thought. She didn’t want to come. But we got a bigger place, a house, and it seemed like it got better.

   Martin paused; took another swallow of beer. She called me Jason, sometimes. My father’s brother.

   You must have felt bad when she did that, Holly murmured.

   Martin shrugged. Not really. She couldn’t help it. And we got along good. I was home a lot with her. He glanced at Billy. I got tired of school. We’d moved a lot, so I was always behind. I didn’t know anybody. School was a drag, so I stopped going. I rode my bike a lot. Hung out with her. I took care of her on the days my mom had to go out and stuff. She wasn’t any trouble.

   Your mom let you stay home?
Martin looked at Holly. She didn’t tell me no. But she didn’t tell my father. I made sure I wasn’t there on the few days he stayed home. But he didn’t really like to be at the house. Even when we figured he’d lost another job, he found things to do to take him away.

They should have made you go, Billy said, but Holly frowned and reached over and laid the pad of her index finger on the crease of his lips. Then she laid her other hand on Martin’s forearm. What happened? she said softly.

Martin curled slightly, hunching his shoulders until his big head dipped down. He spoke to the table. She wanted to go home.

Home where? Holly asked, quizzical.

Back to Montrose. She asked me to take her. He looked across the table at them both. So I did.

*   *   *

They took the bus. It was midnight by the time they arrived. It was late spring, and wet, and cold. They trudged the mile from the bus station to Martin’s grandmother’s house, and they found it was not his grandmother’s house any longer. Jesus, Billy thought. What kind of rube had this kid been? Did he think it would just be sitting there, waiting for them? And then he remembered. Sixteen. John Wesley had always been preternaturally old, but when Thomas had been sixteen… The people in the house had come to the door and shouted at them when they’d tried to fit his grandmother’s key into the lock. Martin’s grandmother had gotten scared and run off.

It took Martin two hours to find her.
She was sitting in the woods behind the house and her clothes were wet all the way through, he told them. She smelled like pee. He glanced at them and then back down. I did what I could.

It was too cold to be outside. She was too fragile. So he had gone to get help.

Billy could see the outlines of this, now. The kid didn’t know any better. He did the only thing that came to mind. Put his extra shirt – the thick flannel – over her shoulders, and ran for help. Did he go back to the house? Of course not. They had yelled at him, there. A cop car was parked outside, the light spinning. Trust the cops? A kid like this? He knew he was in deep shit.

I remembered the girl from the diner. She—my father—

Billy gave a brief, sharp nod. He felt Holly stiffen slightly and pull away from him.

I waited outside until the diner opened and she showed up. Then I asked her to help me.

Oh, Jesus, Billy said, and breathed out.

She drove me back. It was a couple of miles away. When we got there the cop cars were lined up on the road. An ambulance, too. Martin chewed his lip. My father’s car, too.

How’d he—

The cops called him. The people in the house reported on us.

Holly’s face was pinched. Did they find her in time?

Billy felt a weight settle in his chest. You poor asshole, he said. He shook his head slowly. You poor, poor son of a bitch.

* * *

72
The bar had emptied out. Sez was wiping down glassware and watching ESPN on the bar screen. It wasn’t late. Not much past midnight. But they were the only ones left, and they were through drinking.

I’ve got to work in the morning.

The others nodded. Martin stood, briefly, and then slumped back in the booth. Holly gasped.

It’s all right, Billy said. Sez and I will take care of him. We’ll get him home. He laid a hand softly against her cheek. You go home now, too. You can get there okay?

Holly fixed her gaze on him, then. Her eyes were black pools in her face. He did not understand a thing about this woman. She was unreadable. Unreachable. And he was tired.

She turned and walked from the bar and did not turn back before the door swung shut behind her. Billy could hear her car engine start and roar. It softened the further she got, and then it faded to silence.

*  *  *

There was more to the story. Billy knew there was. He was helping Martin stumble to the truck and maneuver his way onto the seat when Martin suddenly turned and gripped his arms hard.

Easy, there, buddy. Let’s just get you into the truck.

I didn’t run, Martin said. His face was close and his breath smelled sour. Fear and alcohol.

I bet not, Billy said. It was a familiar odor. I bet you didn’t. But come on, now. Get in the—

No. I didn’t run.
Cesar looked the other way. Billy sighed. All right. His voice was flat. You didn’t run.

The girl had my hand and wouldn’t let go. But I walked up to my father and I made her release me. I got ready for him to hit me.

Billy paused. He hit you? He said softly.

I got ready. Martin swallowed hard. I wanted him to.

Billy waited.

He did—this thing. Martin leaned back against the side of the truck bed and let it support him. Billy watched him fold his arms across his chest and sink into himself.

The night had grown cool. On the high plain the winds could bend and bring down the air from the mountains, from the peaks where the snow lingered through summer and nothing came between the night sky and a man who stood watching it.

He—got me in this hold, Martin said. Like a hug. And he held on tight.

Billy let his eyes shut, just for a few seconds. He was too tired for this. For any of it.

Martin’s face was shaded from the streetlight and his voice came from the back of his throat. He kept his arms crossed tightly like a shield.

After a while his legs kind of buckled and he fell to the pavement. But he didn’t let go, so I went down, too. Martin released his arms and stretched them in a quick, violent thrust backward. He craned his neck and ran his hands up and down his face. Then he let his hands drop and he looked directly at Billy. We were lying there in the street, Martin said, his voice low. Lying on our backs. He kept one arm looped in mine. I could hear the ambulance pull away. The cops walked around us but nobody said anything. And then my father got up, got in his car, and drove away.
In the distance, a night bird made a soft whirring sound. The waitress took you home, Billy said.

I stayed with her for five days. It was the first time. Then I borrowed some money from her and I left.

You stole it.

I paid her back when I got a job. That, and more. I hired on as laborer on a concrete crew. They paid good and gave me a place to stay.

You never went home.

I talked to my mother on the phone.

And your father?

Billy watched the skin beneath Martin’s right eye twitch slightly and the cords in his neck tighten. My father, he said. He heaved himself into the truck and steadied himself with one arm against the dashboard. What father, he said, and Billy closed the door.

* * *

Billy was clean and shaved and tired and he stood at the side of his bed long enough to realize he wouldn’t be sleeping anytime soon. The clock read almost three. He wasn’t due at the site for another several hours. It was too long a time to lie awake. He reached for his running shoes. Sometimes that could help.

He slipped quietly past Martin’s sleeping shape. The young man had his face turned to the couch back and his chest rose and fell steadily as though the snoring had exhausted him. He would wake embarrassed and they would both forget everything, Billy knew. They would be polite strangers from then on out. No further confidences would pass between them.
Billy turned the knob and let himself out onto the stair landing. He let the door latch quietly behind him and he paused there to adjust to the cool air. The sky was almost completely clear, a few wispy clouds catching a glimmer of moonlight from the thin crescent of moon just rising. Overhead, stars. Lots of them.

Some nights when the kids were small, before Azi and he had blown apart, he would lay out their sleeping bags and lie down with them on the grass of the backyard to watch for shooting stars. The August sky was full of them, tiny darts of light streaking across the dark, blazing briefly before fading again into the black. Liza and John Wesley would make up stories. Nonsense. Shifting midstream and then faltering as one or the other fell asleep. He would lay there listening to the quiet sound of animals rustling in the distance and his children’s muffled breathing and he would let the darkness fill him until it seemed he was himself the backdrop for the stars and their brief flare a kind of story itself, a kind of code he couldn’t key. And then he would shift and return to the feeling of his body again, and he would stand, and lift each child and carry him or her to bed, and return for the blankets, and stand a minute longer, and then enter the house and the bed where Azi lay waiting for him.

Billy gripped the splintered handrail and started down the steps. He should get the crew over to replace these when things slowed down. He would do that.

He reached the ground and flexed his ankles, letting them warm, and then he slowly stretched into his stride.
I was hungry and you fed me.

I was thirsty and you brought me drink.

I was lying in the middle of the Big Ten Truck Stop parking lot, the desert wind hoving off the giant rigs as they rumbled past and the gravel pressing divots in the soft flesh of my cheek, and you grabbed hold of my ankles and dragged me to the concrete sidewalk.

Babbling all the while. Little brother, I swear, you said. I swear. If you ever—

Give me back my fucking boot, I said, for it had come off my foot and was sitting like the skull of a dead man in your hands. And quit with that. Because you know you always will.

But the look on your face said, Don’t bet on it, buddy. Not for much longer.

* * *

We were born conjoined but in thought only. In time, we departed our mother’s womb two years, two months, nine days and change apart. You reconnoitered the new world first and gave the all-clear before I tugged on Dad’s sleeve and begged him to let me follow. Oh, why not, he sighed. My only son, begotten not made. And he did that fancy business only Dad knows how to do and I made my little transit into flesh. Come again to raise the living and the dead, and I go to where they need raising, and you, being you, rescue me every time.
But when you drew the line at the dog, I knew I'd best be hurrying. There was no time to waste. It had already begun.

*   *   *

We were still in Ohio. You were living with that skanky Linda by then, skanky Linda with room enough to drive a Freightliner through the gap between her front teeth, monstrous head of red hair, earrings that flashed like fishing lures from her fleshy lobes. Skanky skank but you could not see it and you would not listen. I knew. But that's all I'll say about that.

Yeah it was late, so it was late, but it was late for us, too, me and little Chula with a face only a son of God could love. And I was left alone loving it because our friends had made themselves scarce when the money ran out. Rent was up on the motel room overlooking the freeway and even if I'd've been rich we'd've got tossed out anyway. The fire in the trashcan, for one, which was NOT my idea. And you can't get around the fact that so many bodies filling a space for so long makes an unavoidable stink, even without your rotten limburger smell to ripen the mix any more. They called the sheriff to stand by while they evicted us, and it was while I was sorting through the piles of trash in the dumpster for my personal belongings that I came across her.

Chula. My little pretty. Crouched in a corner of that iron box where some dope fiend had tossed her. I thought I was looking at a balled up pullover, a mess of gray wool, until she whimpered. And then, whoosh! Eyes, nose, one little ear standing up, the other drooping flat, a mouth like a bat with a serious underbite—she was ugly in a way that made me want to go back to seeing a sweater. But I gathered my wits and gathered her out of there. Over at Kentucky Fried we shared two-thirds of a chicken dinner I found sitting on top of the trash can. I worked on
taming her rat's nest of fur with a comb I carry around and she gave me no trouble at all, just turned her ugly little face toward me and panted with her pink tongue flashing in the evening light. But a chill was coming on, and we had no place to sleep.

I had a key to your place but you'd warned me not to use it when Linda's car was parked out front and there it was, the gold Camry with the dented fender and Oregon plates, parked nose-to-butt behind your Tacoma. I swept Chula into my arms to disguise her least attractive features. Her legs were bowed stubs and her belly drooped, saggy from too many litters on the street, but when I tucked her into my jacket front only her little head jutted out, like a baby in a front-pack gizmo the hippie ladies wear. I leaned on your doorbell.

I shouldn't have been surprised when skanky Linda came to the door. I guess I was surprised when she opened it a crack, took a gander at me and my girl, and slammed it in our faces. I could hear those big flat feet of hers slap the hardwood floors down the hall toward your bedroom in the back, and I told little Chula just hold on, big brother would have us tucked in on the couch in no time flat.

It was getting cold out there, waiting. I was starting to shiver. I could hear yelling going on inside the house and directed my mind to picture the stash you keep in the box under your bed, the couple of Snickers bars and the beef jerky with pepper you don't even like but I do, and was feeling sorry that you didn't keep that fifth of Four Roses like you used to have before skanky Linda came into your life and narrowed your outlook. I was thinking those Slim Jims would taste good. I may have mentioned that fact to Chula, so when you opened the door and saw me talking you were wrong to think I was having a conversation with myself.

I will say, I didn't like the look on your face. Nor your tone of voice. I fairly resented having to remind you of our relationship. Your brother. Put on earth to raise the—
You can't come inside, you said. Not with the dog.

It was too late to argue. I could settle for something less than my due until daylight.

Wait there, you told me, and I did, because where else would they take me in? Though my spirits were dampened. My own brother had succumbed to middle age. The beard, trimmed, no longer a glorious emblem of resistance; the eye fire less raging pyre, more pilot light. When you returned you carried a flashlight and your arms were filled with bulky gear which turned out to be an army tent you made me set up in your back yard. You unrolled your sleeping bag inside it. There, you said, waving the beam of the flashlight toward the tent's entrance. You can go there, and we did.

*  *  *

It was Linda's idea to move. She was hot to buy a house and had heard that financing a condo in Tucson was a piece of cake. It got infernal in the summer but any kind of weather beat Ohio in January. She wanted a swimming pool. She wanted low-maintenance landscaping. She wanted an air-conditioned mall fifteen minutes door-to-door. I heard desert and said okay.

I let Chula go off with some girls in a convertible, and waved sadly as they drove out of sight. I couldn't offer her the kind of life she deserved. Besides, she would fry like a chicharrón in that heat.

He isn't coming, Linda said. The door was closed but I could hear the two of you arguing behind it. He meant me. But I wasn't going to be left behind. I didn't give Chula up for nothing. You and I had a job to do, and I was beginning to feel ready to do it.

Then I'm not going, I heard you say, your voice low and gravelly.
Then there was quiet and I imagined you were each persuading the other of your point of view by non-verbal means. I put on my hat and went out walking in the neighborhood.

When I came back, it was settled: I could go, but I was going to have to get my own place within a month of being there. And I would have to take my meds. Yadda yadda yadda, Linda said. Ruh RUH ruh.

A month in the desert, you said, gazing meaningfully at me. Give or take a few days.

I gazed back at you. Oh my brother, who will protect you when I am gone?

* * *

I went to the library and looked at books on the desert. At night, I lay awake thinking of saguaros. I liked the way they stood against the sky, straight-backed, palms raised in blessing. Ciao, I thought. Gesundheit. Any language I could think of, they would understand it. They could talk back to me without talking, as Chula had. With a little razor blade I kept tucked in the pocket of my jeans, I carefully freed those photos from the books that trapped them. I folded them into small neat squares that would travel safely, and I reshelved the books according to the numbers on their spines.

We packed the camping gear. We had a handbook on how to survive in the wilderness. A person could crack open a cactus and save himself by drinking the water inside, it said, and I tucked that away in my brain. It was the kind of thing that might come in handy, someday.

* * *

The place you found was a rental apartment in a complex on the outskirts of town. A place to start, you called it, and followed with a flood of advantages and endearments meant to keep
Linda's chilly disapproval from hardening to permafrost. It had a swimming pool, see? A bank of washers and dryers so plentiful there would never be a wait. A groundskeeper, sweetheart. A pool man. A gate.

The mall was not so far.

It was midnight when we arrived, and even I felt some dismay. The gate motor broken so we had to pull the thing aside. Grounds strewn with windblown trash. Our upstairs unit faced a blank wall. Linda lurched inside the single bedroom and locked the door.

But you and I, we slid open the glass doors to the back and stood on the narrow balcony and took in the sight. In one direction, across the interstate, the Big Ten Truck Stop shone like a citadel in the darkness. The low rumble of engines, occasional hammer of brakes lifted to penetrate our silence. I turned the other way and the desert beckoned below, just beyond the chainlink. I sniffed for locusts and honey. I could not smell them, but it did not stop me from trying.

Tomorrow, I whispered. I tipped my head toward the dark expanse. Let's go.

Your sigh sounded like Dad's when he is most burdened. How I wish I could, little brother, you said. I'll be starting work in the morning.

But a little flare of the old fire came back in your eyes when you added, Soon.

* * *

Soon, you said. It's not my way to force a situation, but I grew anxious, I'll confess. An urgency came upon me. The longer we waited, the more dire the need. I sought solace at times as anyone would, dodging lanes of traffic on the freeway and finding comfort among my people in the
drivers' lounge at the Big Ten. Skanky Linda found her own diversion at the pool, filling the ears
of the layabouts who joined her with false tales of my shortfalls.

Unbelievable slander, followed by muffled laughter of Philistines.

You know I don't swim, brother. But I had asked for your blessing. So when your day off
arrived—your first in a long run of ceaseless work—and you invited me to join you at the pool,
what was I to think? It was no river. It was barely a puddle, and all around its banks lay
unbelievers in lawn chairs, their minds made rank by Linda's libel. They called me The Monther.
And I could tolerate their derision, I could weather their smirks, because I knew the work we
were called to do. The time was near. I would be quit of this place and we would advance to the
raising.

Go on down, little brother, you said. Be there in a minute.

But you never came.

I sat there in my shorts, the pale skin of my legs growing redder, and you never came.

Skanky Linda came down, instead. Her face was redder than her hair, redder than my
legs, and when she spoke spit sprayed through the gap in her teeth. I'd never seen her look so
mad. She marched up to where I sat and her shadow darkened the ground around me. Get, she
said.

I looked at her.

The pool, she clarified. She thrust one long arm out and motioned in its direction. Your
brother sent you down to go swimming. Get in the pool.

I don't swim, I said.

You might not do what your brother tells you, Linda thundered, leaning her frightening
She scared me so much, I got in the pool.

Skanky Linda stood on the edge of the pool and said, Swim.

I swam.

What happened next is a blur in my mind. I floundered, that I recall. My feet could not touch bottom without my head dipping below the surface, and this inspired a peculiar panic. Somehow Linda appeared at my side and I reached for her arm but she sank below the surface. Well, I saw her sink below the surface. It may be that I lowered her head beneath the surface. I do know that once her head was underwater and I couldn't hear her shouts, my heart grew calm. If she was down, I was up. I wanted to keep it that way.

You are expert at baptizing, my brother, but I am new to this. I may have been doing it wrong.

I don't remember how it happened that we returned to dry land. The Philistines gathered around her. No one paid any attention to me.

* * *

Once more I am in the Big Ten, but this time I am alone and upright, my boots on my feet, my heart beating steady in my chest, my gaze pure upon the men who ferry our goods from place to place across this continent. They are my people. I will make them drivers of men.

When the police enter they are wary of me. They approach with caution. Hands up, they say.

I lift my arms up like a saguaro. They, too, are my people. I offer them all my blessing.
Sister

The streetlamps are still bright this morning, my husband and daughter still asleep, when I leave the house to meet you.

Half an hour of dusky highway driving east from Shreveport and then nothing but small roads and the sun in my eyes, air coming in wet and heavy through the open window, me singing the whole way, two hours, top of my lungs, to stop from thinking about where I'm headed. I round a bend and there it is, the gravel drive to my father's cabin. Everything is as I remember it. The dock, the lake, the cabin, the trees, the smell, sweet olive and rank mud, the light glinting off the surface of the water—the same, but less. The green more grown over. The buildings more run down.

Fifteen years is a long time, Tainsley.

I park the truck and climb down. I swapped my Subaru for Jeremy's work pickup to get around moving Nina's car seat, but his bench is shoved far back, frozen to fit my husband's long legs, and my back aches from the pillow I had wedged behind me. His truck's a beater. Windshield a spiderweb of cracks and a transmission that won't shift into reverse. The wheels of a car crunch gravel in the driveway and I edge defensively against the rusty fender of the truck, but there's no hiding the difference. This is what my life looks like, minus a daughter made of
spit-shine and fairy dust and a husband more handsome than the sun. This is what I am without their beauty: broken windshield and don’t back up. The poorer half of you and me.

You must be doing even better than they say, Tainsley. Parking beside me in a fancy sports model that ought to belong to a stockbroker in mid-life crisis, not a working artist in her twenties. “Hey,” you mouth through the closed window. It takes you a good while to exit your car. There’s a problem with the door lock; an electrical glitch, you explain, when you finally emerge. Your hair is a mass of red curls and your eyes hide behind movie star sunglasses. I see you still favor that right leg. You tip the glasses to the top of your head and gaze at me appraisingly. “Well.” A long look, up and down. Fifteen years of catching up in one excruciating gander. “I hadn’t imagined you would be so... tall.”

I’d forgotten this part. You, funny as hell.

I crack a smile and your face goes high wattage, the same incandescent glow you wore as a kid. _Charm the spots off a leopard, that girl_, my mother used to say. You stir the air with small talk about the drive. Twenty hours on the interstate, you tell me, turning to take in the scene, combing your hair back with your hands. Whole lot of flat between Minnesota and here. Do you want your music country or Christian. Oh, wait—you ruffle your brow at me—maybe I’ve gone Christian. I shake my head, smiling. Country?

"Same as ever, I guess."

You duck your chin and train a serious gaze on me. "It's been a long time, Mary Rose," you say softly, as if you'd heard me think it.

I glance away. A long time, yes. All those lazy summer mornings we’d spent lolling on this dock, those humid Louisiana afternoons, sweaty and bored under ceiling fans—after that last night I slammed the door shut on it, chalked that up to a childhood I’d be better off forgetting.
When you were well enough to return to school I made sure we never met in the halls. Mid-year, your family put a thousand miles between us, and I was glad to have you gone. I don't mean this to be cruel. I had no way to think about what had happened, and I shaped my life in a way that meant I didn’t have to.

"Too long," I say, and your sidelong glance makes me think neither one of us is really sure if it's been long enough.

Plenty happened in those fifteen years. I left home, too, finished our shitty little third-rate high school and hightailed it out of that backwater town. I worked my way through college, met a man, got married, had a daughter: bippity bam. Nina had just learned to crawl when my mother called me last month with the news. Hikers had found my father’s body just yards from the lake, dead already some days and beginning to decompose in the September heat. The coroner suspected suicide. My mother reminded me that, although they had never divorced, she had not spoken to my father since I was twelve years old. The night we left the cabin was the last time she had seen him, and she was happy to leave it that way. If I wanted to, I could make the two hour trip and identify the body. Then I could clear the cabin and find someone to sell it.

Burn it down, I thought. Burn that fucking place down and everything in it.

My mother’s words could not have been clearer. "You take half, Mary Rose," she said. "Give half to me. And we will be done with each other."

As poor as we are, Jeremy and I, I didn’t want the money. But I wanted to be free of her, and free of everything that had happened there. I’d tried, but I had forgotten none of it. Not one second. In this way I found myself with my hand on the phone. I dialed a number. And when you answered—you, grown up, distant—I wasted no time with idle chatter.

"He’s dead," I said.
There was a long pause, and a sound that could have meant you’d hung up. I stayed on
the line and hoped you hadn’t.

It was just static in the wire. Because you said—as though it were not fifteen years since
we’d last spoken, as though our conversation continued as it always had—tell me what you need,
just that, and it all came rushing out of me, what I knew and what I didn’t, what I could do and
what I couldn’t face alone. I could clean, I could paint, I could haul. I could do any kind of work,
but I couldn't walk up that path. I couldn't open the door without you.

"I need you to come," I said.

The line was quiet.

"I know it's far," I said.

"Far?" You laughed. "Far?" The sound of papers rustling. Far. As if distance were what
kept us apart.

The lake is behind you now, a light breeze riffling its surface and lifting fine strands of
your hair. I eye you sideways and speak out of the corner of my mouth. “Whatever profit the
cabin brings I’ll split with you.” I declare, awkward as a teenager. “Half of my share is yours.”

“Please,” you scoff. You gesture toward the car. “Does it look like I need charity?” You
rustle in the back seat for supplies, and when you turn and let the car door swing shut behind
you, you’re holding a cardboard box filled with bottles and brushes and rubber gloves and steel
wool for scrubbing. You’ve brought a cotton scarf to tie up your hair and your feet are sensibly
shod in work boots. I look down at my own flimsy sneakers and feel the color creep up my neck.
I've brought a broom. Generously, you add, “It’s a good thing you've got the truck. We can haul
any crap to the dump. Can you work late?”

“I have to get home.”
“Your daughter.”

I gaze at you, but your face betrays no emotion. “I left her with her father. She’s nine months old. We live two hours away, in Shreveport.”

You give a short, curt nod. Of course you know where I live. You know it in the same way I know everything I can about you: how your mother and father sold their house in Minneapolis and bought an RV as a permanent home when you left for art school; how you quit after two semesters to live on the street and take photos of the people you met there; how your photographs have been shown in major art galleries and gained you a fair amount of attention. We still have people in common. The rest I can read on the Internet. I must be more difficult for you to track down, but there’s less to know. I’m married and we have a kid. We do what it takes to get by.

I have no doubt the car belongs to you.

"We could start, then? Murray?" You gesture with an elbow toward the cabin.

I feel a smile flush warm across my skin. No one's called me that in all these years.

"Tinsel," I say, trying it out, rolling your baby name across my tongue.

Sister.

* * *

I’d never told Jeremy the whole of the story. I’d never had reason to tell him. He’s wondered why my mother and I have so little to say to each other and I’ve told him, truthfully, that you stop communicating with someone who hits you. He’s asked why my parents divorced and I told him—this was difficult to do—that my father had been unfaithful and my mother had not forgiven him that.
But I had to explain, the night I called to ask you to come. How else would he have
understood? He knew I’d had a best friend, a girl I was closer to as a kid than anyone since,
except for him. Your family moved away when we were twelve, I told him. Until then, our
families had spent every summer together at the lake where my father had his cabin. Your
parents rented the same adjacent cabin, summer after summer. We were each only children, born
months apart, and we had grown up like sisters, I said. He nodded. That much was easy to
understand. I could have left it at that.

Instead, I told him the truth. "Tainsley and I are half-sisters by blood," I said. We looked
so much alike because we had the same father. Your mother and my father had had an affair, and
you were what came of it.

"Were they already married?" Jeremy asked softly, and I knew he was thinking of the
awful, stupid night when Michael and I scrambled out of our clothes and fucked in the mop
closet of the conference center we worked at. Jeremy’d been in Alabama all month on a job and I
was crazy lonely without him. Lonely and horny. Reckless. Half-drunk on the bottles of cheap
wine the place poured freely to loosen up the sheet metal contractors or artichoke growers or
whoever the fuck they had in there that night; reckless and stupid and—what? He said he forgave
me but I knew there was a hard kernel of hurt lodged deep in his chest, and that we could work
around it but never lose it. Yes, I said. They were already married. And I stumbled on.

"It came out the last night that we were at the cabins. My mother went berserk."

"I guess," Jeremy said, and gave a strained little laugh.

I didn’t know how to phrase it. She tried to kill you? She knocked you savagely into the
lake and would have watched you drown? She tried to hit your father when he churned about in
the water, holding you in his arms and trying to somehow get your convulsing body onto the
dock. My father had all he could do to wrestle my mother down, restrain her from attacking your mother. Run to the phone, he shouted at me. Call 911. Tell them to hurry.

To Jeremy I said simply, "It was something she couldn't handle. My mother. She never let my father in the house again. And Tainsley—"

He looked at me the way he does, the way I love, and said, "You gained and lost a sister all at once."

As though it were as clear as that. As though this were a story about something that had happened, and was done.

*   *   *

I keep my back to the dock as I reach into the truckbed for the broom, and together you and I trudge up the path of chipped brick pavers toward the cabin. The small, neat yard my father used to keep is swallowed now by sprawling green. Mold spreads in dark streaks up the plywood siding. When we reach the porch, you shuffle to the side. "Got a way in?"

I dig into the front pocket of my jeans and show you the little silver key. The police gave it to me when I came to identify the body. They didn't make me see him. They knew who he was, they said, and they'd run his prints to be sure. Nothing extraordinary in his wallet, the police sergeant claimed, which I took to mean a suicide note but could have been anything. A wad of hundred dollar bills? A gram of cocaine? A pressed flower? He was a serious man, that police sergeant, with thinning hair and a deep groove that ran down each cheek. Even though he was careful to use neutral language I could tell he wanted to know I felt something. I opened the billfold and counted the cash. Six twenties and a few singles: groceries for the week and enough left over for gas. I pocketed that, and then pushed the wallet back across his desk with my
fingertips. The sergeant looked at me, measuring. "Take this, at least." He spread the wallet and shook free a small key, the kind that fits a padlock. "You'll need it."

"For what?"

He looked at me strangely. "To open the house," he said. "Didn't you ever visit him?"

On the porch, the sun shining, I offer the small key like evidence. The door jamb is still splintered from that night, when my father broke the door down to reach my mother, to plead with her to stay. He must never have fixed it, just replaced the knob with a padlock he could secure from the outside. I fit the small key in its slot, wiggle it impatiently."Let me try," you say, softly shouldering your way past me, and it yields to your gentle effort.

I pause on the threshold and take a long breath. When I step inside, it's the same plaid couch I remember, the same scarred oak square we'd sit around at breakfast. A sole pair of reading glasses sits in the thin layer of dust on the kitchen counter. The morning dishes have been washed and set to dry in the rack, and the sink is empty.

"He lived here all that time?" You glance around, dubious. The cabin is tidy and sparsely furnished, as blandly equipped as a motel room. It smells slightly musty, the generic stink of closed-up camps, off-season. My father must have left nothing to rot in the refrigerator, even. He didn't trust anyone would be coming here for a while. Maybe he didn't think he'd be found so quickly.

"Far as I know."

He didn't trust my mother. Or me. And why would he? I saw him twice a year at my grandparents’ house. My mother deposited me in the driveway and exactly four hours later I was to be waiting for her at the curb. After my grandmother died I barely saw him. I called him once or twice from college, when I needed money. I hadn't told him about Nina.
I move around you and push open the door to the first bedroom. It is completely empty, swept clean. My parents slept in this room when we came here every summer, but nothing remains of that. I shut that door and pause to breathe, and then I twist the knob and enter my old room. Resting against the far wall, under the window, a single bed—not mine—is crisply made, the sheets tucked in and a cotton blanket flung evenly over it. I cross the small room and roughly check the dresser in the opposite corner. Bed linens and threadbare towels. Squatting, I paw through the contents of a cardboard box on the floor. Khaki pants, cotton shirts, neatly folded shorts and socks—nothing that could not belong to any other man of his size and weight. You hover above me, your face full of something like hope, but there is nothing. No papers, no keepsakes, not even our names scrawled on the margin of a page. “All right.” I can hear how small, how weary, my voice has become, and I clear my throat and start over, with gusto. “Let’s haul everything into the yard.” I offer it like something solid to proceed from. The closest thing to a plan I can muster.

“What are we waiting for?” you growl back, all muscle and bravado.

I marvel at this. At you. You’ll stop at nothing to get me to smile. And how is this, after everything that happened? After all that, where is the blame?

* * *

The dishes—there aren’t many—go in boxes for Goodwill. What food remains, we bag in plastic trash sacks and fling in the back of the truck for the dump. It takes both of us to carry the furniture to the yard. I’ll tarp it and ask someone from the church to haul it away for us. They can take whatever they want. We get into a rhythm, working together easily, and packing and carrying shifts seamlessly into cleaning, sweeping and scrubbing and mopping, listening to the
squeak of newspaper on the glass as you scrub to let new light through. Your leg slows you
down a little but I adjust my pace to remain even with you. I wonder if you tire easily. You hum
when you work, tunelessly, in the same way you did as a kid. I wonder if you even know you’re
doing it. I wonder if it was hard for you, living on the street. I wonder if you found friends there
as close as we had been. I wonder about the small sag of skin beneath your right eye, if that was
part of the damage from that night as well. I wonder who loves you. How well. For how long. I
wonder if it will last.

“Stop looking at me.”

I smile and look away.

I wonder how much longer you’ll be here, so I can.

* * *

Late in the afternoon, we wash our rags in the sink and wring them out, lay them to dry over the
porch rail. We’ve finished most of what needs to be done. A couple of hours in the morning and
then you will get in the car and make the long drive back to Minneapolis. I’ll stop in town to
make arrangements with the realtor before driving home.

You’ve thought of everything. A bottle of red wine, a corkscrew, a twelve pack of those
plastic cheese and crackers snacks that come with their own plastic paddle and last for decades
without refrigeration. We grab two mismatched tumblers from the Goodwill box and pour
ourselves generous portions of wine. We dose ourselves again with DEET, and without so much
as a shared glance, we veer away from the dock. Squat lakeside and look out over its placid
surface.
“Same shithole it ever was,” I say. It’s not much of a lake. Richer kids went on vacation to Disneyworld or South Walton Beach or down to Padre Island; two or three got on an airplane with their whole family and flew to the Caribbean. I’ve never been on an airplane bigger than the single engine float plane my uncle charters to guide hunters to remote parts of the river parishes. I’ll bet you’ve flown a lot. I’ll bet it's nothing to you.

You reach for my lit cigarette, take a long drag before passing it back. "Not a bad looking shithole." The smoke streams from your nostrils for emphasis.

I thought I'd hate this place. Instead I'm flooded with how much I loved coming up here, the way the parents would relax, be happy, drink so much they’d stop caring about where we were or what we were up to. The world we made here was just the two of us. It was make believe, and you believed it. But none of that is useful to us, now. “You’ll stay in Minneapolis? Keep taking pictures?"

You sit back in the dampness, work a pebble from the ridges of your boot sole with a stick. “Maybe. Depends.”

On what? Look at that car. If I had a job that would buy Jeremy a decent truck, let us put a down payment on a house so we could climb out of the crappy rental spiral we’re stuck in, I wouldn’t be so choosy about what it was. But it won't help to point out my shortcomings.

“You? All good with what you’re up to?” You tilt your head toward me and beam that smile.


“Better’n Dad, you mean.”
I snort, and the red wine stings coming out of my nose. He’s dead, you’re here, what kind of world is this? I sit back and laugh out loud and am amazed to remember that, too: how the mad wild growth of this place absorbs sound, damps down the most violent outburst.

My father became a different man after that night. He seemed to tumble down into himself, back himself into a corner he couldn’t come out of. I’d never felt especially close to him before that but at least he’d been around. Gone, he disappeared into a fog, providing what my mother said he had to and spending our allotted hours on small talk, once in a while dispensing generic advice or blundering into a question about school. I couldn’t wait for the time to pass.

I should have taken his wallet when the police offered it. I should have something of his. I should know more than I do. My parents never made me choose between them. If they had, would anything be different?

And you, whose parents stayed together, how did they bear it?

Instead, you ask about Jeremy. We’ve been married four years, I tell you. I knew the first time I saw Jeremy that I’d never get over the feeling he gave me. Even with Michael, drunk sloppy and electrified by the way he boldly held my hips, pulled my ass to him hard so I could feel how bad he wanted me—even then I knew it wasn’t worth it. Nothing was worth risking what I had with my husband. And yet I did it anyway. I don’t dare tell you this. I don’t tell anyone. I told Jeremy only what happened, not what made me agree.

When you ask me about my daughter, I tell you Nina is what I gave him.

You drain your cup and get to your feet. Stretch your long neck; put a hand against it, like it hurts.

“Remember those swans?” I have just thought of them: that pair of beautiful beasts—terrifyingly large—who spent a few days one summer gliding, stately, on the lake before
continuing their journey. But your face is clouded and you look tired and I think you must be remembering that other day.

“Bring your daughter tomorrow,” you say. You reach for my cigarette and smoke it down to the filter, toss it in the lake. “Can you be here at ten? Bring Nina.” And then, as though it were settled, without even a moment to let me process the pleasure it brings me, you climb into the car and pull onto the road toward the motel where you’re staying.

I should go, too. Instead I wait until your car has driven well into the cover of the trees, and I turn again toward the lake. The shallows are murky with sediment, the surface dark and opaque. The dock juts out adjacent to the ramp, close to where we’ve parked. The planked walkway is speckled with soft spots. There are places where a careless step would crumble underfoot. For one wild moment I'm frantic to call you back. Together, I want us to strike a match and set that thing on fire. I want us to stand here and watch as the flames devour it and everything that happened on it. And after that?

I don't know. I don't know if there is an after that.

*   *   *

Jeremy has dinner waiting for me when I get home. It's past Nina's bedtime and she's cranky, fussing when I take her from him, fussing even when I bury my face in the softness of her belly and blow bubbles. We are raising a wild girl who wears no clothes. Her skin has to breathe, Jeremy insists. Even in the winter, when she was a newborn, he made me crank the heat so she could lie in her crib and wave her bare little arms and legs.

"She wanted to see you," he says, sheepish at keeping her up so late. Nina would have happily fallen asleep in Jeremy's arms and not given me a thought until morning, but I'm grateful
anyway. I kiss my daughter once more and lay her down in her crib and then turn to her father. I drink in his earnest, sunburned face. I know that he loves no one so much in the world as this girl, not even me. I kiss my husband long and hard; take his hand, ignore his surprised laugh, stumble with him to our bed. Afterward, I am ravenous. He watches me eat, urging more potatoes, more fish, slicing an apple for me and feeding me sections by hand. "Was she what you expected?" Jeremy's eyes are soft brown deer's eyes, startling in the thicket of blond beard and hair that swarms his face.

I pick at the fish skin that litters my plate and try to explain it to him. How your face is the same round moon, your eyes the same green pools, still too big for your face. The joke is that people used to tell us we could be sisters, I tell him. That we hung around together so much we were starting to look alike. I never saw the resemblance. You were the pretty one. You still are.

He scoffs. "You're beautiful."

I love him for thinking this, but I know the difference. I was born bold. I was the make-believer, concocting stories about creatures that lived under the big skunk cabbage leaves, how they moved so fast all you could see was the faintest glimmer where they’d been. I showed you how to use a pocketknife to carve a charm from the sticks we picked up from the forest floor. They would ward off bad dreams, I promised, and you believed me. As a kid you believed anything. I wonder if you still will. The thought of it makes my stomach lurch. I try to tell him this, but Jeremy takes my chin and gently turns my face so I’ll look at him. "It’s only you, thinking," he says. "You don’t lie." He glances at the clock, stifles a yawn. "What time do you leave?"

Not until eight, I tell him. We get ready for bed, climb under the sheet. "I told Tainsley we'd be there by ten."
"We?"

"I promised her I'd bring Nina."

He tilts his head, his smile uncertain. "Bring Tainsley here. We both can meet her."

I reach for his hand, trace the lines on his palm with my fingertip. "Two hours in the wrong direction, and then she'll have to turn around and go two hours back. Before the drive to Minnesota."

"Then I'll come with you."

He watches me closely. In time, he takes his hand from mine, rolls onto his back, switches off the light.

In the morning Jeremy rises early. He’s washed the Subaru. He’s put together Nina’s diaper bag and made a lunch for me and gathered a bag with her favorite toys, but when I take her from his arms and nestle her into the car seat, threading her arms through the straps and clicking the buckle shut, he wavers. It isn’t a good idea for her to be in the car that long, he says. She’ll be around chemicals, breathing in the cleaning supplies we're using. He’s taken the day off anyway; it's no big deal. His face flushes as he works up the reasons not to let her go, and he reaches in to retrieve her from the car.

"Honey," I say.

He turns to me, his eyes searching, anxious for my assurance.

I almost relent, then. I almost turn back. This is everything I love, here, the two of them. There is nothing I want more than this. Who would I be without Jeremy? If he left me, what would be left of me?

But I get in the car and start the engine and pull away and don't look back.

* * *

99
You're outside pruning the overgrown rose bushes with the pair of scissors you found yesterday in a drawer, but you straighten your back and watch as we drive up. I park the car and get out. Give a low whistle. "You've got it pretty tidy around here."

"Borrowed a rake from the guy in cabin six," you say, your voice muffled, your head inside the back seat of the car. "Hello, small person." You are struggling with the clips and straps of Nina's car seat. To me, "How do I get this kid out?"

I let you fuss awkwardly with buckles and then I nudge you aside, reach in to release my daughter. Nina's pale hair, the color of Jeremy’s but with my fine texture, is plastered with sweat to her forehead. I lift her out of her car seat. "Auntie Tinsel," I tell her, by way of introduction, and pass her to you. I think Nina will cry—she cries with almost everybody who is not Jeremy or me—but she settles into your arms and gazes at you with that frank look she has. Your red hair, your smile, that easy way you have about you—even my daughter wants to be near you. The words well up in my throat. I've missed you, I think, but don't say it aloud.

Inside, I set Nina loose on a blanket Jeremy thought to stow in the hatchback. My girl’s on hyperdrive today, scooting more than crawling, leaving the blanket to cruise the room. I catch you stealing glances. When it's time for Nina to eat I show you how to feed her. You land chicken and rice in the folds above her eye and in her hair. "She's playing you," I warn. "Be in charge." It does no good. You are besotted, and Nina knows it.

When I finish scrubbing the cabinets I stretch out on the blanket, too. You are trying to teach my daughter to say auntie and she is watching your lips like they are exotic animals. "Aaaan-teeed," you repeat. You grab for her ring of plastic keys and shake them like a tambourine
in a circle around her. "These look familiar," you say, glancing down at the toy. "I might have had a set of these when I was a kid."

"Sure you did. Everybody did."

You shake the keys and mug for my kid. It's a fact, Nina has the world's cutest giggle. "What do you think, baby?" You laugh when she reaches for the keys. "Maybe so. Maybe not. Maybe I made it all up."


You glance at me then, a sharp quick look, full of warning.

There may never be another time. "I remember it all."

Nina reaches out and snares the keys from you. She puts them in her mouth and babbles around them, filling the quiet. When you look at me again it is difficult for me to stay steady, to hold your gaze.

But you break away first, and I watch the color bloom delicately across your neck and face, and when you look at my daughter I am more afraid than I have ever been.

When you speak, your voice is low and husky. "That's over, Mary Rose. Let it go."

"We need to—"

"No." You stroke the soft down on Nina's cheek, smile when she babbles at you. "Let it go."

It's time, now, you say. It's over. It's over. Time for that to be over.

But I can't hear you. All I can hear is the sound of that day.

* * *
It was mid-summer, when nothing serious should be undertaken in Louisiana. The heat hung on us like a layer of restraint, an uptick in gravity that made us avoid any but the most necessary movements. We had come back to the cabin for a supper of cold cuts and lemonade and I headed for the recliner, eased into its frayed webbing there at the end of the dock. You lay prone, a threadbare towel protecting your skin from the splintering boards. The parents played cards around the rickety table set up on the dock. A kerosene lamp cast its flickering light across their faces and made them look ghoulish.

They were all half in the bag by then. They always were, this time of the evening. You could tell by the way their expressions lasted a little too long, their skin sagged a little too fully across the bones of their faces. We were used to it. Our parents were gentle with us when they were drunk. They treated us benignly, like pets for whom they held a special affection but no real expectations. It was when they were sober that we had to worry. I did, anyway.

"Patricia," my father said. He enunciated your mother’s name slowly to avoid slurring the syllables. "I’m afraid you’ve got the worst hand. You’ll have to tell a secret."

I saw you lift your head a little. This was a different game than the ones they usually played. You shot me a glance to see if I had noticed.

"I haven’t got any secrets, Sam," your mother said brightly.

My father said, "Make something up. Patricia. It’s the rule."

"Yes, Patricia," my mother said. "Make something up so we can move on." Her voice was sharper than the others. She hadn’t had as much to drink.

"I know a secret," your father said. He sat farther from the lamp than the others and I couldn’t see his face as well.

"It’s not your turn, honey," your mother said.
He said, "It’s Sam’s secret."

My mother said, sideways, "Then it’s not much of a secret, is it?"

"It’s Sam’s secret," your father repeated, and my mother said that’s what she’d meant, that if you know someone’s secret it’s not a secret anymore, and your father said, It’s a secret from Sam.

"Well, then, out with it, buddy!" My father bellowed, and clapped your father on the back.

You were sitting up by now. I shifted, too, so I could watch more closely. Something was going on that I didn’t want to miss. My father didn’t have secrets. I tried to imagine what he could be hiding from us. Did he double as a Hollywood stunt man? Go undercover as a spy on sensitive military missions? Maybe when we thought he was off on a bender he actually had another, more noble task to complete.

"Don’t." Your mother’s voice was subdued but clear. Her gaze was cast down but her body shifted slightly toward your father. "Kenny. Don’t. He doesn’t."

My mother put her hand on the neck of the bourbon bottle and shook her head, as though the only way she could tolerate the game was to catch up with the drinking. She poured herself two fingers. "Jesus Christ," she said. "This is a stupid game."

"You’re right," my father said. "Let’s play another game." He lifted a card from the deck and slapped it against his forehead. "There," he said. "What’ll you bet."

"Blind man’s bluff!" Your father chortled. "Sam. You’re funny." He paused. "You’re so funny that you have two daughters."

My father squinched his eyes, and then he exploded with laughter. "You’re drunk, man!" He shook his head at the joke of it. "Two daughters."
My mother stopped with her glass halfway to her mouth. She put it down.

"Two daughters," your father insisted. His face was twisted in something that looked like glee but I’d never heard his voice sound that way before. "One wasn’t enough for Sam. He had to have both." He looked around the table, his expression shifting to a kind of sullen defensiveness. "Ask Patricia," your father said. "It’s her secret, too." He looked at your mother and said, "He ought to know. If I know, he should know."

"Kenny." Your mother’s voice was so soft I could hardly hear. "It was a long time ago."

There was a silence so deep that even the crickets racketing away couldn’t fill it. You and I exchanged a glance. I didn’t know what they meant.

My mother did, though. Her face slowly hardened. Her eyes narrowed and her head shifted slightly, weaving slowly back and forth, like a cottonmouth will do as it fixes the location of its prey. "I see," she said. "I see that I am the only one here who doesn’t know that secret."

She stood up. In one quick gesture she flung her bourbon in my father’s face.

I think now that the pause that followed was intended to allow my father to deny the claim. The look she turned on him was raw, untempered pain. I’ve seen that expression on my husband’s face, once. He forgave me, and I swear I will never cause him to feel that way again.

My father said nothing.

She backed away from the table and tipped over her chair behind her. I thought she was turning to bend down and right the chair but when she stood straight again the chair remained on the floor and she held the double-headed ash paddle my father had just used to maneuver the canoe on the lake and had not yet brought inside.
She walked right past me and didn’t even give me a glance. Instead, she grabbed you by
the arm and yanked you to your feet. Then she swung that paddle around as hard as a person
could and cracked it against the side of your head.

I’ll never forget the sound it made. The splash, when you fell into the water, was quiet in
comparison.

*   *   *

You send me out to gather some supplies from your car, then, and I find the photos there, in a
manila folder on the passenger seat. A mangy dog chained to a stump in the snow. An old
woman in a hospital bed. Something—I turn it around before I can tell—a human torso,
photographed from behind. A scar running from spine to hip.

Someone took that picture of you.

Studying the photos, opening the folders that lay beneath, rifling like a thief through your
things, I know I’m trespassing and that you want me to. I examine the envelopes that scatter from
one folder. Letters, documents, bills addressed to you, your first name attached to a last I don’t
recognize. I go through them, folder after folder.

I feel you at the car window before I turn to find you standing there. You have Nina on
your hip. You tug at the door handle and swing it open. "I thought the lock might have trapped
you here."

Broadly, vaguely, helplessly, I gesture to the folder in my lap.

You hitch Nina higher on your hip. "He's leaving me." You make a soft sound and look
toward the lake. "Or I'll be the one to leave. It works out the same. If I go back—"

"Why did you come?"
You gaze at me gently, for a long time, as if waiting for me to understand. "I came for you, Mary Rose." A quizzical smile crosses your face. "You asked me to." And then you step back and walk away, down the short slope and onto the planked walkway of the dock. You do not hesitate. Holding my daughter, you walk all the way along the rotted structure to the end, where there is nothing but the dark water of the lake.

*   *   *

Sometimes I wonder how things would have turned out if we'd stayed home that summer. If my father and mother had had a private fight, had split without involving your parents, had hidden the truth from us. Or if the truth itself had never come out, had stayed a secret no one really knew, or knew for certain. Would we have drifted from each other's lives as we grew older? Or, without any way to name it, would we have felt that blood bond as something unbreakable, something stronger and deeper and more treacherous than friendship?

The day has tipped well past noon; the sky's grown clotted with rainclouds. The breeze picking up means a shower will follow. Still you stand at the end of the dock, my daughter in your arms. I watch the two of you in urgent conversation. You, speaking, forming the words. Nina reaching out to touch your mouth, your face, as the words pour forth. The water beyond with nothing at all to say.

You are there a long time. Her small face is sober, alert, as she listens to the sound of your voice. I think she must know you from my heartbeat. She must know you from the smell of my skin, from the thoughts of you that course through my mind nearly every day. It's knitted into her bones, what happened that night. But you are telling her something different. Everything I
failed to see, maybe. The things I did not ask. And then gently, cautiously, you pick your way back along the rotted dock.

There's no need to burn it. Termites and the weather are taking care of it at their own pace. It will follow its downward slide into the lake before long. But not before we are gone from here.

I look at you closely as you approach. Nina reaches for me.

You give me back my girl. "She's wet," you say, and slip her into my arms.

That's something I can fix.

"I've got diapers in the bag," I say, and we turn our backs to the water and walk up the slope to the cars.
Chasing the Odds

Richie is raising his two girls by himself since Emily took off. It’s not all that different. *I did most of that shit before, anyway,* he tells Floyd—or, rather, he signs it, since Richie is deaf and Floyd, his brother, grew up thinking all families talked with their hands and, when things got heated between the boys, with their fists. It’s just as well. With the racket the tractor is making towing the hay combine, Floyd couldn’t hear a word. *I know you did,* he signs back. Then he makes a face and a gesture with his hands that anybody—deaf or hearing—would understand. Richie gets his meaning. If he were to translate, it might go: *Floyd says Fuck all,* and what Floyd would mean is, what are you going to do about it except keep on keeping on? They have come to the end of the field and the sky is growing dark. Floyd glances at Richie’s face. It is still, composed, and sad. Richie can’t let go of her leaving. There is nothing for Floyd to say and they’ve run out of field to mow so he turns the tractor around and heads for the barn.

Floyd is still married to Bridget, but they have no children. Floyd would trade Bridget for the girls any day. If Emily were to come back, Floyd seriously thinks he might shoot her. For Richie’s own good, and for the girls’ sake. Not that Richie would see it that way. He has made a shrine to Emily that she doesn’t deserve. Floyd thinks Emily is trash but that Richie is—what? Floyd’s youngest brother, he’s a good bet. Anything Richie tries, there’s a good chance it will turn out well. Floyd thinks that maybe he himself is trash but that at least he can recognize a
good thing when he sees it, and that this quality should count for something. And maybe he is not trash. Maybe he is just an ordinary man with extraordinarily bad luck.

When they get to the barn there is almost no light left and Floyd waves a hand to send Richie off. He will put away the tractor and shut things down himself. The girls are at gymnastics and Richie has twenty minutes to make a twenty-five minute drive to pick them up.

He’ll get there on time. He’s never late.

Floyd watches the truck chase its headlights over the dirt road and then he puts the tractor in its bay.

*   *   *

Richie takes short cuts on the things he figures don’t matter so he’ll have time to spend on the things that do. He’d rather give the girls cereal and milk for dinner than spend time cooking and lose out on the time to read with them before bed. It’s easier to give them baths at night and let them sleep in their school clothes than to fight them to get dressed in the morning. Alyssa, who is seven, can get her own clothes on. Everyone still calls Nicole ‘Baby’ although she is four. Emily stayed for the birthday party but loaded up the car and left before the girls got up the next morning. It was the only time Richie ever saw her dressed before dawn. He was up because he hadn’t gone to bed. He didn’t try to stop her but he spent most of the night thinking maybe she would change her mind.

She didn’t. He has written to her many times, sending her photographs and news of the girls, telling her even the small things so when she comes back she won’t feel she has been so far away. For so long.

*   *   *
Everyone loves the little girls. Their grandmother thinks they are pretty—she signs this when they come to visit—but she cannot remember their names, nor which son they belong to, nor even, sometimes, why they are there. Richie’s sisters Donna and Marlene take care of her. Neither one has ever lived outside of the house they grew up in but Marlene has a son, Dominick, who is studying to be a pharmacist. Donna and Marlene often watch the girls for Richie but it is harder for them now that Grandma’s health is sliding so abruptly downhill. For nine years, since Dominick started high school, she has been a little senile, and each year gets just a little bit worse; lately, though, the dementia has come on with a vengeance. She cannot be left alone in a room. Some days she cannot even sign what she wants and she cries fitfully and will not eat.

Alyssa, Richie’s older girl, is a talker. Her hands flit rapidly as sparrows and she follows Donna and Marlene around, telling them everything. The little one is hearing but she doesn’t talk at all, neither with her voice nor with her hands. She would sit in her father’s lap and curl up against his chest all day and all night if he let her.

He won’t allow the girls to sleep in bed with him but some nights he lies on a rug in their room like a dog and listens to them breathe.

Everyone knows this because Alyssa tells them. He’s waiting for their mother to return, she tells them. But she doesn’t think she will.

Why is that? Marlene asks her. The sign for why is a shrug, both palms up and out. She could be asking why anything. Why did Emily leave? Why won’t she return? But Alyssa knows the question is more precise than that. This why is actually a how: how can a little girl know something so clear and sure when her father is so forcefully blind to the fact?
She said so, Alyssa signs. When her mother had loaded the car and stood by its door in the driveway she looked up at the bedroom window. Alyssa stood there. She looked down past the porch at the driveway, at her father on his knees in the dirt, his shoulders hunched forward and shaking, his hands extended toward Emily as if in prayer. Alyssa’s mother looked at him, and then she looked up at the bedroom window. The mother and the daughter held each other’s gaze, and then Emily lifted her arm and made a single arc with it, complete and resolute as the sun rising in the morning and going to earth at night.

I know goodbye, Alyssa says, and won’t be persuaded to change her mind.

*   *   *

Bridget loves Richie too. She tolerates Floyd. She thinks Floyd could get ahead if he worked harder. She would like to quit her job cooking for the local K through 8 but doesn’t expect that to be much of a possibility. It seems more likely that Floyd could be struck by lightning when he’s driving the tractor across the field or that she could be one of the lucky winners at the local casino. Rita G won $250,000! shouts a billboard on Rte. 559. She can picture her face up there. Bridget R won $250,000! Or if Floyd were struck by lightning she would have to quit and stay home and take care of him. Either way her life would be different. She can’t picture Floyd ever leaving, or her ever leaving him. She can’t imagine what got in to Emily. You hit the jackpot, Bridget thinks, and you just walk away?

*   *   *

Dominick is twenty-three and handsome and he is not mean like his uncle Floyd nor quiet and timid like his aunt Donna, but he knows he has those traits ticking away like potentialities in his
cells. He is afraid to make a wrong move. He is the best student the pharmacy school has seen in years and will win a prize and a fellowship for further study when he completes his course. He leaves nothing to chance that he can control and it feels to him that he can control none of it. His grandmother's brain has betrayed her. His mother is terrified of suffering from the same disease. Dominick knows she thinks about ropes, about guns, about the pills he is learning about. When Momma goes, Marlene, his mother, will be tethered to the earth by nothing more than the fine taut strand of her love for him, and he holds himself straight, barely breathing, for fear of it breaking.

He met the professor three times before she remembered his name. *I'll spell it for you*, he said. *Close your eyes*, and with his index finger he slowly traced the letters on her palm. D O M I N I C K. *With a K?* she said. And he answered, *Yes. That is how you will remember.*

She slept with him that night, and he knows it's because of the way his finger felt sliding along the fleshy mounds and swales of her palm.

***

Richie gets up in the morning and doesn’t think about the bad things that could happen. He doesn’t waste time worrying that he could be killed in a freak accident or canned from his day job at MacPherson Steel and then where would the girls be. He doesn’t worry that a deranged gunman could burst into their gymnastics program and riddle the kids with holes. He doesn’t let himself think that the morning in the driveway, him on his knees sobbing and Emily’s blue eyes dry and clear, could be the last he ever sees of her.

He does what he can to make the girls laugh. He can quack like Donald Duck and he’ll do it for as long as it takes until Baby Nicole cracks a smile. He’ll turn a cartwheel in the living...
room for Alyssa and land on his butt, breathless, and not know if his chest seized because of the hard landing or the breathtaking look of her laughing or because his heart really is breaking, slow motion, every morning he wakes up and Emily still isn’t there. He’ll stand up. He’ll laugh himself. Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Hearty, and for real because the girls will know if he’s faking it. Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha, along with Alyssa, until Baby Nicole puts her hand over her mouth and her tiny frame shakes with mirth. And then he will make them peanut butter sandwiches and they will read together until they fall asleep.

* * *

Floyd stands in the middle of the fallow field and lets the math cascade over the quiet of his mind. One hundred acres in alfalfa and seventy-five in soybeans to sell at the exchange. A dry winter, and the snow left on the mountains a thin crust that won't last through the spring. He'll take half the cows to auction in La Jara and hope the rains come steady enough to yield three cuts; less hay than that and there won't be enough to feed the cows he keeps.

He hasn't sold the land. He'll never sell the land. He rubs the back of his hand across his wind-chapped brow. Who'd buy this land? When all it yields is heartache; when all it offers is bad luck.

His hand slides down the side of his jaw and stops to cradle his chin. He can smell the spring in the dirt. Every year, the sandhill cranes rest here on their way north. Floyd can almost hear them, though they haven't yet arrived: their hiss and trill and rattle, that odd old cry, older than human, closer to wind. And the elk will cross in herds of a hundred or more, traversing his fields, still in stubble from the fall, to reach the foothills that rise on the other side of the highway.
Every year the cranes. Every year the elk. And who's to say he's not lucky? Who's to say he's not the luckiest man in the world?

*   *   *

Emily has bet everything on something better. Even when she stops to eat, or to rest, or to get a job, or to smile at a man – an older man who hears and speaks and buys her things and tells her how beautiful she is and how happy he will make her, a man whose eyes are not limpid with love but cold and hard with desire, a man who knows a good thing when he sees it and isn’t afraid to use his strength to wrestle the odds in his favor – even then she keeps her eyes on what’s ahead. Even then, years later, she keeps an eye on the horizon, a foot on the gas pedal.

Wondering what better thing is waiting in store for her.
Decency

Off in the distance, a steady drumbeat: Sundance must have started. That's why the unfamiliar trucks, the long hair. Sundance brought them from all over. Last year's Florida runaway and the cops that followed. Some were clean-shaven—not many like that; others sported beards to their waists and a feral look that hinted of months in the wilderness. Lorne was forbidden to go near any of them. It wasn't about propriety or consequences. His parents were scared by the way they gathered like locusts and worshipped out loud, so different from their own tight-lipped, hurried prayers for rain. For Lorne's success on the high school football field. Lorne didn't know about the lump under his mother's left breast or how his parents prayed for it to disappear. He knew they worried over the harvest and though they never said it his brother's absence was the one thing that could never be repaired. Long time gone, was as close as he'd ever heard them come to mentioning Jim. Long time. When the principal, who should have known better, asked them, Lorne's mother turned her face aside and Lorne heard his father's voice tighten. Long time gone, he said, and underneath that, not spoken but ringing like a bell, *and never coming back*.

Until he did.

The Sundance brought him. And a girl, cute as a daisy, pregnant as the sow Lorne's father had bred in the spring. They'd driven down from Saskatchewan in a primer-gray Mustang Jim had been working on. Jim got a job stocking shelves, midnight on, in a Fred Meyers six miles
down the county road from where they lived. If the Mustang was running he drove it. If it wasn't, he walked. It wasn't far until after. Some mornings his boss gave him a lift. It was out of his way but he was an okay guy. He wouldn't last, Jim said. No one decent ever did.

Jim wasn't decent. Lorne knew this in a deep way, and his parents knew it, and some of the kids Lorne went to Valley High with did, too—but the daisy girl didn't know it and didn't even suspect. Maybe she wouldn't care, Lorne thought, but Jim wasn't enough of a fool to risk telling her.

Lorne couldn't tell about himself. There were things he wanted, things he couldn't get any other way, so he stole them. Was this indecent? It was wrong, he knew that. But the want started and he had to do something to make it go away. Some things he gave back after he'd had time to fool around with them. That wasn't indecent. Indecent was fooling around with people you weren't supposed to. You were supposed to wait until you were married and then the priest told you what you could or couldn't do. You couldn't kill a baby. Lorne knew that. It looked like Jim had been decent as far as that went. But making a baby when you weren't married—you couldn't hide that. There was no way you could fake decent with something like that.

Sundance happened in a cleared bowl, a meadow that was forest before Lorne's father's father cut it down. Their house was built with those logs. After he cut the timber Lorne's grandfather sold the land to a neighbor for fifty cents on the dollar, Lorne's grandmother said. Any bad transaction earned her scorn. Her son—Lorne's father—he turned out fifty cents on the dollar, in her book. Not worth what she put into him. The way he farmed, he should have been a schoolteacher. Wasting all that time raising fancy vegetables for the farmers' market when he could be putting real food on his family's table. Beans, corn, squash. But he took after his impractical father.
Lorne wondered who he took after. His grandmother, maybe. He was practical, good at math, an athlete. He lacked patience. He stole things. He wondered if she had done anything like that. He thought maybe it was something he would outgrow. He couldn't ask her because she was dead, now. Lorne's father had married late in life. His friends had fathers in their thirties. Lorne's brother Jim was thirty. He had a different mother. Maybe she wasn't decent, Lorne thought. Maybe Jim got it from her.

Lorne's own mother was quiet and good at everything and decent and impossible to talk to. When he tried she gave a little laugh like he was making a joke, and smoothed his hair and walked away. She cooked good meals and thought ahead to each thing either of them might need throughout the day. She packed them lunches, washed Lorne's uniform, handled the farm accounting. She preferred to be in the background, she said, when pressed. People liked her, women and men. Respected her. She didn't really have any friends. Lorne took after her in this way.

Jim hadn't told them he was coming. Why would he? Lorne's mother asked his father as they sat together, heads bent over the farm books on the kitchen table. *He knows he isn't welcome here.* It was the harshest thing Lorne had ever heard her say. Lorne's father made a sound in the back of his throat that seemed like agreement but maybe wasn't. Lorne was awake, listening. He missed things when they whispered. His father was supposed to be angry at Jim for coming back but the sounds he made didn't sound angry, they sounded sad.

Lorne wasn't mad at Jim. He could barely remember what he looked like. Jim went away when Lorne was three and Lorne thought if he didn't have the secret yearbook—Jim's yearbook—under his bed to look at, he might not recognize his brother at all. He was wrong.
about this. The man in the campground at Sundance didn't look like the yearbook picture but Lorne was positive. There were some things you didn't forget.

That smile, for example. It was broad and toothy and even though the man had thin hair and a soft belly there was no mistaking Jim's smile. Lorne was keeping out of sight, tucked behind the trunk of a fat ponderosa and watching the Sundancers as they set up camp. He had scanned them all, disappointed, and then a gray Mustang pulled up and a man got out and went around to the other side and helped a girl get out of the car. The girl was so pregnant it was hard for her to boost herself out of the low bucket seat and the man reached in and helped set her on her feet. He said something that made her laugh and then he turned and looked straight at Lorne and lifted his arm.

Lorne felt his heart clang in the back of his throat. He didn't know if he should wave back or pretend he couldn't see him. But then he realized that Jim wasn't waving. He had the girl by the arm and he was gesturing for her. He was tracing an arc with his arm that took in everything around them—the trees where Lorne hid, the hills behind, the meadow itself, even the sky, and even though Lorne was too far away to hear his voice or read his lips, he was sure what his brother said.

*This is mine*, his body told the girl.

* * *

Lorne didn't know how he knew that his mother was sick. No one talked about it. There wasn't a time when someone came to him and said, your mother has cancer and it will kill her. He just knew it. Well, he was pretty sure. It was there in the way she walked, slower than normal, choosing her steps. It was a smell in the bathroom when he got up in the night and stumbled in to
pee. It was written in the fear on his father’s face. It was why she never answered any of his questions. They were never the right questions, he understood. The right question was: what will I do without you?

Someone did tell him about Jim. A girl a year behind him at school stopped in front of him on the school bus. When he didn't say anything she dropped into the seat beside him. He looked ahead and fiddled with the zipper on his backpack. She wore headphones and bobbed slightly to the beat of whatever poured into her ears. Then she lifted them from the crown of her head and smoothed her hair. It was long and brown and lay straight as a knife. Your brother’s here, she said.

Lorne looked at her. What brother, he said. He meant to sound mean. He thought he knew this girl. He thought her father was the man who sold his father the new tractor the year before. The tractor was trouble from the start. They’d already replaced the carburetor. It was still under warranty, but that didn't make up for the hassle.

Your brother Jim, she said, and cracked her gum. Then she reached into the tight pocket of her jeans and withdrew a stick. She handed it to him. My mother said she saw him with a girl in the Wash 'n Go. They're here for the Sundance. She looked away and Lorne wondered if she was lying. She had no reason to lie. Then she turned back and said, A really pregnant girl. I guess you're going to be an uncle.

Not lying, just uncomfortable. As soon as she said it Lorne knew that it was true.

So? Lorne said.

She shrugged. As soon as she got off the bus Lorne spit the gum into his hand and stuck it under the seat.
Lorne's grandmother died of bitterness, his father said. She swallowed a seed of it and watered it and fertilized it and waited while it grew into a fat melon that blocked her airway and let her choke to death in the bed shoved into the corner of her small room at the nursing home.

Why? Lorne asked him.

His father shrugged. Fifty cents on the dollar, he said, his thin mouth twisted into a painful excuse for a smile. She never got over it. Next door and all.

He didn't mean just the land, Lorne understood. He meant himself.

*   *   *

Jim's girl's name was Brightness. It wasn't a made-up name, she insisted. Her parents were Vietnamese refugees who had moved to Toronto before she was born. They gave her a Vietnamese name that no one could pronounce. In English, Brightness was as close as they could come. When she was a teenager, she told Lorne, she learned that a better translation was Radiance. But her name had been Brightness for so long she didn't see any reason to change. He liked it, Lorne said. Everyone called her Bright. It seemed to fit.

It wasn't long after Sundance that Lorne's father got up from dinner to answer the phone and it was Jim. Lorne watched his mother. She went on cutting her steak into small careful pieces, lifting the pieces to her mouth, chewing deliberately, but Lorne could tell from her color and by the way she wouldn't look at him that she was upset. He finished his steak and his mother forked the unfinished piece of hers and delivered it to his plate and then got up and walked into her bedroom and shut the door. Lorne's father was still on the phone.

When he finished talking, Lorne's father went into the bedroom, too. Lorne finished everything on the table and washed the dishes.
The next morning he went to the hospital to meet his new nephew. Up close, Bright looked tired and Jim looked old. But the baby was a miracle.

They named the baby Pan, which made Lorne's mother laugh. Why not Pot? she said. Pan was the Greek god of the woods, and music, Jim explained. You aren't Greek, Lorne's mother countered. Neither is he. That baby is Canadian, with some Vietnamese and some Swedish and some... She hesitated.

My mother is from Pennsylvania, Jim said, his eyes inscrutable.

Some Pennsylvanian, then, Lorne's mother said.

But the baby stretched his chubby hands into the air and she picked him up. Come here, little Pan, she murmured. What have you got in that diaper.

* * *

Bright was decent. The football season came and went and Lorne didn't perform up to the coach's expectations and he got moved to second string. Lorne's mother spent two days in the hospital and Bright cooked for them. She made something Vietnamese that Jim and Lorne's father praised her for but left sitting in a lump on their plates. Lorne ate his. His mother was a better cook but his mother wasn't there. She was in the hospital having something removed.

When she came home she had to rest, and Bright kept cooking. Sometimes Lorne's mother called out directions to her. Pan lay on the floor, banging and waving the empty plastic containers and wooden spoons and plastic-coated spatula Bright gave him to play with. His hair was a deep brown color and he looked constantly surprised. It was something in the way he scrunched his forehead when he looked up at them. He was growing, but he was small. Bright was small, too, but Jim was bigger than any of them. Jim had been a wide receiver on the Valley
High team. There was a trophy the team had won—district title—the year he was a senior. There was no picture of the team. The administration took it down after what happened. There was a picture from 1988 and a space and then a picture for 1990. Whenever Lorne passed that wall—this was before Jim came back—he would think about what the team had done and how they’d been caught, and how that had brought their lives in Braswell to an end. Each one of them had left. Only Jim had come back, and when Lorne passed that wall now he looked the other way.

Bright washed the dishes. She was home with Pan while Jim worked his job and helped their father with the winter chores and Lorne’s mother recovered. It seemed to take her a long time. Even when the doctor said she was better she spent most of the day looking out the window, moving from spot to spot in the house to follow the sun. Sometimes she spread the paperwork for the farm accounting on the table and just looked at it. Lorne’s father struggled with it at night. Some nights Lorne could hear his parents argue in their bedroom before he fell asleep. Or not argue, really; his mother was silent, most of the time, while his father circled around and around the same questions, a querulous tone to his voice, which grew more and more weary.

Lorne’s new bedroom was tiny. It was a closet, really, between his parents’ room and his old bedroom, a bigger room with a window opening to a lower roof he’d been able to lie out on, nights he couldn’t sleep. Now that room belonged to Jim and Bright and little Pan. They weren’t quiet, either. Even with the baby in the room they made the bedsprings squeak. Lorne pulled the pillow over his head when he heard their voices change from normal. Jim’s voice got husky and Bright made soft, high noises. And then it was quiet and on both sides of his small room Lorne could hear the steady drone of sleepers.
Lorne's mother should have been better. The doctor said the surgery had been successful and scans showed they'd gotten all the cancer. It wasn't that making her ill, but something was.

It wasn't Pan. The baby cooed and cried and scooted and then crawled around the house. She seemed delighted by him and his face shone when he saw her. It wasn't Bright and it wasn't him, Lorne was fairly sure. That left his father and Jim. Lorne thought it was Jim she was mad at and his father she took her anger out on, but though Lorne's father asked her over and over to tell him what was wrong, she refused to. She held on to her silence like a kind of power, a stick she could use to hit Lorne's father with, and he bent lower and lower with the pounding.

The girl whose father sold tractors was named Selena. Lorne couldn't get away from her. Her boyfriend was the quarterback, a kid who'd moved to Braswell the year before from Phoenix. He wasn't her boyfriend, Selena said. They were just friends. The quarterback said otherwise, but a lot of guys lied about that.

I guess your brother thinks nobody remembers what he did, Selena told Lorne. She'd been waiting for him to shower and dress and walk outside from the locker room. Lorne ran cross country in the spring. He wasn't fast, but the coach said it might give him an edge when football came around again.

Lorne didn't know what the team had done that had been so indecent. When he asked his father he'd said the boys had made some bad choices. Lorne knew it had something to do with a girl. A single girl. No one knew more or would tell him. He thought about it, though. Guiltily, hours spent imagining what a team of football players would do with a girl. It wasn't just Jim, Lorne told Selena.

I heard he was the ringleader.
Lorne looked at her. She was too young to date a junior—even if they were just friends. She was flat-chested and thin as a willow twig and she had a toy dangling from the zipper pull of her backpack. It was her first year at the high school. What do you want from me? he said.

The look of bored confidence shimmered on her face, like a channel that wouldn't come in clearly, and then it slid away entirely. Lorne had the feeling that he'd never really seen her before that moment. She looked scared. She said, Are you going to go to the dance on Friday?

They were standing at the far corner of the gym before the parking lot yawned and the drive circled around to the front of the high school. Lorne had to walk all the way through there to catch the late bus home. He might miss it if he delayed much longer. But he looked at the frightened look on Selena's face, her mouth slightly open and her breath coming in quick little pants and her eyes following every change in his expression, and something happened. He dropped his gym bag and he used both hands to roughly grab her shoulders and shove her up against the brick wall of the gym and without tenderness, without care, he kissed her hard. He heard her skull knock against the bricks and he dropped his hands and stepped back. There were tears glimmering in her eyes.

Lorne rubbed his mouth roughly with the back of his hand. I'm not going, he said harshly. I don't even like you. Stay away from me. And he grabbed his gym bag and ran for the bus and left her there.

She left him alone after that, kept her distance, but there were times when Lorne could feel her gaze on him. Lorne glared at her and she dropped her eyes. There were plenty of other kids for her to laugh with. He knew she went to the dances, sometimes with the quarterback but sometimes with other boys. Lorne never went. There were girls he would have liked to ask but he was too shy. He had become morose around others, rarely meeting their eyes, never
answering questions in class or doing things after school with other kids. At home he played with Pan, entertained the boy with slapstick pratfalls and magic tricks he practiced from an open book. The boy laughed and clapped his chubby hands together. Bright was there, always, too. She smiled at Lorne and fed him snacks. He was bulking up. She talked to him like he was a normal person. He made up things to tell her, normal things, to protect her from the person he could feel himself turning into.

His mother was hospitalized again. He came home from the last day of school and she wasn't there.

Lorne's father and Jim and Bright all sat down with him in the living room. Lorne couldn't think of a time when they'd ever come together for a reason like that. For the purpose of discussing something.

Lorne's father cleared his throat. Your mother has depression, he said. The doctor said it's a disease and she needs treatment to get better. They're starting that now.

Lorne looked around. When's she coming home.

They won't keep her for longer than a few days, his father said. His gaze fell to the floor. She's under observation.

Jim's hand lifted brusquely like he was shooing away a fly. She tried to off herself.

Lorne felt a wave of sharp, stinging emotion wash over him. He didn't know if it came because of what his mother had tried to do or because Jim had bluntly told the truth. No one ever told the truth.

Bright reached over to put her hand on the arm of Lorne's chair. She'll be okay, she said softly. We'll help her when she comes home. She needs medicine and she needs us to understand. That will help her.
Lorne didn't understand. Not this, not anything. He turned to Jim. What did you do?

Bright looked at him quizzically. Lorne's father's face blanched even paler. Jim's expression didn't change. He watched Lorne carefully like he wanted to be sure he understood the question he was asking. Then Jim said slowly, in a normal voice, I fucked a girl I wasn't supposed to. It was a mistake.

You fucked her by mistake? Lorne's voice cracked.

Bright looked confused. She looked at Jim and then at his father.

Pan broke things. He crawled to Lorne's foot and pulled himself to standing by clutching Lorne's pant leg in his pudgy hands. He cooed. Lorne picked him up and held him tight to his chest. He couldn't speak, just sat there with his chin hooked over the little boy's head, listening to his heart beat through the baby's body. His heart, or Pan's, it didn't matter, until Pan grew restless and squirmed loose.

*   *   *

It wasn't a few days, it was two weeks before Lorne's mother came home. He had visited her every day of the last four she spent in the hospital, but not before that. She didn't want visitors before that. Not even her son.

She was frail when they brought her home, but she was calm and open to conversation. Bright took the lead on that. She described Pan's growth, the progress in the gardens, funny things she'd seen on TV. When she ran out of things to talk about she read passages from magazines. Lorne's mother had never been a TV watcher before but she became one, now. She grew stronger. Bright had developed a passion for flowers and Lorne's mother helped her weed
the beds. She took over most of the cooking, to everyone's relief, and she went back to keeping
the books for the farm.

They were doing well. Jim's contribution to the labor meant they could cultivate twice the
acreage, and Saturday mornings Jim and Bright and Pan loaded the flatbed with boxes of
produce and sold it from their own booth at the farmers' market. Sometimes Lorne went along.
Jim and Bright did the selling but Lorne moved boxes and rearranged the display and took Pan
around the market, riding on his shoulders. He let the baby help him stack the tomatoes, squirt
the lettuce with water from a spray bottle. Lorne talked to Pan steadily, a soft stream of
nonsense. He didn't notice Selena until she was standing right beside him. Close enough to
touch.

He's a cute kid, she said. She looked uncertain.

Lorne bristled. He wanted her to leave but she just stood there. He noticed Jim's gaze
flick toward Selena and then back to the man he was conversing with. He was weighing squash
in the balance, sliding them deftly into a bag. Lorne said, His name is Pan.

He's smiling at me, Selena said, surprised.

He likes people, Lorne said grudgingly. He reached out to stop Pan from knocking a
tomato from the stack.

Afterward, Bright took him aside. She likes you, Bright said.

Lorne scowled. Too bad for her, he said, and Bright looked at him longer than usual until
Lorne turned away.

* * *

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The summer was busy and exhausting. Jim worked like two men, pushing Lorne to work harder, work faster, and letting their father rest in the shade or spend time in the cool dark of the barn seeing to the equipment. Lorne ate constantly and could not get enough to fill himself. Every calorie went to muscle, and he bulked up without adding much height. Jim was still a good six inches taller than he was and stronger, too. He had lost the belly as soon as farm work started. His skin had burned bronze and his hair bleached blonder in the sun. Lorne's hair was dark and he turned brown. Pan resembled him. The boy didn't look like Jim at all. It had become a joke but Jim didn't seem to find it funny.

When Pan was with him, Lorne felt untouchable. People paid attention to the cute little boy, and some of their good feeling spread to the boy who carried him about. Lorne never stole things then. It didn't even cross his mind. But when he was on his own it felt like a kind of compulsion, a necessity, even. He knew it was backwards but somehow he believed that if he didn't steal something bad would happen. That by doing the bad thing, the forbidden thing, he was keeping badness at bay. It didn't make sense to Lorne but he knew he believed it. He thought it through carefully and determined that he was wrong. But he went on stealing.

It was never anything big. He didn't mug people or break and enter or go into a bank with a gun and a ski mask. He wasn't a criminal. But when he found a pair of work gloves that fit him perfectly at Walmart, it wasn't hard to free them of their electronic tag and stuff them into his backpack. He stole a shovel that was leaning against a landscaper's truck a few blocks from school. He lifted cans of Dr. Pepper, Mounds bars, small packets of beef jerky from the convenience store when his father stopped for gas. He stole a pair of shoes from outside a neighbor's door. The next day he put them back.
Pre-season football started at the end of July. It was the height of the season in the fields, but Lorne had started in Pop Warner football and played all the way through. His father needed the help but he knew what it meant to Lorne. It was the only thing outside of school that he did away from his family, and every year he let the boy go.

That's bullshit, Jim said.

They were eating dinner. It was after eight and they were all exhausted. Even Bright had left Pan with Lorne's mother so she could help with the picking. They were rumpled and dirty and had bits of leaves and dirt in their hair. Lorne looked up, startled.

It's not negotiable, Jim, Lorne's father said firmly.

It should be. Jim stretched out of his seat and walked his plate to the sink. We need him. He's not a kid any more.

Lorne's mother surprised them. He's fifteen! she shouted. The color rose in her cheeks.

Jim looked subdued. I'm just saying. He lifted an eyebrow at Lorne. You're a good worker. And then, as though he couldn't resist the dig, I thought you'd be over that baby stuff by now.

Lorne's face was bewildered. But you—

Yeah. Jim laughed bitterly. Look where it got me.

Only Bright looked around after that. What? she said, turning her gaze from one closed face to another. What got you?

*   *   *

Lorne went to a week of preseason, just to spite Jim. He felt he had to. The football had lost its shine for him but he didn't let them know. He waited until Jim came with an offer. He would
sweeten the pot, he said. He knew Lorne had money saved up for a car. If Lorne came back and worked until school started, Jim would make up the difference between what he had and what he needed. He would help him locate a good one and buy it. And in the meantime, he would teach Lorne to drive on the Mustang.

Lorne paused long enough to let Jim sweat a bit. Then he said, Okay.

They worked like men possessed, then, during the days, and nights Jim took Lorne out to the back roads and turned him loose. There wasn't much to teach. Lorne already knew the basics. He just needed time behind the wheel to grow comfortable with the road. He crept along at thirty, first, and moved the speedometer gradually up until he was banking the turns along the river at a hundred miles an hour.

Ease up, Jim said, and yawned. You flip it, you fix it.

Lorne brought it down to sixty-five. He glanced at Jim. In the dim light of the dash his brother looked unfamiliar, someone he hardly knew. How long you staying, he said.

Jim looked surprised. He paused, peered ahead. Forty-five, he said. Cops hang out up ahead.

Lorne asked again. How long?

There was a long time of listening to the tires roll over the road. Then Jim said, Why? Don't you like having a little brother around?

Lorne laughed. He said, He's not my brother. He's my—

Jim looked at him, his dark eyes glittery in the low light.

And Lorne realized it would not be much longer at all.

* * *
The fights in Lorne's old bedroom grew more frequent. Muffled angry voices, silence, and then the bedsprings. Each day started out fine, with everyone cheerful, but by dinnertime Jim was sullen and quiet and Bright's eyes were glazed with worry. The baby cried more. But Lorne's mother was steady, stronger, and tried where she could to make up for the strife.

School next week, she murmured.

Lorne made a face. He wouldn't mind it, really. They'd worked hard all summer and the fall would be easier, no football and the evening chores never much of a burden. He turned to Jim. Go and get that car?

Lorne's father grinned. You got one picked out?

Jim said, Week after next. He glanced around. Bright and me, we're going to the Sundance. We'll camp out over there for the week.

Lorne's father put down his fork. Son, he said. Lorne's mother got up and left the table.

Bright watched her go. Then she lifted Pan from his high chair and followed her onto the porch.

We're going, Dad. Jim's voice was final. It's our religion. He looked at his father evenly.

You could come if you want. I'm inviting you.

He didn't invite Lorne, though, the boy noticed.

*   *   *

Lorne rode to school on the bus. When Selena climbed on he looked away. From the corner of his eye he could see that she'd gotten curvier over the summer. She was wearing makeup. She sat next to a boy Lorne didn't recognize and talked to him the whole way to school.

Bright was wrong, Lorne thought. Well, Bright was wrong about a lot of things.
It was different, being back in school but not playing on the team. Lorne felt older. He felt done with school. He started to wonder whether he could make it through two more years. Whether it was worth it to him to do that. Where it would get him.

Look where it got Jim, Lorne thought.

* * *

The drums started the morning of the first day. It was a slow, quiet beat, a single drum that welcomed the dancers as they filed in. More drums would join, Lorne knew, and the beat would speed up and get louder. He knew what they did, there in the meadow. He had watched them.

No food, no water, no sleep for two days. Just chanting and prayer. For the others there were meals and quiet conversation, the rewards of gathering, but for the men who had come together to dance the sun ceremony it was a time of ritual fasting and sacrifice.

Men like Lorne's brother. Lorne's father. Lorne saw them down there. They walked to the pole that was covered in bright flags, and someone—a shaman?—blessed them and handed each one a rope. Each man carried it back to the circle and wrapped it around himself. As a group they leaned back, tautened the ropes, and began to sing. Slowly they revolved around the pole.

Lorne moved stealthily behind the cover of trees to look for Bright and Pan. Maybe they were resting, he thought. Women weren't allowed in the ceremony. There was a specific women's area but it was protected from view. He couldn't find them anywhere.

Lorne lay down with his back in the leaves and slept, then. The odd high-pitched singing filled the whole sky. It comforted him. He knew how his mother hated this ceremony, blamed the group for everything that went wrong all year—every burglary, every freak accident—as though the energy of the Indians and all the freaks who followed them somehow polluted the town. Jim
had explained it to them, though: it wasn't polluting, it was purifying. It was a way to come clear
on the other side from the bad things that had gone into making you. It was a way to pay your
respects to the Creator, and for those who were prepared, to make a sacrifice to the sun in order
to repair the ills of the world.

The singing had stopped by the time Lorne woke. He stood and brushed the leaves from
his clothes and he peered down into the bowl. The drums had begun again. The men gathered at
the center. He found his father's shirtless torso, white where his shirt had blocked the sun all
summer long. His brother was bronzed, built like a god. It was a different man than the one
Lorne had recognized the year before. There was no smile, now.

A chill ran down Lorne's spine. He looked around hurriedly again for Bright, for Pan.

The singing began again, but harsher and higher. And Lorne could not move his eyes
away from the center as the man stepped forward and thrust his chest toward the shaman. He
dropped to his knees but he kept his back arched so his chest remained high. The shaman slid
forward and with a knife made an incision in the man's chest. Blood flowed everywhere and the
man was concealed from Lorne's view as others came forward to stanch the blood. Lorne knew
what would happen next. A stick would be inserted through the man's chest, threaded under his
muscles, and the man would attach the line to the stick and continue to dance, his weight flung
backwards against the stick.

It was Lorne's father, down there. Honoring the sun.

The wail lifted up out of the bowl. First his father's voice, and then the shaman's, and then
the others all joined in.

Lorne bolted, then. He crashed through the underbrush and ran.
It was dusk when he stopped. He stood along the highway, bent double with his hands on his thighs and his breath a fire racing out of him.

And then he slowly stood and turned and walked the highway home.

*   *   *

His mother sat in her rocking chair and turned from the window as she heard him come in. He didn't know what to say to her. She patted the stool that sat next to her, inviting him to sit, and he did. He could tell she'd been crying. She was calm, now.

Did you see them?

See who.

She gave the slightest smile. He had answered her and she would have to accept that.

Lorne said, Is Pan here? Is Bright?

Lorne's mother reached a fine-boned hand and touched his shoulder. She smoothed his hair behind his ears. They've gone, she said.

As soon as she said it, Lorne knew that it was true.

Lorne let his mother's hand rest on the back of his neck. Then he reached and gently cupped it between his. He patted it and held it to his forehead while he fought the sudden urge to cry, and then he patted it again and returned it to her lap. Are you okay, Mom?

She met his gaze, then. He saw in her eyes that she had traveled some distance and come back. Don't worry about me, she said. Her eyes softened and she looked at him closely. Do I have to worry about you?

Lorne stood up. I'll be okay, he said. He turned to go to the small bedroom that was his, now, but he turned back. Mom. Go to bed. Dad—
I know, she said. That's okay. But I'll stay up anyway.

He nodded, and walked away.

* * *

It was late when Lorne rose again. His mother still sat slumped in her chair, her head tilted to the side, her breath even and peaceful. He waited to put on his shoes until he was safely past her. He had thrown a lump of cheese and some leftover pot roast and a few apples into a sack by the light of the refrigerator, and he stepped out into the yard.

Jim's Mustang waited in the driveway. He felt under the mat for the spare key. Then he slid beneath the steering wheel and ignited the engine.

Saskatchewan was a long way off. Toronto was even farther. He didn't know where he would find them, but he knew he wouldn't stop until he did. He closed his eyes and gripped the wheel and listened to the engine and let his mind stretch forward toward the future. Let his will carry him away from here and everything it demanded of him.

A soft rap on the glass at the passenger's side broke him from his prayer. The night was black and Lorne squinted toward the dark mass outside the window. And then the door opened and the dome light spread its soft butter and Lorne's mother slid into the bucket seat beside him and pulled the door shut. It was dark again.

No. He felt it, bigger than him, uncontrollable. I'm going. The rasp and yaw of his own voice startled him, but he wouldn't back down. He would not.

The Mustang's engine quivered beneath his foot. He could feel his mother looking at him through the blackness. It was too dark to make out her features but he could see the lifted thrust of her jaw, hear the metal click as the tongue of her seat belt settled into the clasp.
Then go, she said.
Queenie on the Loose

My neighbor Joshua is not a handsome man. My husband was uncommonly graceful, but Joshua is built like a prize steer: deep chested, earthbound, programmed for forward. His hair is the same no-color of chamisa blossoms in late fall. Sixteen years next door and I can tell you he has forty acres of prime Colorado bindweed, the construction project of the century, and unusual feet. Nothing registers as soft on him but his eyes.

They are blue and sympathetic.

I learned about the feet because my husband had left and I was trying to give away his shoes. Our sons inherited Arne’s genes for height but had not yet topped out. I didn’t want to save them for their future. There was something unsavory about the thought of my boys tromping around in shoes with H E A R T A T T A C K stamped in invisible letters across the scuffed leather toes. And still? Goddamn. I could not make myself throw them away. They were a decent pair of Redwings with life in them yet. Even though my husband no longer had life in him.

It was over a year ago, that day we left the cemetery and had Arne’s reception under the shade trees behind our trailer. Neighbors brought picnic tables and filled them with food. I had nothing to do but sit at a table with First Boy and Last Boy at either elbow and Queenie, our decrepit mutt, at my feet, and listen to every story my neighbors told. The sun shifted and the
boys drooped. They were old enough to understand what was going on but young enough so that not even grief was able to command their whole attention. They had buried their father in the morning and now, as the crowd began to thin, they wanted to go inside and play video games. I said yes.

My friend Mary Alma looked at me, startled. Her son Junior clung to her side like an unnecessary limb.

I told the boys, Go.

I watched my neighbor Joshua wade toward me through a small crowd of neighbors in jeans. He arrived at the other side of the table, took his hands from the pockets of his overalls, and said, “Kika.”

“Joshua.” I considered him. “What size are your feet.”

His eyes glistened pale blue in a face made ruddy by the sun. The skin around them crinkled. I could tell he had shaved for the funeral. He hesitated. It didn’t seem like that difficult a question to me, but I was in no rush. I could take all day.

It would depend on the shoe, he said.

“Follow me.” I got up from the table. Queenie rose from where she lay and trotted after, and with Joshua bringing up the rear we cut a neat parade across the weedy yard.

The room was a mess, but at least I’d made the bed. Joshua sat gingerly on the end. His Carhartts looked like a smear of cutbank mud against the daisy yellow of the spread. I stooped to pick up Arne’s shoes and when I stood again I noted that Joshua was the first man in eighteen years other than my husband to enter my bedroom. Because he was sitting I had a good view of the top of his head. For one long, addled moment I wanted to secure my fingers in the sandy swirls of his hair, lean my weight against his shoulders, and sway him backward onto the bed. It
was the day of my husband’s funeral and I couldn’t get the picture out of my mind, shockingly clear and completely imaginary, of lying with my bare skin pressed against my neighbor’s chest. I blinked. Instead, I handed Joshua the shoes.

“Try these,” I said.

Queenie’s white muzzle swiveled at my side as we watched Joshua tug off the Durham ropers he wore. He had a hole in the toe of his right gray sock. He eased his foot into Arne’s shoe. HEART, I read. He tugged on the laces. He looked up at me and nodded.

But when he tried the right he looked like Cinderella’s less fortunate kin. He took his foot back out, jacked up his abundant eyebrows, and wiggled his toes.

I felt a small hard splinter shear off the black mass at my heart with the sound I made.

All right, Joshua, I thought. You are a fairy tale but maybe not that one. What’s the story of a man who lives alone for sixteen years and toils and builds for – nothing?

“Lopsided,” he apologized.

But he took them anyway.

*   *   *

The boys don’t like it when I tell people their father left me. First Boy is slight and dark with the intense expression and chiseled features of a Persian prince. Neither his father nor I are Persian. He looks like us, only beautiful, as though somehow our rough components had been refined and improved upon before they were made available for his use. He is prone to fits of compulsive anger. This is his own contribution to the mix.

Last Boy’s hair, like mine, is a nondescript brown all winter. Come summer the sun will bleach it to straw and melt the baby fat that pads his bones. He walks bent from the weight of the
books he carries. Not yet out of middle school, he’s already sure which college he plans to attend. He has a card taped to the wall on his side of their bedroom that lists the things he’ll need that first year. Desk lamp, extra long bed sheets, shower caddie: he’s salting them away until he’s collected them all. I can’t afford to give him an allowance so I can be fairly sure it will take him until graduation to accumulate all the pieces.

Tuition? We’ll cross that bridge, Arne always said, when we get to it.

“You ought to just tell them he died.” First Boy’s been picking at me on this subject lately. He can pick away on autopilot, nine tenths of his attention elsewhere. Last night he was bench-pressing smart stacks of iron in the living room. “Why not?” WHOOF! went the air from his lungs as he thrust the bar skyward. “What’s wrong with the truth?” Last Boy lay sprawled on the couch, his thumbs twitching at the video controls, but he kept one ear cocked to hear my response. When they plant themselves they are like trees in my living room, and I am lost in a forest of boy.

“The truth?” I snorted. “The truth is here we are, boys. Here we are, the three of us. Do you see your father anywhere?”

“He’s dead.” First Boy said this patiently, as though I were a child in need of a careful reiteration of the facts.

“I don’t see how that changes anything.” I watched my sons glance at one another and away. They know better than to contradict me on this issue.

It is possible that, someday, I might actually forgive Arne for going. But the truth is I don’t expect that to happen anytime soon. Queenie’s head rose off the floor at the vibration of my footfalls and she feebly thumped her tail against the kitchen cabinets. “Twenty years, Queenie,” I muttered, though she’s deaf as a stone. I worked the dish sponge until the plates
squeaked. Twenty years, and what is that? More than half my life. A flash in the pan. Five breathtaking acres Arne bought when he was nineteen and visionary. He worked like an animal for two years to pay it off, and when he owned the land and I was through with school we drove over to the county courthouse to make it final. The plan was for Arne and me to live in the travel trailer long enough to raise money for materials so we could build our house and never waste a dime in interest. That was freedom, my husband said. Why be a slave to the system? In the meantime he’d keep working as a carpenter, bone up on skills he’d need to build something really fine.

I didn’t need really fine. I was good with warm and dry. But maybe a little more space? I had nothing against togetherness but I reminded him I had to sit down to pee, and after five years my knees had callused from banging the shower door.

We bought the bigger trailer when First Boy was born. Even with a baby and a new dog – Queenie, who walked out of the sagebrush and clung to my heels like a shadow – the two bedrooms seemed like a mansion compared to the Holiday Rambler. We paid for it outright, up front, which shoved us back to zero again. Arne wasn’t worried. We’d sock it away and build our dream house before First Boy went to school. But then we got Last Boy. We called him Tyrone in the womb until he nearly turned it inside out being born, making sure there wouldn’t be any others to follow. Not that I was exactly clamoring for more.

Raising kids costs money. Being alive costs money. And then Arne got sick with something that tired him out bad. Even a short day would leave him gray and wilted. I should have made him go to the doctor sooner. He didn’t want to spend the money. He wanted to save it for the house.

We spent it anyway. Dying costs money, too.
I tipped my head back and caught a glimpse of the boys through the open doorway. Son number one, champion smart ass, rock solid in his uncertainty. And the other? That bright star dimming with distance as he slides into himself? A heart attack isn’t something you can postpone, maybe. But now, Arne? For god’s sake, now?

A squirt of dish suds leapt out of the sink and landed just inches from Queenie’s black nose. She opened a cautious eye to assess the threat and I loosed a small laugh. I monitored it carefully, though. You never know where something like that can lead.

Sometimes I think my anger at his going is the only part of him I’ve got left.

* * *

What do I trust? Numbers. Brass tacks. Bird in the hand and gas in the car. But Arne was a dreamer. So is my best friend Mary Alma. For a while they did their dreaming together in the Whispering Pines Motel, though I never let on I knew.

“Kika,” Mary Alma said this afternoon, sacking the few things I’d stopped to pick up at the market. “You know what your problem is?”

That is never a good way to start a conversation. But at least it beats her alternate favorite: let’s face it, Kika, Arne’s been gone a whole year now. Sometimes this is followed by: and you know what your problem is?

I picked up the tube of ointment she’d just run across the scanner. “Hemorrhoids.” There are no secrets in this town.

She ignored me. “You’re not even forty, yet, girl. Am I right? Am I right? And I’ll tell you what.” She leaned toward me, fixed me in her gaze like a televangelist eager for my soul.

“You have given up on your aspirations.”
God love her. There’s not a problem in the world Mary Alma can’t damp mop the day with. So why is she still divorced and hankering after every man who doesn’t hit her? “You forget.” I reached across to salvage the tomatoes from the sack of canned beans she’d bagged them with. “I’m the one who never went in for dreams in the first place.”

“Who said anything about dreams? I’m talking about the future.” She narrowed her eyes and took rapid stock. Then she lifted one manicured hand and with the other started, point by point, maligning my appearance and character. “Why’d you quit wearing makeup?” She began with her pinkie and worked her way along. “Those glasses make you look like a fish. Your hair’s all grown out frizzy and let me tell you, a little color could make a world of difference. You come to town dressed like a bargain bag of produce –”

I sputtered an objection but she grabbed hold of her thumb and wagged it hard.

“—And fifth,” she said, and stopped. She gave me a look that came murderously close to pity.


I took two twenties out of my purse and flattened them into her palm. I shut my gaping mouth. If I focused on the way her shadow smeared just a little too slatternly from the corner of her eye I could still preserve what few shreds of self respect I had left.

“Thirty-seven – eight – nine and forty,” she said, meaningfully meeting my gaze.

I couldn’t afford to surrender an inch.

“God knows he’s got room,” she called, and I ducked out of the store and into the parking lot.

* * *

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Safe in my car, I rolled up the window and stewed in the late afternoon heat. Room? I laughed bitterly, quietly. You could call it that. Years pass and Joshua’s place slowly grows, rooms accreting like barnacles on a sunken ship as he pours his extra hours into a project so endless no one thinks of it starting or expects it to stop. The sun rises, the mail truck comes around, Joshua builds. And Kika?

All it takes is the smallest spark for the rumors to fly. It’s true Joshua comes by sometimes. He takes the boys out in his truck after firewood, gets them to stack it in the woodshed by the trailer. He taught them to change the oil in my Toyota. Every few months they’ll be lying in the driveway together, three headless bodies spoking out from under the little car. I’m in favor of this. They need someone to teach them these things.

For Queenie, Joshua brings a bone. For me –

Well. I’m not blind.

There was a time once, years ago, before Last Boy went to kindergarten, when Joshua came to the house to pay Arne for a job he’d done. Kitchen cabinets, maybe. Arne sat at the table making out the bill so Joshua was left standing on the linoleum, hat awkward in his grip.

“Keeping busy, Joshua?” I asked, making small talk. I remember the skin of his forearm was sun brown and age speckled but the hairs covered it in a downy blond mat, stiff and soft at the same time. And I wanted to reach over and pluck one of them. I don’t know why. “Seven miles of fencing,” he said, his voice soft and deferent. “Start in the morning.” Ag all the way but that voice, deep and courteous. It set me off somehow. “Seven miles?” I said, scrutinizing his face for pride. Looking for anything. False humility. It stayed clear as a pond. “And what’ll you do after lunch?”
I didn’t expect much. But he rose to the bait, he took it. Out of that unruffled surface came a smile that nearly made me faint. And I was the one who had to hide my face. Not from Joshua. Not even from Arne. But from myself.

I started the engine and reached up to adjust the rear-view mirror.

There’s nothing the matter with my glasses. There’s nothing very wrong with my hair.

*   *   *

Back home, I shut the yard gate behind me. Queenie came out of the trailer and made her little circuit, peeing on historically important spots, crouching to leave a small neat pile of shit. I suspect she’s forgotten what it was like to be out in the wide world. Poor girl, she’s functionally blind and rickety on her legs but she still has a powerful bark for her age, which is slightly more in chronological years than First Boy and considerably more than Methuselah if you adjust for a dog’s lifespan. Sometimes she stands in the middle of the kitchen floor at night and barks at imaginary threats. Last week when she did that a stream of yellow pee ran onto the linoleum.

“Oh, Queenie,” I said, and stooped to hug her and mop up the urine at the same time. I didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry. Last Boy was finishing some homework at the kitchen table and turned away, embarrassed. We all prefer to act as though her infirmities are indications of temporary, curable illness, but there’s no question that she will go soon.

I don’t know how we will shoulder the grief this will cause.

My husband was a man whom drink would make garrulous. Boyish, even. He was crazy about the things he knew how to do. His enthusiasm could keep a whole room entertained while he regaled them with the details of circular stair layout. He could be falling down drunk and still tell you how to derive the angle of seat cut for a rafter on an irregular pitch roof.
Inebriated, he’d talk about it. Sober, he’d just do it. He had his complications but work wasn’t one of them.

To me alone he’d say: Look. Kika, look. In the dark, with his hands. And he’d make me see it. Something we could leave our children after a good long life together.

I loved his gaze, always out there. And I hated it. Look closer, Arne, I wanted to tell him. Look at what you have. But I didn’t know to think then, *Before it’s gone.*

* * *

Joshua’s dually raised the dust on the road outside the trailer as I was frying the beef for sloppy joes. The truck stopped a little abruptly and First Boy climbed out of the driver’s door. Joshua eased himself down from the passenger’s side and Last Boy popped over the bed rail. I didn’t think it was safe for my son to be riding in the back with so inexperienced a driver, but my opinion carried limited leverage. First Boy started Drivers Ed a week ago and now he is expert in all matters related to the road. It seems I regularly fail to engage my directionals an adequate distance before making a turn, I seldom manage to come to a full stop in the absence of oncoming traffic, and I’ve been known to illegally overtake on the right. There is something comforting about these faults. They seem so correctable. Perhaps by driving more attentively I could eliminate the other flaws in my character.

Impatience, for instance. I’d like to help him practice driving but I can’t get through a ride without screaming. For now Joshua must do it.

Joshua hesitated in front of the truck and raised his arm in a tentative wave. It was a hopeful gesture, the wave of a man who’s not certain what lies on the receiving end but is willing to take a chance, and graceful because of that. I tapped on the kitchen window, saluted him with
the spatula. Thanks, I meant it to say. Possibly, Come in to dinner. And, Let me ask you this, Joshua – though there really wasn’t anything more about him I felt I needed to know that I couldn’t read right then in the language of his stance, the slight shifting of his weight as his shoulders settled under the straps of his overalls and his large hands found the pockets. I lifted my hand to the window but this time let my palm roll open on the glass. Joshua’s face lay in the deep V beside my thumb. His gaze roamed over the trailer, searching for me. He looked, and then he gave up looking, and I watched him return to the truck and pull away.

I served my children their plates. First Boy took an evil glee in recapping the road accident video they’d made him sit through in class. I leaned back in my chair and for one brief moment took a mental snapshot of the boys together, laughing. I felt my guard relax. Of the three of us laughing. Things would never be the same, but maybe the way things were different was a way we could live with. And then I leaned forward to serve myself.

“Pretty funny about Joshua, huh,” First Boy said, low, to his brother.

I paused with the ladle poised over my own plate. He caught my expression and backpedaled. “Nothing serious,” he assured me. “An old car accident. They put him in jail for a while.”

This teenager had orange grease in a clown’s mouth around his lips. He did not look like someone with reliable information and I was letting this impression get the better of me because I wasn’t willing to entertain the possibility that what he said might be true. But it was true, and worse: it was irrevocable. Not long out of high school, Joshua had stolen a car. With a girl riding shotgun, he’d driven too fast on a dirt road. Missed a turn and flipped the car.

“The cops had to haul it off him.” First Boy looked intoxicated with the information.

I waited three beats for my breath to begin before asking.
My son glanced away. Yes, he answered. The girl died.

“You can’t go over there any more.” My voice cracked like a steel trap, shutting, and his eyes widened. “Never,” I said. I watched the muscles in his neck go rigid. His skin darkened, and with each second that passed I could feel him moving further from me. I kept expecting him to get up, push his chair in, and walk out the door for good. I realized I’ve been waiting for that since the day he was born.

Instead he coughed. With a voice so low I could barely catch it he said, “Jail kept him alive.” He said it soberly, respectfully, and I wanted to hit him. “He quit crank.”

Slowly I lowered the ladle to the plastic tablecloth and waited the long seconds for it to come to a balance. The orange liquid puddled beneath the curve of its cup. “Aaron,” I said, for that is his true name. “You must understand. Jail wouldn’t have stopped him from that.”

“He stopped himself.” Aaron looked at me full on, without the trace of a challenge. “He didn’t want to die.” In that instant my son looked exactly like his father. I felt it like a jolt of electricity, a current that paralyzed me until his steady gaze shifted to the side and left me limp. And then I noticed Last Boy’s mouth.

It had become a black hole.

“Tyrone,” I said. I was suddenly afraid to lose him. “It’s my mistake. Your father didn’t mean to die. If his heart could have – ”

But Last Boy clamped his mouth shut. He kept his tears from spilling over. And as I got up and cleared the table and started the dishes I tried not to consider the harm I’ve done them.

It’s not the boys, who can’t let Arne go. Do you think I don’t know that?

* * *

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That night I turned the TV on and fell asleep in the chair. First Boy jiggled my shoulder when they were ready for bed. “Ma,” he said, his voice softly noncommittal.

I struggled upright, groggy and sore. I can only land a kiss if their guard is down and they were both armed and ready, keeping their distance and moving their gaze lazily out of my range. Last Boy worked a toothbrush across his teeth. “We couldn’t get Queenie in,” he said, and the foam stayed neatly in his mouth.

I nodded, and crossed to the back door. Queenie wasn’t there in the pool the porch light cast on the soggy yard. I pushed open the storm door and stood on the little patch of concrete that makes a stoop. And then I walked around the yard to make sure I hadn’t missed her.

The gate had slipped open enough for a fat old dog to waddle through.

“Queenie.” I stepped through myself. “Queenie? Hey there.” I wasn’t calling because I thought she could hear me. I just needed to listen to the sound of her name instead of the prayer running through my head with no faith attached to it, that dull repetitious no, and the slight hiccup of a laugh that was just so tired of trying. Tired of losing. Tired of losing and tired, tired of tired. I wanted things to slow down enough for me to have a fighting chance. I wanted someone to please even the fucking odds.

I went inside and started phoning while my heart thudded softly in my throat. I called down the road to Mary Alma in case she had wandered that far. I thought for a long time and then I dialed Joshua’s number.

I grow roses in my back yard. They’ve got to be hardy to survive. The winters are bad enough, the below-zero nights and feet of snow, but spring is worse. The wind can bend branches severe enough to break. A late frost can kill the buds. It’s a miracle, really, when they
do bloom. If I knew how to pray I’d pray to that, to whatever there is that loves color enough to make a thing that lovely. For no good reason.

The phone rang too many times and I hung up.

For a while I stood in the doorway to the boys’ room. Their beds lined the walls with a thin passage between. They were asleep already, large dark shapes in the sheets, their even breathing filling the air. They seemed big enough to make a universe themselves. Without Queenie. Without me.

I got in my car and drove straight to Joshua’s.

*   *   *

All these years I’ve wondered. A man works for sixteen years to build – a castle? A mansion? Something large and good and valuable. Some hedge against the future. Some honeycomb of home.

Some place to serve your term, warehouse your ghosts, squander your grief.

A place a deaf old dog could go to die.

Joshua’s place was large and unadorned and simple and endless. I looked for Queenie between the buildings, along the verge of bindweed and bramble, the tall stalks pale in the moonlight. I tried a door and stepped inside. Hammer taps jostled the emptiness. They led me to Joshua.

He had his back to me. A single droplight hung from the ceiling and made everything yellow with its bare bulb. He was shirtless in his overalls, down on one knee and neatly fitting floorboards. I watched his arm swing up with the hammer and bring it down. There was a slight
hesitation and I understood that he knew I was there. His arm swung up and down again, once, twice, and again before he stood and turned to me.

I crossed the floor to him and took hold of both of his wrists. I lifted them until his elbows pointed to my chin and his wrists were close enough to handcuff. My head collapsed forward and I breathed deeply the smell of his forearms. And then bitterly, angrily, I let them drop. I stepped back.

“How long, Joshua?”

How much longer do we pay for what’s already gone?

He could have said something. Anything. He could have said Long enough. I wanted to hear him say that. Long enough. It’s over.

But he just opened his arms slowly, and waited until I walked into them.

* * *

My husband was symmetrical. He had long fingers and hands that were broad across the knuckles and matched one another like bookends when he carried them to cradle his skull in deep thought. Like bookends holding his head that way.

That afternoon he tried to tell me something. Arms out to his sides. Arms in to his chest. Over and over, his face growing grayer and his breath more shallow, while we waited for the ambulance. Arms out, arms in. The world. My heart. The world my heart. Like scooping grain down a chute. Then he made a sound and he died.

* * *
The boys were sitting on the couch when I got home that night. Queenie lay between them and slowly thumped her tail. I stood in the entry and gazed at them.

“I have to tell you this,” I said. I only got one chance. What I wanted to say was simple: it doesn’t pay to expect anything. Aaron? Tyrone?

Please god don’t let that stop you.

When Joshua and I rustled together on the wood floor he adjusted his weight so he wouldn’t hurt me. His overalls bunched at his ankles and his foot got caught in the heavy fabric and his boot scraped along my shin. “Oh,” he said. “Kika. I’m sorry.” And he stopped in the heat of it all and reached down and gently stroked my bumped skin.

I walked to the couch and hovered there in front of my young sons. I could see Arne in each of them, in the way Aaron lifted one eyebrow, in the way Tyrone rubbed the back of his neck.

He was there, and he wasn’t.

And he was.

And he wasn’t.

And that was how it would be.

“Your father.” I let my gaze settle on Queenie’s white muzzle, her old, old eyes. Each son had an arm draped across her back. And then, so soft I wasn’t sure that the words would carry, so soft I still believed I could reel them back, I said, “I miss him.”

They knew it, they said. And they patted me good night and went to bed.
Vita

Summer Wood is the author of the novels *Raising Wrecker* (Bloomsbury) and *Arroyo* (Chronicle Books), and teaches writing at the University of New Mexico’s Taos Summer Writers’ Conference.  *Raising Wrecker* received the 2012 WILLA Award for Contemporary Fiction from Women Writing the West. The novel is a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, a BookBrowse Editors’ Choice, and a UK Booksellers’ Choice. In 2007 Wood was awarded the $50,000 Literary Gift of Freedom from A Room of Her Own Foundation. Her non-fiction work has appeared in *National Geographic Traveler, Flyway, Western American Literature*, and other venues, and she currently serves as Executive Editor at Voices from the American Land.

Summer Wood and her partner Kathy Namba have three grown sons, one spoiled mutt, and have served as foster parents through New Mexico’s Child Protective Services.