In My Heart was a Kind of Fighting

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In My Heart was a Kind of Fighting

A Thesis

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

Master of Fine Arts
in Creative Writing

by

Dana R. Glass

B.A. Smith College

May 2015
Table of Contents

There is Perfection in You Also.......................................................1

In My Heart was a Kind of Fighting.............................................16

Outside.........................................................................................32

This Would be the First Time.......................................................43

The Three Dreams of Mark Glass...............................................65

Above Ground..............................................................................74

The Things You Do for Love.......................................................84

Saul Seen at the Bicycle Track 1981/2001.................................91

Wild Mind.....................................................................................102

Vita...............................................................................................123
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Interpreting the Akedah, the majority of Jewish religious commentators argue that God was testing Abraham, to see if he would actually kill his own son, as a test of loyalty. Rabbi Yosef Ibn Caspi (Spain, early 14th c.) writes that, on the contrary, it was Abraham's "imagination" that led him astray, making him only believe that God had commanded him to sacrifice his son. As Ibn Caspi writes, "How could God command such a revolting thing?"

—Wikipedia article, “Binding of Isaac”
There is Perfection in You Also

April arrives overnight, cruel and over-bright, a damp wind that clambers uninvited through Eugene’s window to prick insistently at his heart. Eugene can’t sleep; he tosses under a sheet; he sleeps with one eye open. The bird does the same, keeping cyclopean watch from behind the grating of a beige plastic cat traveller that sits on the floor next to his mattress. Each night he keeps time by the bird’s staccato breathing, a terrified pilgrim’s whispered prayer in the cathedral gloom of his basement apartment.

*Sturnus vulgaris*, the common starling, shockingly easy to come by and easier to keep alive. This one doesn’t seem to need him at all, rejecting food even when offered palm to mouth, refusing to leave the cat traveller even though its wings aren’t clipped. Eugene has the distinct sense that, without any interference at all, its soul will remain clutched indefinitely in its coarse little harpy’s wings, heart beating like a fist against the bone turret of its rib cage.

Three weeks ago, he’d received the letter:

*To Mr. Eugene Shieffelin: we thrill to offer you a position of intern with The American Acclimatization Society. We feel certain you will make valuable contributions to our team as we further the Mission of Aesthetic Diplomacy. Hope to see you for orientation on the 20th of April at 428 Ovington Avenue Apt 2B.*

The letter was printed on tea-colored stationary which was, disconcertingly, slightly damp. There was no signature, though the matching return address was hand-written in blotted blue ink.

“No idea what that is,” Alex admitted when Eugene called to ask her about it. “But I wasn’t really being selective, by the end—Mark! For the last time, can you turn
that the *fuck* down? I’m on the *fucking* phone.” Alex was Eugene’s girlfriend or, as he censoriously continued to remind himself, his ex-girlfriend. During their last semester at college she’d agreed to write his resume and cover letters for some ninety-two jobs across the eastern seaboard; in exchange he’d written the bulk of her honors thesis on *Henry IV*. Eleven months later he’d had a handful of unsuccessful interviews. Alex had a boyfriend named Mark, departmental honors, and a job teaching language arts at an all-girls prep school on the Upper East Side.

“Look, Euge,” Alex said now. “If you’re really moving here for this American climate change or whatever, Mark’s parents are trying to find a subletter for some basement they own in Brooklyn. They’ll probably give you a break if I talk to them.”

Which is how he’d come to this: without dignity or knowledge. Even Google had turned up just one match for “American Acclimatization Society,” a poorly scanned newspaper clipping describing one M. Schneider, a recipient of a 1949 Nobel Prize, though in what Eugene couldn’t tell. The website was in German, and the article didn’t mention the Society or give any clues as to its purpose.

* * *

At first, the city was yawning, exhilarating, every A train entry into darkening chaos, every street a tugging mortal test. He was aware that the feeling was basically one of a limited canon of clichés available to him, a youthful transplant in a city of transients, stepping carefully over subway grates in Midwestern shoes, deeply in debt, buying packets of instant noodles from the 7-Eleven under the open-air shuttle station. High above him commuters waited in clusters, their voices disembodied like his own thoughts, all of which seemed to hit from some great and anonymous distance.
Eugene’s new home was the basement of a henna-colored brownstone in Brooklyn, purchased by Mark’s parents for some blissfully cheap price in the ‘80s. By the time Eugene moved in, the unseasonably warm weather had wilted the small green fingers of crocuses struggling to break through the square foot of dirt outside his single window.

He waited until the end of his first week to call Alex.

“I can’t, my girls are taking midterms right now and I’m swamped,” she said when he suggested meeting for a drink.

He chewed the cuticle of his thumb. “Aren’t you teaching middle school? What are they doing taking midterms?”

“It’s the city,” she said impatiently. “Preschoolers take midterms.”

“You’re the only person I know here,” he said, bidding vaguely for her sympathies.

“You’ll meet people,” she said.

“I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Everyone feels that way,” she said.

* * *

At the end of his second week he took the train to 428 Ovington Avenue, apartment 2B. It was in a neighborhood in south Brooklyn, almost an hour on the train, and when Eugene exited the station he was surprised by how suburban it looked, even slightly like his parent’s neighborhood, with wide, leafy streets and blonde brick houses. Across the street from the subway, a gaggle of men repainted the sign of a hookah bar. Building 428 was as wide and cubical as a saltlick, eight condos huddled around a gated, cement
parking lot. The nameplates revealed nothing as official-sounding as a society, and apartment 2B was unmarked entirely. Eugene hesitated. He took a step backwards and nearly knocked over a woman in sunglasses and elastic waist pants, who barely even turned to look at him. Finally, not knowing what else to do, he pressed the buzzer.

A female voice answered.

“Excuse me,” Eugene said. “I’m trying to reach the American Acclimatization Society? My name is Eugene?”

There was a whoosh of static that Eugene realized was a heavy sigh. “There is no living with him after this,” said the woman. The latch clicked under his hand.

He was halfway up the stairs when the door on the first landing swung open. In the doorway was an elderly man, thick waisted and gnome-faced, wearing an undershirt and a pair of wrinkled khakis belted just under his nipples. “Doctor Schneider,” said the man without offering his hand. “Come in.” There was no sign of the woman who had answered the buzzer.

The American Acclimatization Society, it appeared, took for its headquarters a sparsely decorated apartment. In the front room was an impressively ugly floral sectional, above which hung two abstract, mud-colored canvases. The room adjoining was a combination kitchen and dining room, dominated by a fly-leafed banquet table and oaken sideboard. A darkened hall led, Eugene assumed, to a master bedroom. “I’m happy you made it here,” the man said, sounding anything but, following Eugene across the carpet.

Eugene didn’t answer. As his eyes adjusted from outside, he realized that the facing wall of the kitchen was stacked ceiling-high with birdcages. “You, ah, have a lot
of birds?” he asked, realizing as he spoke that the question was ridiculous; the cages were empty. He turned to Doctor Schneider, who grinned.

“Just one,” said the Doctor. “Our pride and joy.” The Doctor shuffled over to the wall, and then Eugene saw: in one of the larger cages near to the floor, an indignant-looking brown bird, its body only a little bigger than Eugene’s fist. It had a needle-sharp beak and dark, soda straw legs, which were splayed ungracefully on a plywood platform. Its eyes were the same shifting non-color as the iridescent threads of down crosshatching the nostrils. “Sturnus vulgaris,” said the Doctor. “The common starling.” Looking at it, Eugene felt an embarrassing lump in his throat.

“I’m not sure I understand, Mr.—”

“Doctor, if you don’t mind. Students traditionally call me Doc.”

“Sorry, Doctor. What am I doing here, exactly?”

From one slash pocket the Doctor unfurled a white handkerchief, into which he coughed briefly before answering. “In the spirit of keeping nothing back, I admit: our mission has not been without its challenges. The skylarks refused to breed, and don’t even ask me to speak about the song thrushes.” He dabbed his eyes before continuing. “But for this starling, all hope would be lost. For the starling, we have a reassuring source. Eugene, is it?”

“Uh, yeah. Yes.”

“You are literate?”

The absurdity of the question startled him out of self-pity. “Yes, Sir. Doctor.”

“And furthermore, you have studied literature?”

He nodded. “At college. I probably sent you my cv when—”
“And, being a scholar of literature, you have read Genesis?”

“It’s been a while.” Eugene felt the heat rise in his cheeks. It had been ages since he’d set eyes on any kind of holy book, never in college but in the single dank classroom of Bet Sefer, the only Hebrew day school for a hundred miles outside of Milwaukee, to which his parents had driven him every third day for nearly eleven years.

The Doctor didn’t seem to notice his discomfort. “Think of our goal, then, as you would a kind of new Eden.”

“With starlings.” Perhaps in another minute, his alarm would jar him awake and the man in front of him would fragment into just another of his own strange fears.

“With every kind of bird mentioned by—that is to say, do you understand what I mean when I say that the key to reform lies not in knowledge produced, but the way we produce the producers?”

Eugene tried to imagine describing this conversation to Alex, probably while she perched gracefully on the edge of his mattress in the basement, probably in her kitten heels and dark pantyhose. He felt a sudden determination, and nodded. “Sure. Like, we have to change the way people are socialized to change society. Like nurture versus nature.”

The Doc blinked at him. “But we aren’t just talking about people, Eugene. We are speaking of poets.”

“Poets?”

“It is poets with whom our hope lies, after all.”

“Wait, so—you want to make a bird garden for poets?”

“Not just poets. The Bard himself.”
Now Eugene couldn’t hide his dismay. “This is about *Shakespeare*?”

But the Doctor only turned to him, rotating his body with great care. “My boy,” he said solemnly, “everything is about Shakespeare.” The Doctor returned the handkerchief to his pants pocket and touched a finger to the cage. “Starlings are found in much of Western Europe, also in the Mediterranean and Asia. Our second one should be delivered soon, and then we’ll have a breeding pair. The first on this continent.”

*Sturnus vulgaris* cocked its head, watching them, though Eugene couldn’t tell which of them was the object of its unreadable gaze. “Doctor,” he said uncertainly. “I’m still not clear what this has to do with starlings.”

The Doctor didn’t seem to hear him. “Starlings are excellent mimics, you know,” he said. “Unfortunate, of course, that this one has chosen as its muse my wife.” He waved a hand in front of the cage.

“*Morty, Morty, Mortimer, Mortimer,*” said the starling.

“Most ironic,” said the Doctor.

“This dish is still dirty,” said the starling.

* * *

By noon Eugene was back on the sidewalk. He’d escaped after the Doctor announced his intention to sleep through the hottest part of the day, with assurances that he’d return tomorrow. As Eugene walked back to the train he dialed Alex’s number. When she answered he was surprised.

“I’m on lunch, what’s up?”

“I thought you’d be in class,” he said.

“I’m on lunch,” she said again. “Are you okay?”
“I just left the first day of my internship and I just wanted to call and say thanks. You just really came through for me and if there’s anything I can—”

“I’m happy for you,” she cut him off. He could hear a radio in the background. “That’s really great. Actually, while I have you on the phone—” she began, and he could tell he wouldn’t like whatever she was about to say.

“Actually, they’re talking about offering me a job already,” he said quickly. “I’d really like to pay you back somehow, my boss is some kind of crazy Bardolator and—”

“Euge,” she said. There was an awkward pause. “D’you think you could lay off calling me for a while? Mark’s been getting pissy about you calling all the time.”

“I’d never have asked you to blow off a friend when we were together.”

“C’mon. Don’t make me say it’s not just him.”

“I’m sure it’ll be nice and easy to pretend I don’t exist, with me living in his parent’s basement.”

“Don’t be a dick.”

He couldn’t think of anything mean enough to say. “Fine,” he said.

She exhaled. “I’m sorry, but you did this to yourself.”

He hung up without replying and shimmied past a linked line of schoolchildren and back into the darkness underground.

* * *

The Doctor and his wife received more paper mail than anyone Eugene had ever met: piles of glossy magazines, credit card offers and coupons, form letters and envelopes stamped call for submission and alumni quarterlies and wedding invitations from places like Buenos Aires and Prague, and at first most of his internship seemed to consist of
documenting the mail fastidiously by hand, using a system the Doc had demonstrated, a file of cross-referenced index cards that Eugene secretly referred to as the Demented Dewey Decimal. He sat at the dining room table, stacking *The American Poetry Review* with *Sports Illustrated* with *The Economist*; *Revolution* with *The Jerusalem Post* with something thin and nearly translucent and all in Cyrillic, baling them with cotton string and stacking them in the walk-in pantry.

The single reason he didn’t immediately quit was easy: the Doc’s wife. A tiny woman with a hoarse, mannish voice and a spiral of thick white hair, she dressed in an endless series of floral muumuus and quickly developed a habit of creeping from the bedroom to offer him food. On particularly restless days she would sometimes appear as many as three times in a single hour. Those were the good days.

“Bubbeleh,” she’d say. “I just came in for a glass of water but I want you should eat something. Do you like tuna melts?” While he ate she lowered herself to the seat across from his, one veined hand swiping violently at the tabletop in an effort to remove offending, invisible crumbs. Then she made confession, speeches that came fast and without foreseeable consequence.

“I call to him,” she’d say again and again. “You know it, you hear it, I say, Morty, Morty, you have stories in that meshuginna brain why should you ignore them all. But there he goes again, racing to speak with a deceased and dead man, here a *comedy*, here a *romantic*.”

Eugene didn’t understand a lot of what the Doc’s wife was so upset about, but he didn’t really care as long as she kept him from starving. He had six hundred dollars in his bank account and nothing in his apartment but instant coffee and a jar of peanut butter.
“This! This is when you earned His wrath. You hear me calling! Such potential. He knows if you do not use the gift He gives you. He’s sick you know. Did he tell you that? Did he tell you, that he is a sick old man and almost at the end? I said it this morning, I said, Morty this is when everything is counted. I know he hears me.” In one of her many disarmingly youthful gestures, she shrugged affectionately.

“I’m sorry, Missus S,” Eugene said honestly.

“He’s lucky, what he found in you,” she said and lifted herself, forearms quivering, to continue her slow trek to the bathroom. Sometimes when she spoke, Eugene had the sense of missing something important. There were too many threads in this place, frayed edges out of which he could make no reparative sense.

* * *

Soon he was at the Doc’s every weekday morning, sometimes before the Doc was even awake, so he could eat Fruit Loops with Missus S while she scanned the obituary section of the Times. He helped the Doc grow cherry tomatoes on the balcony, took out the trash, and once drove them to a dentist in Manhattan, navigating the Doc’s ancient Lincoln town car through brilliantly sunny city streets. Once or twice, the Doc pressed a creased twenty-dollar bill into his hand. There was little mention of birds.

On the days he didn’t go to the Doc’s, he drank coffee, counting quarters from his pocket. Outside of the Schneider’s, the city remained unknowable and unlivable; it would never let him stay. When his stomach began to grumble he drank more coffee. It hadn’t been much more than a month before he’d discovered the letter in the Doc’s mail:

_Dear Sir: we are writing to inform you that rogue breeding activities at this address have been documented and will be prosecuted. Please know that we understand your long history with the Zoological Society and do not wish to_
It was from the New York Zoological Society. Eugene brought the letter into the kitchen, where the Doc was spooning puppy chow into a plastic measuring cup. The Doc’s starling officially survived on a combination of dog food and putty-colored poultry nutrient pellets that the Doc had shipped from a farm supply outlet, though in Eugene’s time with the Schneiders he had also seen the bird eat cornbread, figs, cottage cheese, chopped liver, honey roasted peanuts, turnip greens, and tuna fish straight from the can. Whenever the Doc walked into the kitchen, the starling would start keening, darting its head at the bars of the cage wall. After so many weeks, it still gave Eugene the creeps.

The old man didn’t seem concerned. “Some farts aren’t even worth pretending not to smell,” he said. His mouth twisted, and it took Eugene a moment to realize that the Doc was trying to suppress glee. “We’re talking about people who read books on a computer!”

“Lots of people—do that,” Eugene said, thinking guiltily of the train, where he often read the newspaper on his phone.

“Eugene, the Zoological Society is a trivial meeting of mediocre minds, united mainly by a common dislike of me. Now they seek to destroy my Eden.”

“Why?”

“To make their own park.”

“Wait, they stole our idea?”
The Doc opened the tap and let water run into the starling’s food dish. “You make it sound so crude. Theirs is but a storybook, a mockery of our masterpiece, a literary Potemkin village. A theme park.”

“Are they breeding the birds?”

“Don’t be silly, these are not interested in the best mankind has to offer.”

“Then can’t we just beat them at their own game? What kind of park is theirs, anyway? People don’t want another stupid zoo, that won’t do anything for the future of literature. For poetry.”

“Eugene,” the Doc said. “Show me one poet and I’ll show you a forgotten, broken man.” The Doc took a fork from the top drawer and began mashing the dog food in water. “The mate is due next week,” he said. “We’ll have our answer then.”

Which is how Eugene had ended up at the South Brooklyn branch of the United States Post Office early on the last Saturday morning, the first of May, trying not to wonder how he would pay rent and sliding an orange package slip and his Wisconsin driver’s license under a glass guillotine at the request of a plump woman in rubber gloves. She’d returned his license with a cardboard tube, the concave plastic lid mummified in tape and marked EXTREMELY FRAGILE three times in sharpie marker. There was a single, ragged hole punched in the side and no return address.

The clerk was obviously curious, so Eugene mouthed, “It’s a vase,” through the window, adding loudly, “Online shopping is bankrupting me.” And then he’d run home, feeling that nothing else would ever surprise him.

But when it had fallen into his hands, drugged and wrapped in tracing paper, wings folded into its body like a feathered torpedo, beak tucked deep into the downy
chest, that’s when he’d realized: he was really hooked on something he might never understand.

* * *

Standing on the sidewalk with the bird in the travelling crate, Eugene starts reciting again the letter he’s going to write for the Doc, replying to the Zoological Society. It begins with a quote from *Henry*. That’s what they need, a little morale-booster. He wonders whether his bird—that’s how he’s thinking of it, *his bird*, Eugene Schieffelin’s very own starling—is the male or the female. He’s been calling it a she—and, under his breath, *baby girl* and *little babe*, but wonders if the Doc even knows.

But when Eugene comes up the apartment stairs, something is very wrong. The door is unlocked, and the blinds are drawn and, weirdest of all, there are people everywhere in the apartment. The air conditioner is off and the heat is immense, everyone visibly sweating through dark clothes, and he doesn’t the Doc anywhere. Missus S is standing in the middle of the rug, staring into space while a hawk-nosed woman in a pantsuit talks rapidly in German, gesturing emphatically. When Eugene waves, Missus S excuses herself, the sleeves of her muumuu flapping around her bony arms like wings, looking like some lost denizen of the tropics in the flock of suits and black leather shoes.

“What’s going on?” he asks her.

“He went last night. He’s gone.” She says it as though repeating words she doesn’t quite understand, and for a moment Eugene doesn’t, either. But even with the glassy eyes of a sleepwalker, Missus S has something of the pragmatic about her. Eugene is suddenly aware of feeling that all these strangers are the trespassers, not he. That this
place is the most private—the only private—place he’s ever had. He can see people watching him talk to Missus S, and it slowly occurs to him.

“Wait, the Doc is—dead?”

She startles a little, then nods, once, bemusedly. “In his sleep.”

“I don’t know—” he starts, and then interrupts himself. “What should I do?”

“Nothing, nothing, Bubbelah. Only, will you take the bird? It cries and I can’t get it to stop even with bread. In the bedroom.” She points down the hall.

“Sure. Of course,” he says, realizing that the second bird is still hanging at his side in the travelling case. She pats him on the shoulder and drifts away, and he squeezes past the other mourners and toward the bedroom.

It isn’t until he’s alone that he realizes, he has only one crate for both birds. The room seems to spin a little; the walls are the color of dust, the bed wide and low to the ground. Above him, on the wall, is a painted woman’s face, an alabaster figure lying prone on a liver-colored couch. It takes him a moment to recognize Missus S, though she must be no more than twenty. The Doc’s bird is on the bottom of its cage, which has been placed on the vanity, mewing and fluttering its wings rapidly. The mirror behind it is covered with a sheet.

“Shut up,” says Eugene. He opens the door of the cage and holds up the crate. “C’mon.” But the starling only looks at him. He pokes it with a nail file, but it only makes a high, nasal noise and spreads it legs wider. The bird in the crate remains silent and, thankfully, unmoving. “You’re supposed to like each other,” he reminds them.

Then he has another idea. He shuts the cage door, crosses to the window, and yanks back the slatted metal shade. Behind the Schneider’s building is a school he’s
never realized was there. The cement schoolyard is almost directly below the window, and he can see the children congregating in the long, bruise-colored shadow cast by the building, probably waiting for their first bell. He twists the latch on the window and lifts the sash.

Eugene balances the crate on the sill and leans out. “Go,” he says, rapping his knuckles on the back wall of the crate. “Get.” He can’t wait anymore. He tips the crate forward and shakes it, upending the starling into the air. The disgruntled bird hangs suspended for a moment in front of him. “I warned you,” he says.

But something is pulling him forward now; he puts the crate on the floor and walks briskly to the cage on the vanity.

For the briefest moment he pauses: the beak, the claws.

“Mortimer,” says the starling.

“We didn’t really know him that well,” Eugene says and plucks the bird from its cage. He’s seen the Doc do it plenty of times, but actually holding the living bird is very different. He presses it carefully between his palms, pretending it’s a glass of water. For a few seconds he can feel the heart beating in the feathered chest. Then he tosses the second bird out the window, and the starlings take flight together, and he can no longer tell them apart and he thinks, maybe, that it was just his own heart he felt, beating hard against his fingertips.
In My Heart was a Kind of Fighting

The night before, at dinner in the five-story walkup, Mark had just stood up to clear the table when Bella leveled a finger at his stained collar and said, “You’ve been wearing that shirt for three days.”

“Ma,” he’d said. “Leave it.”

The shirt was thrift store white, sleeveless, the chest emblazoned with a pair of hot pink pistols and the words ACCEPT NO SUBSTITUTES. Since the funeral Mark had spent every day alone, emptying the desk drawers in his father’s study while Bella went to work. The drawers overflowed horrifically: receipts, photographs, yellowing bills, a fifth of crappy vodka, decades-old back issues of The Economist, his mother’s visa papers and—he’d only discovered it that afternoon—a stack of pages, a little frayed, typed and numbered and rubberbanded into a manila folder. It was a script. A stage play, maybe, and with a dedication in the front, handwritten by his father: TO MY SON, MARK &c.

Mark had finished washing the dishes and filled the samovar. Then he’d gone into the bathroom and run the tub. After he’d shampooed and rinsed his hair, he dropped a hand to the tub rug, where the folder lay sandwiched between the covers of Bella’s celebrity gossip magazine. Then Mark sat up and surveyed what the doctors had described as “minor surface wounds”: a blurred alphabet of bruises, a humped trail of scars thickening like commas across a girlishly swollen abdomen, the knob of an elbow punctuated by a single semicolon of gummy thread. Slowly, slowly—his body ached with
his coming back. And so, as he did every night, he began to pray: *Dad, it’s me. If you can hear this, I hope ya know I’m a dumb motherfucker.*

He was interrupted by Bella’s voice in the hall. “Maka?” The door creaked open. “I’m coming in.”

“Ma! I’m in the tub!”

“There’s a curtain. I have clean towels.”

“I’m still—y’know.” The shower curtain, mint green and thick as a sheet of laminate flooring, was drawn from luck rather than habit. He heard Bella’s cardboard slippers scuff across the floor and the thump of towels deposited on the wall-mounted shelf above the toilet. The medicine cabinet door clicked open and shut. Mark pictured his mother with her upper body suspended over the sink, one hand raised to tug down the yellow lace yoke of her nightgown. Bella’s skin was universe to a bright constellation of freckles, the size and appearance of which she charted faithfully as a determined astronomer.

“How long do you plan to stay in there?”

“Go loiter somewhere else,” he suggested.

“I don’t know why you dry yourself out,” she said.

“It’s therapeutic.”

“You shouldn’t submerge your stitches.”

“I only got one,” Mark said. He attempted to slither deeper into the tub and pinched his shoulder blade on the damp ceramic.
“I hung your shirts,” Bella said. “In the kitchen. They’re still damp.” Her voice had the absent, metallic echo of facing away from him, into the mirror. “I wouldn’t have bothered, only I thought you were going out.”

“I only got one stitch,” he said, louder.

“Well don’t submerge it.”

“You worry about the wrong things.”

“At least you’re getting clean,” she said.

“Ha, getting clean.”

“You aren’t funny,” she said, though he could hear the crescendo of amusement in her voice. He considered pulling the manila folder into the bath with him, but didn’t want to risk drawing her attention further.

As though reading his mind, she said, a little sharply, “Have you thought that it might be time to stop obsessing over all his trash?”

“C’mon, Ma,” he said. “Get.” His meanness nearly always gratified her. But she didn’t answer, and he leaned forward to tug the stopper from the drain in silence.

It was rotten inside of him. It had been for ages, since long before the accident.

* * *

The further north he drove, the thicker the fog laid down over the hood of the minivan. In the dim afternoon the headlights didn’t illuminate so much as magnify the road, the ribbon of yellow swelling unnervingly into view, the crumbling pavement buckling under the tires. The van was Bella’s, used by her rarely, still with the vague chemical scent of a car half its age. He’d taken it without asking.

He knew he was getting close when the pavement crumbled into dirt.
Although everyone had always referred to it as “the farm,” Saul’s house was little more than a shack, a stilted brown structure tilted sideways on the absurdly named Hockomock Bay. Saul was his father’s older brother, a twice-divorced Yeshiva dropout turned naval engineer who’d lost his sense of smell in 1971. Mark parked the van near the machine shed and shrugged on his backpack.

The farm’s yard was an obstacle course of junk. Objects loomed into startling individuation and, just as quickly, receded, like the curious, lapsed inhabitants of a haunted house coming to inspect a trespasser. A collapsed section of chain link, a card table, a goose-necked lamp, the erect and mildewed door of a minifridge, an oar still collared by a rusty oarlock, half a wooden canoe. Mark’s rubber sandals regurgitated mud onto the backs of his calves. Most of the snow had already melted, and rotting leaves drifted knee-high against the house.

Mark stepped onto the granite stoop, leaned forward, and cupped his hands against the door. “Saul,” he bellowed. “I know you’re in there.”

From within the house came a muffled reply.

“It’s me,” he said. He felt his voice preparing to catch a little at his own name. “It’s Mark.”

The door swung open and Saul leaned over the threshold. His uncle was tall and sinewy, with the shaggy salt and pepper hair of an aging rock star. Mark had the sudden and destabilizing feeling of seeing himself aged forty years. “Mark?” Saul said. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Mark opened his mouth. This was the part he hadn’t planned out, exactly. “I wanted to ask you a question.”
Saul raised his eyebrows. The step was loose and Mark swayed and then tipped backwards, into the grass. Something sharp and unseen went into his heel. “Shit I—something just stuck in my foot.”

Saul sighed, retreating slightly into shadow. “Let’s take a look.”

Mark kicked aside a jumble of galoshes and sat where Saul knocked a pile of mismatched socks from the seat of a plastic folding chair. Saul kneeled and gripped Mark’s foot in one hand. The dark, flat head of a nail was embedded in the rubber sole, pinning the sandal to his foot.

“Hope you’ve had a tetanus booster recently,” Saul said and neatly removed the nail. The wound welled brilliantly with blood, and a clean white handkerchief appeared in Saul’s fist. “Just hold that a sec,” he said and walked to the kitchen.

The farm’s kitchen wasn’t much more than a double bowl utility sink and some cast-iron pans. In the center of the room was a barrel-bodied wood-burning stove and facing it, a twig and rose patterned loveseat and two Adirondack chairs. The seams of the ceiling were overflowing with pink insulation, and most of the floor was covered in a splinter-ridden wool rug. A land line phone and a beige computer roosted in the far corner, the keyboard cradled like eggs in a disordered nest of nautical charts and baling twine and a spineless copy of *Propulsion and Auxiliary Engines Seventh Ed.* Below the row of back windows, Mark could just make out an antique copper diver’s helmet and the king-sized landscape of rumpled sheets and clothes that served as Saul’s bed.

“Maybe elevate that,” Saul said, sounding resigned. “And then tell me about this thing you want to ask.”
Mark opened his mouth. He couldn’t bring himself to say it. “You didn’t come to the wedding,” he said instead.

Saul turned, looking confused, a tube of Neosporin held aloft in one hand. “Wedding?”

“Funeral. I meant the funeral.” Mark felt dizzy. As a child the sight of his own blood had made him lightheaded, but it seemed like a far-away reality, that what was inside of him could seem so foreign.

* * *

Mark woke up on his belly, cold air streaming in over his shoulders, his legs tangled too-tightly in the sheets. For a moment he wasn’t sure where he was or why he’d awoken so suddenly. Then he realized that he was at the farm, that he’d rolled from the loveseat onto the floor, that there was someone standing on the threshold of the door.

“Saul?” The voice was hoarse and distinctly feminine.

Mark lurched to his feet. He was in nothing but boxers and immediately had goose bumps all over. The woman in front of him was young, hard to tell how young, with high cheekbones and light brown skin and dark curly hair and would probably have looked like a model in something other than mom jeans and a threadbare Patriots sweatshirt.

“Hi,” Mark said.

“Who’re you?”

“I’m uh—Mark.” Saul’s bed was empty, and Saul himself was nowhere in sight. The farm was filled with light. Through the windows he could see a low veil of mist still hanging over the river. “Do you know what time it is?”
“Nine-ish?”

“Um, what’s your name?” he asked, unsure if she’d already said it.

“I’m Silvia,” she said. “Did Saul say when he’d be back?”

“I don’t think so,” he said, feeling like it should have been obvious; he barely knew where he was. He patted down his hair self-consciously.

“All right,” she said. She walked into the kitchen and started to fill the kettle with water. Mark considered whether Saul would be upset when he returned to find this girl in his house.

Then the door banged open. “Hey, Silv,” Saul said, unbuttoning a flannel overcoat with one hand. “This is Mark. You met?”

Silvia only stepped forward and leaned against the sink with an expectant look.

“The kid himself.”

Out of some combination of self-consciousness and indignance, Mark blurted, “Kid’ is kind of a misnomer, don’t you think?”

“Mark, aren’t you cold?” Saul interrupted conversationally and pointed to a laundry basket. “Those are clean.”

With no better options, Mark bent and pulled on what turned out to be an unfortunately orange Frank Zappa t-shirt. Then he shuffled into his jeans, trying to ignore Silvia’s gaze. Saul crossed the room to push another log into the woodstove. Mark had always considered his uncle a kind of lost soul, a Thoreauvian type babe in arms and the farm as standing proof to their presumably shared genetic predisposition to fail at hacking the real world. But Saul in the flesh seemed like a capable ruler, his body as taut and weathered as his solitary little kingdom.
The realization made Mark feel very alone.

“How long you hanging around for?”

He realized Silvia’s question was directed at him and turned. She was perched on the countertop now, swinging her legs, arms tugged into the sleeves of her sweatshirt.

“I—um, I’m not sure,” he admitted.

“As long as he wants,” Saul said, standing.

Mark felt like it was important to say it. “Saul is my dad’s older brother.”

“Oh,” Silvia said. “You guys look alike.” Then she turned to Saul. “You gonna take me over there or what?”

“Actually, I was thinking Mark can do it,” Saul said. He raised his eyebrows. “You mind?”

Ten minutes later, Mark was nosing the van through the lifting fog. The road was dirt, deeply laddered in the ruts of ATV tracks and scattered with light that pressed greenly through the thick, vaulted ceiling of trees. The same light caught in Silvia’s eyelashes, turning them nearly white. He tried not to look at her.

“So, New York?” Silvia said.

“Yeah,” Mark said.

“Me too.”

“Oh.” he glanced at her sideways. She was drumming her fingers on the window of the car. “Can you stop doing that?” he asked.

“Saul used to live there, too, right?” she said as though he hadn’t spoken.

“Yeah.”

“With your mom and dad?”
“Yeah.”

“And your mom and dad still live there?”

“Actually, my dad died last month. We were in a car accident.” It was the first time he’d said it out loud, and he hated himself immediately for saying it like this, to shut her up or impress her with the drama of his life, he wasn’t sure which.

Silvia was silent. He was about to ask if she’d even heard him when she pointed and said, “Turn here.”

Before he could even cut the engine she had hopped out of the van. He watched her pop the trunk in the rearview mirror.

“So,” she called, “D’you know what your uncle actually does up here?”

“He’s a marine engineer or something,” Mark called back. Silvia pulled out her bike, and her pedal audibly scraped the van’s bumper. “Go easy on the paint job,” he called.

She walked the bike around to the driver’s window, and he reluctantly rolled it down. “I met your dad up here once, y’know,” she said.

For some reason his first instinct was to laugh, which finally seemed to surprise her. When he caught his breath she was looking at him quizzically. “So?” he said.

“He seemed like a good guy. He disapproved of me, though.”

“Why would he disapprove of you?”

She shrugged. “I guess because he thought I was some strange, homeless kid mooching off your uncle.”

“It probably wasn’t that personal,” Mark said. “My parents complained a lot about Saul living way up here. Especially my dad.”
She shrugged again. “I didn’t say he was wrong.”

Mark didn’t know what to say, so he said, “Am I just—leaving you here in the woods?”

Silvia looked at him. Then she seemed to decide something and said, “What the hell. C’mon,” and stepped towards the woods, beckoning.

Mark shut off the ignition without moving the van to the side of the road and jumped into the dirt to follow Silvia through an opening in the trees. It was a narrow, rooted path that opened quickly into widely spaced pines and then a field. He followed her up and over a hillock of wind-burned, yellowing grass and onto a boardwalk that crossed the damp opening of the Kennebec River into the Bay. At the edge of the river the ground was scattered in translucent, violet eggcups, the water a flat mirror of the bright, colorless sky. When the ground turned swampy Silvia finally left her bike, though she’d dragged it uncomplainingly, refusing his help, over an uneven quarter-mile. That was when Mark saw their destination, slightly down the bend in the river’s mouth: a stumpy white lighthouse. It made a surprisingly dramatic sight parked against the cloudless sky. Through the planks of the boardwalk Mark could see the dark ropes of seaweed draped across the granite.

“All this shit’s decommissioned now,” Silvia said, answering a question he hadn’t asked. She pulled a keychain out from the pocket of her jeans and inserted the first of a pair of keys into a salt-encrusted padlock. “My dad is dead, too,” she said and pushed open the door without waiting for him to answer.

Mark knew what he was smelling before his eyes could confirm it. “No way,” he said. Silvia flicked on a dim wall-mountain lamp and details materialized. The floor was
flagstone, covered in plastic pots of various sizes, massive bags of medium, a pallet in the center supported a humming water pump and an industrial box fan. A plastic tub contained a mess of wires and tubing, which spread off across the shadowed floor like a web. The plants were against the wall, the line of them curving upwards in a neat row, lining the lighthouse staircase. Tubing was covered in cloth and stapled to the walls, which were painted white.

Mark looked up into the spiral of green.

“Sorry it’s dark. We just flipped em.”

“Nice set up,” was all he could think of to say. “This is yours?”

“Your uncle’s,” she said. “I just help out sometimes.” Then she turned and smiled at him, a wide, limber smile that made dimples appear in her cheeks. She had slightly crooked teeth. “Told you,” she said, though what she was proving he still couldn’t tell. She started up the stairs, brushing an open palm over the saw-toothed leaves. Everything was vibrantly green even in the dim light. Without being asked, Mark followed her. At the top of the stairs was a trap door, and then they were back in the cold and the bright, in the round head of the lighthouse and surrounded by the bay on all sides, the water brilliant through the red-tinted glass. Mark went to the window, feeling her eyes on him.

“When my dad died I lost my mind,” she said. She came over and stood beside him. Her hair had the thick, pleasing disorder of something beautiful that had been unraveled, a medieval tapestry fallen to ruin.

“You seem okay now,” was all he could think of to say. He didn’t know whether to feel hurt or relieved at her lack of interest in his own mourning.

“I am okay, actually,” she said. “But I’m still crazy.”
“I was driving the car,” he said.

“I know,” Silvia said, without horror or, if it was possible, surprise. She looked away from him. “This is prettier than any city, you gotta admit.”

“Yeah,” he said. Her hair brushed his hand and he tangled his fingers in it, but gently, so that she probably wouldn’t feel it.

“You’ll be okay, too,” Silvia said without turning.

Something in her words suddenly made him understood what he was about to do.

“I bet you have more than one phone,” Mark said. “Because of all this stuff.”

“I do,” she said.

“I bet you know Saul’s home number by heart,” he said.

“That’s not a good idea,” she said. “But sure.”

* * *

His uncle was the only person Mark still knew with a landline, and he quietly gave thanks to Silvia for knowing the number by heart. He’d taken the flip phone Silvia handed him and come out to the boardwalk. It seemed easier to speak outside the lighthouse, dangling his legs over the rocks. He barely had to disguise his voice; everyone had been forever mixing them up on the phone.

“Hello?” said Saul after only the second ring.

“Saulie Glass?” Mark said.

“Who’s this?”

“It’s me,” Mark said, and then said it before he could think twice about what he was doing: “It’s your brother Leo.”

“Who the hell is this,” Saul said.
“Saulie, relax.” Mark was struck with the funny sensation of knowing what to say without knowing why. He suddenly remembered his father’s laugh, the high-pitched ha-ha he’d kept for when he thought something was especially funny but knew no one else did. “Ha-ha,” Mark said. He heard Saul inhale. “Ha-ha,” Mark said again. “You never thought I was funny.”

“I should hang up the phone,” Saul said, but didn’t. “I can hear you’re outside.”

“I’m what?” A gust of wind came from upriver and Mark struggled to keep the cold out of his voice. Instead he said, “I won’t keep you. I just had to ask you a question.”

“Where are you calling from?” Saul demanded, and added, “This isn’t funny”

“You know what’s funny? No ban on cell phones in heaven. You’d hate it.”

Saul was silent for a moment. Then he said, sounding forced, “There’s no such thing as heaven, Buddy.”

“No such thing as what? I can barely hear you. Too many harps, y’know.”

“Too many what?”

“Are you Mark’s father?” Mark asked.

Saul didn’t say anything, and for a split second Mark thought he’d pulled it off. It was the hardest part, to say his own name with the right combination of distance and familiarity and so coordinate the most exact verbal stunt he’d ever attempted to play.

“What did Bella tell you?” Saul asked and Mark knew, somehow, he’d blown it. They both knew it was him on the other end of the line.

Without quite slipping out of character, Mark said, almost gently now, “Answer the question, Saulie.” Behind him the door of the lighthouse opened and shut, and Silvia came out onto the boardwalk.
“It was a mistake,” Saul said. “It shouldn’t matter.”

“I didn’t have to die to know that’s bullshit,” Mark said. Silvia was obviously eavesdropping but he didn’t care. “I have to know,” he said. “I have to know who really loved who.”

“Love had nothing to do with it,” Saul said.

“Mark might need you now,” Mark said. “Did you ever think of that? Or were you too busy being selfish up here in the—”

“You’re the one who told me not to talk to him,” Saul said, sounding suddenly angry. “You’re the one who said to keep away, the one who—”

“Well you shouldn’t have listened to that because I’m—an idiot.”

Saul paused. “Listen, love might have had something to do with it,” he said. “But not in the way you think. Come home, Mark.”

“I can’t,” Mark said. He could feel his whole body straining toward Saul’s voice. The knuckles of his free hand were white around the edge of the boardwalk.

“It’s not your fault,” Saul said. “It was an accident.”

Without answering, Mark hung up the phone. Then he stood up slowly and said, “Let’s go.”

Silvia looked sideways at him. Then she slung an arm across his shoulders and said, “You got a fucked up family, kid.”

* * *

Mark stared at the ceiling. He counted bumps in the plaster. As a child he’d lain in this bath and found pictures in the single, huge water stain there. He could still see them sometimes, if he willed himself to it: a camel, a weasel.
“Maka,” Bella said. “You need to find someplace else to live.” She sounded tired. He heard the creak of her sitting down on the closed lid of the toilet. “You could still register for summer classes,” she said. “Maybe you’d make yourself less crazy with some—”

“You’re kicking me out?”

“You don’t need to say it like that.”

“How would you say it? You’re kicking me to the curb.”

“For your good as much as mine.” Her voice was flat. “Just until I can get a handle on what—”

“Ma,” he interrupted. “Have you ever noticed that the water stain above the bath looks just like a whale?”

He heard the squeak of Bella’s hand in the basin, and she muttered as though to herself. “You’d think two adults together would be able to keep a clean sink.” The door creaked, and he felt the door open. “Clean your hairs out of the drain,” she said. “And don’t leave them dangling on the soap catch. There’s a wastebasket in here for a reason.”

He was alone again. He wiped the sweat from his upper lip. Then he pushed back the curtain, the hooks rattling loudly along the bar, stood and stepped onto the tub rug.

Above the toilet hung one of Bella’s pastels: an abstract, five-fingered white hand on a warm field, signed in lime green crayon, BG 1966. It had been there since before he could remember, it had always been there, and he leaned down and picked up the folder of letters, leaving the magazine on the floor, and flipped it open to the first page.

TO MY SON, MARK. AS YOU READ THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES, WHISPER THEM OUT LOUD TO YOURSELF:

30
I AM GOING BACK TO THE BEGINNING.

I AM GOING BACK.

I AM GOING BACK.
Outside

Last time I saw my daughter was around Christmastime two years ago. It was a thin afternoon that was thick with unfallen snow by the time we met in the parking lot of the mall. My ex came across the tar like Libra, a leather briefcase in one hand and Sasha’s school backpack draped across the other. Sasha herself dragged behind, a knotty spine of mistletoe clutched in one snotty fist and her eyes about as red as those berries. When I said hello she answered without her eyes going off the plant.

“Don’t mumble,” snapped my ex.

“Where’s Cathy Bates?” I said, since at that point my rights and everything were still contingent on a woman whose name I pretended not to know

“Not coming, cancelled because of the storm. But I figured we could just go ahead and meet since I won’t really have time to coordinate everything again until after the holiday.”

“Okay,” I said.

“You’ve been doing really well, anyway,” my ex said, like it was her life at stake if the social worker found out we’d broken the law. “I don’t have time for bureaucracy right now.” She leaned over to brush Sasha’s bangs out of her eyes but our daughter ducked her touch. “See you soon, baby,” my ex said. Then she rotated toward me, tapping her watch. “I’ll meet you here in one hour.”

“Great,” I said, already planning on making her wait ten minutes.

I’ll go ahead and admit it right here, that my heart was leaping.
The mall was all bedroom warmth, every surface dripping in mirrored fringe and clusters of plastic poinsettia. It was like walking the halls of a cheap motel decorated by some especially sentimental elves.

“You look taller,” I told Sasha.

“You look the same,” she said.

“How’s third grade?”

She ignored the question. “Can we go to the food court?”

“You hungry?”

“No.” She grabbed my hand, hanging a little on my arm. “I want a Missus Fields.” She leaned harder, seeming to sense my hesitation. “Mommy says only for special occasions, but today is special, right?”

My shoulder was about threatening to pop right out of its socket, but I gritted my teeth and pointed. “Lead us,” I said. We passed a rolling cart of bejeweled mobile phone cases, where three ginger-haired employees stood flirting with a prepubescent girl. Sasha’s hand fluttered against my palm, dry and delicate as a moth. I wondered how many redheads worked in here, all told. I wondered how much time we’d already used up and then swore to myself I wouldn’t wonder again.

One of the biggest differences about being on the outside was how time played. Everything moved speeded up and looped, shallower than I remembered, dizzying like a shitty home movie. I felt slow by comparison. An enormous woman in a zebra-print tracksuit pressed by us, and I flinched and twitched sideways, right onto the toe of Sasha’s little white sneaker. At the sand-soft give of her foot I swore, loudly. The woman
grunted and moved upstream, leaving us heaving in the wake of manufactured floral stink. “You okay?” I asked Sasha.

“Uh-huh.”

“Don’t tell your mom I said—that word. Okay?” I suggested that she’d probably heard worse at school but she didn’t answer, eyes darting between two points somewhere above my head. I pushed my hand under the collar of my denim jacket and it came back damp. Sasha was still wearing her winter coat, zipped up and everything.

“Jesus, Sash. You must be burning up.” She looked up at me and then down, as though shocked by the existence of her own body. The coat was pink and as massively inflated as a life preserver. “We can’t bring you back to mommy in a plastic bag.”

“Huh?”

“Y’know, if you melted. Doesn’t mommy ever pack messy things for lunch in plastic bags?”

“Mommy packs me corn wraps with hummus,” she said. “Plastic bags are a waste of mother nature’s sources.”

“What about like, a popsicle?”

She squinted at me. “We use Tupperware.”

I pulled her sideways, where we were protected by the deserted front of a Poppin’ Chicken counter. At my insistence she unzipped, fumbling the toggle so that I had to kneel in front of her and help. “Isn’t that better?” I asked as we peeled off the sleeves. Sasha didn’t say anything, only handed me the coat and straightened the hem of her shirt. A dancing blonde girl was screen printed on her concave chest.

“Is that Madonna?” I asked.
“Ew, Mama. Madonna is old. And, like—gross.” Sasha touched the shirt. “It’s Miley.”

“Who?”

“Miley Cyrus? She’s like, on the Disney channel?”

I was blatantly out of touch. I tried to redirect. “D’you want to be a musician when you grow up?”

“No.”

“What do you want to be?”

Sasha cocked her head. “A famous person.”

The air in the food court was saturated with the scents of singed hair and peanut sauce, and it was a lot brighter in there, giving me echoes behind my eyes. Continuing outward from Poppin’ Chicken was a row of glass cafeteria stalls. The adjoining wall was covered in plywood and spray-painted with the words EXCUSE OUR APPEARANCE. Draped over that was a banner that said NOW SEE HOW THE 100% STACKS UP.

“There’s Missus Fields, Mama,” said Sasha, a little breathlessly. Grinning at me from across the floor was the disembodied head of a blue-eyed woman, suspended above a brilliantly lit counter like the Aryan Wizard of Oz. Probably around then, Sasha let go of my hand, because by the time I got to the counter she already had her face smooshed up against the Plexiglas. “Can I get a soda, too?” Sasha asked without turning around. Missus Fields was grown-up Miley.

I told her to get whatever she wanted, trying to find a price listed for any damn thing so I could figure out if I had enough dollar bills in my jacket pocket. Behind her I
could see cookies, with or without chips or raisins or rainbow sprinkles, all tremulously moist and large enough to exert gravitational force.

It was around then that I noticed them, a real old pair of zombies at one of those bolted-down tables in the center of the food court. I could tell that both of them had been watching us, kind of crooked in the face, mouths hanging open a little over their dirty Styrofoam trays. I knew that look. When Sasha turned to order I held up my jacket lapel like a shield and flipped them off. They looked down abruptly.

“That’s six seventy-five, sir,” said the kid in a hairnet. When I raised my eyebrows, he corrected himself. “Uh, ma’am?”

I didn’t say anything, and I didn’t leave a tip because I needed to pay the bridge toll on the way home.

Not even ten steps later Sasha’s face was already covered in tendons of dark chocolate. We walked until we hit the end of the hall, where there was a craft and fabric shop and the barred entrance to some big electronic depot, the grate casting massive, laddered shadows across the parquet. Sasha was more than halfway through her cookie.

“Mama, do you think I should call you something—like, more grown up?”

“Like what?”

“Um.” Sasha blinked, awkwardly determined. “Maya?”

“I’m your mother,” I said. It wasn’t working. “You should call me something respectful. A term of respect.” Ignoring how complicated everything had become seemed, at that moment, my only option. I spotted a display of tinsel-encrusted flowers just over the threshold of the craft and fabric shop. “C’mon,” I said.
In the mall proper they’d been playing a track of jingling bells, but the store was blaring *Thriller* over nasal speakers. My attention was spiraling. I debated asking the obvious question, and then did it. “Did Mommy suggest that? Y’know, you calling me Maya?”


“Well I don’t like it,” I said. I could see her startle at my tone, almost enough so that she reached for my hand. Next to the cash register was a stand of fake palm fronds. “Your Mommy always said, never trust a person who buys fake flowers,” I said, trying to make it better but not really.

When Sasha said she had to pee we walked back in the direction of the food court. The bathrooms were set off the main hallway, in an antechamber near the door we’d come in. The area was barren except for a vending machine and a payphone with a contorted silver cord.

“You aren’t coming?” she asked when I stopped outside the door.

“I don’t have to go,” I said.

Sasha went through the swinging door while I stood in the hall. A pair of tween girls in pink and black came and leaned against the vending machine, eyeballing me skeptically and working their jaws over twin wads of gum. The plastic saddle of the payphone was branded with the words *TELL ME HOW 2 DO 4 U*. There was a clock on the wall above it, but I looked away.
When Sasha came back, her jaw was set and she grabbed my hand. “Wanna know a secret?” I told her that I did, watching her work something out in her head. When she asked me to cross my heart, I did it. “Hope to die?” she insisted.

“Yup,” I agreed. I could feel the cold coming in off the windows by the door.

“I went to Skylar’s house and we saw her dad,” Sasha said.

“Okay.”

“Her dad was naked.”

We shouldered past a woman holding three Macy’s bags and screaming into a cell phone. “Well they didn’t have the gold one,” she said. “Well he’s just going to cry then, and I’m not picking up the pieces this time.”

I asked Sasha if Skylar was a friend from school.

“Duh,” she said, and giggled.

I had a feeling from her tone that the word *duh* was enough to warrant punishment from my ex, but we both knew I’d say nothing. I used to call my ex’s language thing The Lexicon of the Forbidden. It used to make her laugh when I said that.

“Have you ever seen a naked boy?” Sasha asked conversationally. I wondered if this was the point. I admitted that I had, but sometime around ancient history.

“Was it shaped like this?” Sasha curled her free arm over her head like a deformed elephant’s trunk.

I couldn’t help it, I snorted with laughter. Sasha’s face darkened, and she put a hand on her hip, clearly emboldened by my amusement. “That’s how Skylar’s dad was,” she explained. “It was so messed up.”

“You probably shouldn’t spy on your friend’s dad, Sash.”
“We wanted to check if Jenny from Mrs. Raleigh’s group was telling the truth. She said boys don’t have—y’know.” She raised two fingers to her chest.

“Nipples?”

“Mama!”

“Everyone has nipples, Sasha.”

She lowered her voice. “That’s a bad word.”

I didn’t want to argue. “Did you see them?”

Sasha shook her head quickly.

“Okay, well everyone has them,” I repeated, unsure of what to say. I tried to think of what wholesome fact my ex would wheel out here. “Remember when Paris had babies?” I started. “How do you think they drank milk?” Paris was my ex’s cat. After giving birth it had gone psychotic and tried to eat the whole hairless pink litter right off its own tits. My ex had explained to Sasha that it was trying to kiss its babies while I wrestled the damn things from out between their mother’s jaws.

Sasha folded her arms resolutely, dropping my hand. “Boys are gross,” she said. “That’s why you married Mommy, right?”

It only occurred to me later that I could have asked her then, at last, what she thought about Mommy and Mama marrying and then unmarrying and all that, but I didn’t have the balls. Instead I looked to the ceiling of the mall and said, “You might have a snow day tomorrow if the meteorologist is right.”

Sasha shot me a look. Not because I’d avoided her but because she wasn’t sure if I had. It’s possible that I was witness in that look, to the strange, sharp awakening of knowing that one’s parents are not one’s own creation.
When the square of wax paper fluttered from Sasha’s hands to the floor, we both pretended not to see it.

It seems inevitable, now: when we left the mall and stepped out into the parking lot to meet my ex, the only people out there were the men, the two from the food court and one more, this one a lot younger and with thick, dark hair. In front of the door the three of them looked translucent around the edges, thin as paper dolls.

It had finally started snowing, but only barely.

Sasha skirted past them and I figured we’d gotten off but the word came and she heard it and when she whipped around I knew it was trouble.

“Faggot.”

I pushed Sasha ahead of me, her jacket flapping against my arm. I’d forgotten to swaddle her up again, even though it was snowing, and here my only daughter was standing in the parking lot in a t-shirt. It had been so long since we’d been alone. In the falling light the air was the same color as the drifts of dirty snow. They lined the edges of the parking lot like whales surfacing in an oil slick.

My ex was nowhere in sight. Sasha’s eyebrows contorted.

“What, you don’t wanna talk to us?” the younger guy yelled from behind me. “My old man here told me you flipped a bird at them,” he added, and I wasn’t sure if it was a question or not.

“Mama?” Sasha said.

“Ignore them,” I said. A year or two ago I’d have already been dismantling his innards and slowly laying them out for sale in the parking lot. I pushed Sasha a little hard and she stumbled.
“Why you in such a hurry, you kidnap that little girl? You queers just can’t get any the way god intended, huh?”

When I turned around he was closer than I’d realized, but I still stepped toward him and said, “Be careful what you say in front of my kid, asshole.” I could hear him sucking air. He’d just gotten a haircut or something because he had tiny hairs sprinkled across his shoulders, sharp as needles.

“What’re you gonna do?”

He looked right into my eyes. Even in the falling light I could see his fear, the amber flecks in his brown irises, my own reflection floating in space. I knew that fear. I wanted it. I reached for him.

“Mama,” Sasha said from somewhere behind me.

“Is there a problem here?”

I hesitated. He looked away, and then I’d lost him.

It was my ex.

“Is there a problem?” my ex asked again, and just like that the young guy retreated, rejoined the other two. My hand was hanging in the air, and then all three men were sinking into the shadows by the boxwoods. “What’s going on?” My ex hadn’t taken her eyes off them, but I could tell she was talking to me. She always had some gift for getting me out of things bloodlessly.

Sasha screamed, “Mommy!” and broke from behind me, sprinting over to wrap her arms around my ex’s waist. It was snowing pretty good.

“Baby, why aren’t you wearing a coat?” When Sasha looked up at her, she screamed a little. “And what’s all over your face?”
“It’s just chocolate. Mama got me a cookie.”

Here’s the thing I can’t get myself over: I know I could have been a winner. A real, motherfucking winner. But there’s no getting ahead when the whole world is out for you, and I’m just another runty kitten with the jaws still snapped on tight.

“What was Mama thinking?” said my ex, looking at me hard. No mercy for me in the parking lot of the mall. Beside her, my daughter’s eyes were wide and rolling and awake.
This Would Be the First Time

She begins painting disturbed children in watercolor. She works downstairs, at the kitchen table, with the lamp plugged in to the outlet behind her chair. The first night: a towheaded boy on the threshold of a shed door, his face half in shadow, hanging a litter of kittens by their necks from a roof beam, a calico kitten struggling against his hand, the ridged pink roof of its mouth just visible above his thumb. She applies the color delicately, with plenty of water and her smallest flat brush. It reminds her dimly of a Beatrix Potter illustration. The lamplight casts a circle of warmth across her hands, and twice she unthinkingly dips the paintbrush into her glass of orange juice. It doesn’t matter, though; paint is invisible in orange juice.

By sunrise her wrists are ticking, clocking every hairline brushstroke. When she no longer needs the lamp, she stands, stretches, and takes the stairs two at a time, to her studio on the second floor. In her studio she works on commission only, producing portraits: the domesticated animal. She paints from photographs. It pays her bills, though the paintings are empty. A dog’s eye can makes designs on a person as beckoning and momentary as the crater of water on the broken surface of a pond, and by aiming between the ripple of rheumy lashes she can feel her way inside. She could paint herself a home but she prefers this: to lie suspended in watery space. A painting will shelter her for a time, like a womb, and like a womb, it will expel her in the end.
On her easel now is a coarse and khaki police dog, its forelegs planted on the grave of some fallen, flag-wrapped comrade. She’s easing down the dog’s rear tendon when the dog barks. Ringing, the dog is ringing.

The phone is ringing. She steps into the hall and collects the cordless.

“How old are you?”

If the question takes him by surprise, he disguises it. “Twenty-five.”

It seems, this morning, abnormally bright in the house, even though there are no windows in the hall. She squints.

He says, “I left you three messages last week, Matt. I was starting to worry.”

Only her brother called her Matt. She never checks the private line. “Sorry,” she says. “It’s been a long time.”

“Since the funeral.”

“Right. Do you think you could—” She’s about to ask him to call back, but he interrupts.

“I won’t keep you, I’m just calling to ask a favor.”

“Oh?”
“Don’t sound so excited.” He inhales. “Actually, I’m filming a movie. At the Point, if you can believe it. I’m coming up there next weekend. I was hoping we could get together.”

“I thought you’re—a musician, right?” She’s starting to remember. “You got that scholarship for—cello?”

“Standup bass,” he corrects gently. “But I’m in film school now.”

“You mom must love that.”

There’s a moment of silence. Then he says, “Okay, actually—I was wondering if I could stay with you. Just for a night or two, while we scout locations.”

There’s a thick feeling in her throat.

“I’ll sleep on your couch, the floor, whatever. I’m easy.” He pauses. “Matt? You do still live at granddad’s place, right?”

“Oh, yes. I do, and it would be great to see you but I have—” She tries to collect her thoughts. “I have a thing in the—I need time. A lot of work to get done, y’know?”

“You won’t even know I’m there.”

“I can’t show you around.”

“You don’t need to.”

“My couch is very—short.”

“Mattie, listen. My mom’s moving back here and she’s in big financial trouble. I just have to finish this movie so I can graduate and get a—”

“Gambling?”

“Yeah,” he says heavily. “The gambling.”
“Okay,” she says. “Okay.” She starts walking back toward the studio, the phone still against her ear, pressing hard on the broken board at the end of the hall. The slanted attic ceilings are too white, and the light is too white. “Of course you can stay here. Just call me when you finalize your plans.”

“Thanks. Really, it’ll be really great to see—”

But he doesn’t sound as grateful as he should, so she hangs up the phone and puts it on the drafting table. Of course? When did she last use those words? On her easel, the police dog begins to sink. Now she can see that the dirt is fresh and soft and maybe the grave is empty. Every patch of earth is just waiting for an inhabitant, she thinks, as the dirt envelopes the paws.

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Across the road, the neighbor appears to be transplanting all of Eden. The neighbor returns to the Point every spring, towing his wife and a truckload of soil. Displayed haphazardly along the edge of his driveway is an array of ceramic dishes and planters that reminds Mattie of her mother’s favorite holiday loaf pans. When the neighbor catches sight of her in the window, he yells upward from where he’s crouching in the scrub grass, excavating dirt from the base of his mailbox, a circle of holes like an inverted fairy ring. “Hey-a, Matthe-a!” His Boston tongue kneads her name like dough.

“Hi,” she calls.

“You expecting guests?”

“Huh?”
“Been seeing you at that window all morning. Finally figured you must be looking for someone.” He chuckles, shading his eyes with one gloved hand. “Wife does the exact same thing.”

“My nephew,” she answers, tapping her feet against the wall under the sill. Behind her, the finished police dog is leaning on the wall, waiting to be mummified in bubble wrap. On the easel now is a trio of cats, but she can’t get into them. They’re shapeless and dead-eyed, and the whiskers—last night she botched the whiskers and had to over-paint half the tabby. She watches the neighbor shake earth from the trembling roots of a nasturtium.

Desperate for distraction from waiting, she wanders downstairs, where the watercolor boy is still lying unfinished on the kitchen table. She sifts a decent nib out of the kitchen drawer and begins adding crosshairs of ink to the kittens, a row of bodies limp and finely furred as washrags. She isn’t sure how long she’s been working when she hears tires whining on gravel. Then a car door slams, and the neighbor’s voice rings in through the front window.

“You must be Matthea’s nephew.”

She can’t hear the reply, only the scrape of a bag being dragged over the road, though whether it’s Adnan’s luggage or the neighbor’s bag of potting soil, she can’t tell. “Not much family resemblance,” says the neighbor, and laughs. It’s only then that it occurs to her that she should hide the paints and the boy and the kittens. She spreads an old newspaper over the picture, probably smudging the ink but it doesn’t matter. No one should see it. Then she rinses her hands and goes to open the door.
Adnan is no longer the lithe, longhaired teenager she remembers standing silently next to her brother’s coffin. The man on the threshold has short, almost military hair and a chest deep enough to fill out his V-necked Bonnaroo shirt. She recognizes his mother’s dark, vaguely amphibious eyes. He grins at her with her brother’s smile.

“Hey Matt,” he says, bobbing his head a little as though to kiss her on the cheek.

She steps forward and touches him lightly on the shoulder, pressing him back.

“Come in,” she says.

“Thanks.” He hoists a massive L.L. Bean duffel bag carefully into the foyer. “It’s been ages since I was here.”

“Since before—since you were a kid, probably?”

“Basically.” He peers into the house, mouth slightly open.

She marvels at his earnestness. For an instant she can see it, too, like a painting she would never paint: freestanding flagstone fireplace ringed in shabby floral furniture that her mother bought from Sears when Mattie herself was a child, mounted and mildewing Elk head, attached kitchen with badly scarred wooden countertop and rusty gas stove. The pine bookcase overflowing with disintegrating, pulp detective novels and her father’s collection of vintage cribbage boards. And beyond, through the windows: the sloping, verdurous humps of Saddleback Mountain and the white-capped surface of the bay. It is unaccountably rare, and she has a sudden memory of Adnan himself, silky-skinned in the falling light, watching raptly as her own father fills in a crossword puzzle. A Mickey Mouse coloring book and scattered box of crayons lie forgotten at the far end of the table.
Then Adnan turns to her, smirking a little. “You haven’t done much with the place, huh?” he says, and she realizes with a flush of resentment that he’s teasing her. He must think himself very conventionally charming. He must have many girlfriends, like her brother. She imagines telling him to leave. She imagines leaving.

“Are you hungry?” she asks instead.

“Nah, I stopped for a sandwich an hour ago.”

“Well, you’re in the guest room.”

“There’s a guest room in this place?” He squints upward as though to see through the floor.

“My parents’ room.”

“Okay,” he says. “I’ll drag this up there, then.” He doesn’t move.

“What’re you doing now?” she asks.

“I have to go into town and run a couple errands. Then I was thinking we could have dinner.”

Town consists of a single main street: a grocery store, a gas station, a Walgreens, the elementary school and a squatting stone library. She wonders what he could possibly want there. “There isn’t a lot of food in the house,” she says.

“I’ll go grocery shopping,” he said. “What time do you usually eat?”

“Late,” she says uncertainly. “Let me give you my credit card.”

He looks embarrassed. “C’mon, Matt. Do you know the last time an adult offered me money?”

She feels determined to prove him wrong. “You’re in school. And I’m your aunt.”
“The answer is you, at the funeral.” At her look of confusion, he continues, “You gave me fifty bucks and told me to buy myself something nice. I didn’t take it.”

Mattie feels herself frown. She says, “I guess you only get to refuse me once.” On an impulse, she steps forward and pulls her wallet from her pocket and places it firmly into his palm. Her wallet is dark leather and wedge-shaped; his fingers are dry and warm. “I have to get back to work now,” she says and shimmies past him, up the stairs.

She stands in front of her easel until she hears the door slam, wondering what she’s gotten herself into. Then she walks to the end of the hall, to her parents’ old room. She usually keeps the door closed. The bed is made up, as always, in her mother’s favorite quilt and white lace shams. Adnan’s duffel is on the bed, which bothers her a little—who knows if the bottom of the bag is clean—and a zipper-less, crimson sweatshirt hangs on the post. On the vanity is a pair of Ray Bans and a wrinkled copy of a magazine called Wired.

“Adnan,” she says out loud, just to see if she can say his name without sounding anti-social, but her voice is too tangible in the static room, so she crosses the floor and pushes open the single window, the only second-floor window to face the bay. “Adnan,” she says again to the water, and then, for no reason, “Welcome home.”

Mattie only ever really goes shopping to re-stock the fridge with pre-sliced deli meats and whatever breakfast cereal is currently on sale, and when Adnan reappears late in the afternoon with arms full of brown paper bags, she feels irritated, as though the food is a sign of disrespect to her monkishly empty cabinets. To make matters worse, he keeps going back to the car for more, groceries he unloads carefully onto the kitchen counter: circus-colored cherry tomatoes, frilly greens, an eggplant that weighs as much as a
bowling ball, bags of granola with dried red berries and two cartons of milk and eggs and a steak-sized piece of halibut, a can of crushed tomatoes and a can of soup and three cloves of garlic and a net of shallots and risotto rice and a tall yellow column of off-brand olive oil and a plastic hutch of blueberries and unsalted butter and goat cheese with dill and a box of water crackers and a cylinder of slice-and-bake cookie dough.

She leans on the counter behind him. “Blueberries aren’t in season yet,” she says.

Instead of answering, he squats on his heels and paws into the cabinet next to the stove. “Do you—oh wait, found it.” He stands, holding a red plastic cutting board and a shallow sauté pan that Mattie’s never seen before. Adnan puts the cutting board on the counter, yanks open the butter with his teeth, and lights the gas.

“What are we making?”

“Hand me the wine?” He crushes a garlic clove under the blade of her biggest knife as a generous wedge of butter begins to melt in the sauté pan.

“There’s wine?”

“On the table.” He gestures with the knife and she sees a bottle of white with a duck on the label. There’s also a bottle of bourbon.

“You bought liquor?”

“I just thought it would be nice,” he says without looking up. “We can make cocktails or something.”

She brings both bottles to the sink, wondering when she last consumed alcohol. It was never her drug of choice; in art school only the administration students were really serious drinkers. She opens the wine with her father’s ancient wooden corkscrew and
hands it to Adnan, who pours a generous amount into the pan. She flinches when it
sizzles. He laughs. The golden warmth of garlic fills the kitchen.

“That smells good,” she admits.

“If I could only eat one thing for the rest of my life, it would be garlic.”

“You’d stink.”

Adnan shrugs, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “I already stink.” He pours risotto
without measuring and shakes the pan to coat the kernels in butter and garlic. Mattie
pours an inch of whiskey into each of a pair of drinking glasses.

“Is that enough?” she asks.

“That’s one way to do it,” he says, then raises his glass and takes it like a shot.

She sips and winces as the roof of her mouth burns. “No wonder I never drink.”

She watches as he twists the handle on the can opener and pours in the soup can,
which turns out to be vegetable broth, watches the muscles in his back heave in soft
swells like the surface of the ocean far offshore. She has the odd sensation of not
knowing what he looks like when he has his back to her. Of not knowing his face.

“What’s your movie about?” she asks.

He doesn’t answer right away. “I guess it’s about—kids playing in the woods.
Rural kids. In New England.”

“Your dad?” she asks, only a little bit sorry.

He cocks his head to the side, and she can see the slightest tension in his shoulder
blades, in the way he raises them up and together. “It’s more about me than him.”

“But you’re filming here.”
“It’s fiction,” he says. The alcohol already has a bright spot burning in her peripheral vision, so she pours herself more. Adnan stirs the risotto. Then he says, “Mark doesn’t even want to film up here, but I’m pretty sure it’s going to be perfect. I saw some good spots today, just driving around.”

She can tell the information is a concession to her, that he’s speaking to break the tension. “Who’s Mark?”

“A friend from school. He’s producing.” He stirs the risotto. “Helping me write, too.”

“Why isn’t he staying here?”

“He’s driving up tomorrow, he’s staying in a motel if we even need to—”

She tries not to feel hurt, knowing he’s right. “You can invite him over.”

“Okay. Thanks, Mattie.” He turns to face her, still stirring. “Can I see your studio?”

“There’s nothing to see,” she says honestly, but twenty minutes later they’re trekking upstairs, balancing the bottle of bourbon and two platefuls of risotto and tomato salad between them.

“Y’know,” Adnan says over his shoulder as she flicks on the overhead. “We’re the only artists in the family.”

“What about your mom?”

“She doesn’t count, she barely does anything anymore. And she’s not your family, technically.” He goes to stand in front of her easel, sticking a forkful of risotto into his mouth. “This is pretty good.”

Mattie isn’t sure if he means the art or the food. “She was successful.”
“Yeah, well. Not anymore.” Adnan gestures at the three half-rendered cats. “Who actually wants this?”

Mattie wants to be insulted, but she feels outside of herself; she can’t quite will herself to it. She sets her plate of food on the drafting table. “These are a mother’s day present for someone in Connecticut.” There’s something rising in her throat, and to her own surprise it’s laughter. She giggles, a little helplessly. “Sometimes I’m painting and I just think—” She sees that he’s watching her with amusement, but she pushes on. “I just think, who…the fuck…cares.” He grins. She steps backwards, trying to find something to lean on, and her heel hits the couch and she sits. “I hate cats,” she says, and then, thinking about it, “I hate a lot of animals, actually.”

“You hate dogs?”

“Dogs are okay.”

“You know, I don’t think this is what you really do, is it?” Adnan says. He’s smirking again, but somehow this time she doesn’t mind. “To state the obvious.”

“What?” she asks dully.

“Where’s your work?”

“This is my work.”

He grins. “You’re really stubborn, huh?”

Somewhere below the window, the neighbor’s ride-on lawnmower sputters to life. The neighbor always mows the lawn just after sunset, to avoid the heat of the day. She agreed to it a long time ago, the only neighbor for miles. She stands and crosses the floor intending to close the window. Below, the neighbor has gathered every dried twig and branch from his yard, aiming the mower directly over the pile. “Hey,” she calls, suddenly
frantic, “Stop! You’ll dull the blades!” She waves her arms but he doesn’t look up, only wipes sweat from his brow with the back of one hand. Even in the falling light, she can see the remaining streak of dirt, faintly translucent, like turpentine. She slams the window shut just as the first branch breaks under the tire.

There’s something wrong about the whole tableau, then, her rumpled clothes and the pervasive smell of honeysuckle in the darkening house. Her nephew is watching her. On the arm of the sofa, a blob of red paint has hardened to a minute, crimson mountain range.

“I think I might be a little drunk,” she says, avoiding his eyes.

“Matt,” he says and takes a step closer. “Did you ever ask my dad if—”

“I have to sleep and you should, too,” she says. Then she turns and bolts from the room.

* * *

Mark pushes back his plate. “Dude, you are such a ringer.”

Adnan laughs a trilling, cartoonish laugh and says, “I never pretended I don’t got skills.”

Mark turns to her. “Mattie, did you know this guy is a ringer?” Mark has turned out to be very tall, with a long, triangular torso and dimples high in his cheekbones. If not for the Malcolm X glasses, Mattie thinks he would look more like a star football player than a filmmaker, in any case not at all as Mattie would expect Adnan’s friends to look.

“Asshole eats nothing but frozen dinners for years and then I come over here and—this.” He gestures sweepingly at the empty plates. “Ringer.”
She doesn’t know what a ringer is. “Dishonesty runs in the family,” she suggests, which makes both men laugh, Mark slapping the edge of the table a little bit and making the forks shiver against the ceramic dishes.

“So,” he says conversationally. “You live up here year round?”


“And all alone?” Mark continues. “No boyfriend or anything?”

“Dude,” says Adnan.

“Mattie doesn’t mind.” Mark winks at her.

“I had a fiancé,” she says, wondering what siren urge is causing her to share so much about herself. “A long time ago.”

“What was wrong with him?”

“We just,” she starts and stops, considering how to say it. “We were both artists, only he thought—he wanted to make it big. And he did.” She looks at Adnan. “I never really cared enough, I guess.”

“I remember him,” Adnan says suddenly.

“You met him a couple times,” she says, realizing as she says it. “You were little, though.” Then, because she can’t quite stop herself, “Your dad hated him.”

There is the slenderest, most tender of silences. To keep it from getting too big she grabs her plate and stands. “Who wants dessert?” With a flourish, she pulls the slice-and-bake cookies from where she’s hidden them, still warm, in the microwave.

“You made the cookies!” Adnan is clearly delighted. “You did it while we were out?” He’s almost talking to himself, and she catches Mark’s eye as he eyeballs her nephew sideways. “I can’t believe you did that,” Adnan says again.
“I’m not completely useless.” She sets the plate of cookies on the table, and both men reach for them. “So what are you doing after graduation?” she asks Mark.

“Oh, I’m not in school,” Mark answers breezily. “I dropped out.”

“I thought you were friends from—”

“Mark had some success with an early draft of his thesis film,” Adnan interrupts.

“And as soon as that’s over, I’m climbing Devil’s Tower,” Mark says, grabbing another two cookies at once. “Trying to get this guy to go with me.” He elbows Adnan.

“I told you, I’m not going.”

Mark rolls his eyes. “It’s a fucking—er, sorry, Mattie. It’s a great climb. I did it once before, with my uncles.”

“It’s a sacred spot for Native people in the region,” Adnan says to Mattie. “It really shouldn’t be legal to climb in the first place.” Instead of eating his cookie, Adnan taps it on the edge of his plate, watching crumbs collect on the table.

“Government and religion shouldn’t mix,” says Mark through a mouthful of crumbs. “And it’s not like I’m bothering anyone, anyway.” He grins impishly. “I go up the back way.”

Adnan rolls his eyes. “Asshole.”

“Anyway,” Mark continues with the magnanimous confidence of someone who is most comfortable talking about himself, “after our boy here gets his shit—er, sorry, his stuff together, we’re starting a production company.”

Mattie feels unsure of what question to ask. “Really?”

“It’s no scheme, bro,” says Mark. “It’s fact.” He leans across the table. “Mattie, I spent a bunch of years filming this musician in New Orleans. Friend of a friend introduced us and for some reason the guy really took a liking to me. He’s ninety-nine, distant relation of Buddy Bolden, y’know, the works. Anyway, he starts letting me record him and four months later the storm hits. I was down there with him. Last year I finished a first cut, submitted it on a whim, next thing I know I’m in Utah winning an Audience Pick at Sundance, I network my ass off, and this shit—er—this stuff is taking off.”

“It’s not that easy,” Adnan snaps.

Mark gives Adnan a hard look. “You call that easy?”

Trying to distract them, Mattie says, “I wouldn’t have taken you for a documentary filmmaker.”

“What would you have taken me for?”

“Not a filmmaker.”

“Well if Adnan is your idea of a filmmaker, I’ll say I’m flattered.”

“Don’t get me started,” says Adnan into his glass.

“Jazz, huh?” she asks Mark.

“I’m a freak about it, have been since I was a kid. This movie is my baby. But this guy—” He jabs Adnan with one elbow. “This guy has a head for business I just don’t have.” He sits back and watches her appraisingly. “Actually, we could use a visual artist, too.”

Adnan sits up. “Don’t recruit my relations!”

“I’m just saying."

58
“You haven’t seen anything I do,” she points out, feeling slow in front of whatever is so vital in these two boys.

“I can smell talent,” Mark says to her. “You got it.”

Adnan slouches back in his chair, possibly resigning himself to his fate.

* * *

Mattie startles awake. She must have drifted off at the table. After the boys went upstairs she hadn’t been able to sleep. She’d begun painting in watercolor, at the kitchen table: a little girl standing in the forest, the leaves and bracken glistening with rain across her squeezed-shut eyes, the rest of her completely naked.

Mattie tries to gather her thoughts, rubbing her eyes. The sunlight is slicing through the bay, tinting the kitchen gold. Adnan is standing behind her at the refrigerator; he’s barefooted and wearing Boston University basketball shorts.


He stares at her. “I didn’t mean to wake you up.” He sets the milk on the counter and pours it over a bowl of cereal, moving casually though he sounds concerned. She can’t tell if he’s making conversation just to keep from being awkward, so she doesn’t say anything. “Mark kept kicking me in his sleep so I figured I might as well get up.”

“I was painting and—I guess I passed out. Stupid.”

“What’s up?” he says through a mouthful of Rice Puffs. And then, as though in slow motion, he walks toward her.

“Nothing,” she says. “I’m just—sitting here.” She’s made a huge mistake but she can’t trace its origins. She stares at her nephew’s hands: light palms, hairy knuckles, neatly trimmed nails on tan, tapered fingers.
“This is your work,” he says, sounding delighted, almost breathless. “I knew it!” He pulls the painting of the little girl toward him. “What is this?”

“Nothing.”


She’s pulling the tubes of watercolor toward her across the table. But Adnan puts one finger on the corner of the newsprint and then something catches in his breath. He finds the boy and the kittens. Mattie goes still, both of them do.

Then he speaks. “This is my dad,” he says.

“Yeah,” she says.

“This is him.”

“It’s him.”

“From when he was a kid.”

She sighs heavily, inhaling so deeply it’s almost a yawn. “Yeah,” she says. Neatly trimmed nails, tapered fingers. Adnan thumbnail is warped and purpled.

“Did he really kill cats?”

“Kittens.”

And then, with a finality she’s been anticipating since her nephew crossed the threshold: “He always had problems, then,” he says, exhaling as though he’s been holding air in his lungs for a very long time. His breath raises the hair on her arms.

He leans forward and touches the painting of the little girl in the rain. “And this,” he says, almost carefully. “This must be you. My dad had a photograph like this. I mean, not just like it—” He laughs hoarsely. “But around the same age. Of you.”

“He did?”
“He said he took it, though I doubt that’s true. You’re in the woods. Wrapped in the quilt on granddad’s bed.”

Mattie tries to remember. She can’t.

“He said it was after they found you in the woods.”

“That never happened.”

“Matt, c’mon.”

“He made it up.” She considers, trying to remember the last time she even had to talk about it. “We made it all up together.”

“Mattie, I found it in the newspaper yesterday.”

“You did what?”

“I went to the library to look up the articles.” When she twists in the chair, to look at him, he avoids her eyes. “They were pretty easy to find.”

“Why would you do that?” she asks. In how many years? It’s never once occurred to her that there might exist such public documentation. “Is this for your movie? You didn’t even bother to ask me if—”

He shrugs. “I have a copy of the newspaper, do you want to see it?” Adnan says, a little defensively. “The headline is *Girl Buried Alive*. They even mention how granddad sent the—”

“No.”

“It’s all there. *Hancock Point Press*.” His voice softens. “Never knew you were in a coma. Y’know, after they found you was when granddad had him institutionalized the first time.” Adnan looks at her. “That’s what he always talked about later.”
“There was bad stuff. But I know he wouldn’t have done that, not that time. It was a game.”

“He did it to all of us.”

“Adnan—”

“He was sick, Matt. I don’t know how sick. And he was a bully.”

“Adnan—”

“Help!” The voice is faint and slightly hoarse and Adnan, finally, meets her eyes. He looks afraid. It comes again, then, the panic distinct this time: “Help!” Mattie stands and they run through the kitchen and out onto the lawn. Across the road, the neighbor’s wife is crumpled sideways in the grass at the end of the driveway, her right ankle caught in one of the neighbor’s plantless holes and twisted at a horribly geometrical angle. When she sees Mattie and Adnan, the neighbor’s wife starts trying to hoist herself upward, repeating the word: “Help! Help me! Help me!” Mattie tries not to look at the ankle. The woman is curvaceous, seemingly older than the neighbor, in a polyester housedress with some kind of abstract, glebous pattern.

“Whoa, stop trying to move.” Adnan crouches by the woman and touches her shoulder, lightly. The woman goes still under his touch. “Mattie, do you have a phone?” he says, without turning around. “We’ve gotta call an ambulance. Is your husband home?” He sounds businesslike but kind.

“The store,” the woman says through gritted teeth, though her voice is miraculously calm.

“I’ll run back to the house,” Mattie says and does, trying not to look at her nephew in the grass, trying not to listen to the animal-brained part of her that says it
should be her crouched in the grass. She hears the neighbor’s wife say, “Weed killer.” Then she leans forward and sprints toward the house, practicing in her head what to tell the dispatcher and wondering how it could be possible that she has no idea how fast ambulances drive on dirt roads.

* * *

“Mattie, thanks again for your hospitality,” Mark says, turning as he slams the trunk of the car. “Sorry for all the excitement yesterday.” They’d watched the neighbor’s wife trundled into the ambulance to Ellsworth, a half hour drive to where her husband would be waiting. While the boys were out in the afternoon, Mattie had crossed the road and filled in the holes around the mailbox.

“Have fun at Devil’s Tower,” she says. “And drive carefully in the rain.”

Adnan comes outside, dragging his duffel bag. The screen door bangs shut behind him.

“Bye,” he says.

“I’m sorry you have to leave.”

“I’ll call you,” he says.

“I hope so,” she says, and to her surprise, means it. She steps back and calls to them. “I look forward to seeing those movies, boys. Both movies.”

“C’mon, dude, I’m gonna get struck by lightning over here,” Mark calls from around the car.

Adnan walks to the driver’s seat and sits down and starts the car. The tires grind on the gravel. He waves a little bit—or maybe he’s just adjusting the mirror—and the car
disappears around the drive, and she can hear it through the trees for a minute even when
she can no longer see it.

She stands alone in the yard of her family home, where she’s lived her whole life. Hanging over the house, the clouds are damp and thunderous-looking in the sky, so much bigger than the house, so much bigger than her and somehow without any space inside.

When she starts to shiver, she goes back into the house and climbs the stairs to the second floor. She stands outside her studio door and looks at the room, already half in the shadow of the approaching storm: the decrepit drafting table piled in paints, the stretched canvases, the rollers, the cans of water, the fading scent of linseed oil. The police dog still leaning against the wall. The seashell ear of a cat; of cats uncreated. Through the window she can see the needle-fingered pine boughs, and if she leaned over she’d be able to see the spiral of gnats under the neighbor’s porch light, and through their curtained windows the neighbor’s wife moving slowly on her crutches between the stove and the refrigerator.

Mattie balances on her toes and presses hard on the broken floorboard. The air is taut and palpable and inviting but she doesn’t cross the threshold, she stands without moving, waiting, waiting, waiting.
Mark dreams about the desert: every fall his father buys instant oats and canned beans and unrolls the sleeping bags from the crawlspace. His mother fills two-gallon jugs of water and they pack the car and drive south along the riverbank. Mark associates the changing season not with tingeing leaves, but with the bedroom warmth of the station wagon’s backseat crowded with mildewed quilts, and with watching the rowers glide alongside his window in boats as liquid light as bird bones.

The drive takes three days and they always spend the first night outside of Chicago, where Mark’s father’s sister lives with her two daughters and Mark’s grandmother, who smells of cloves and is called only Boo Boo by everyone. Boo Boo plays a game with him about rowing a boat, only instead of a boat it’s the couch; he goes falling from the cushions and becomes a mischievous fish. Mark has never been in water deeper than the bathtub, but Boo Boo says it doesn’t matter and casts her line over and over to reel him in out of the itchy blue depths of the carpet. Boo Boo tells him he is an incorrigible little trout who will most likely taste delicious on a bagel.

The house in Chicago has a square kitchen separate from the dining room. His aunt feeds Mark there with his cousins even though at home he eats dinner at the table with his parents. His cousins are identical twins who go blank-eyed with suspicion whenever Mark speaks. They play endless games of Monopoly while he draws pictures in a book of lined paper: aliens boarding a rocket ship; a fat weenie dog strapped to a wheeled contraption; the phantom of the opera. He labels all the drawings, guessing when
he doesn’t know how to spell a word. Boo Boo smiles approvingly when he shows her and says, “Make sure you record it all out there, chap. You’ll be glad one day if you do.”

They always leave Chicago so early that the sun isn’t up, so early that the next thing he remembers is his father twisting in the passenger seat to shake him awake, saying, “Maka, it’s Nevada.” His mother rolls down her car window to grasp hands with a smiling woman who says, “Welcome home.”

In the desert Mark is always falling asleep in one place and waking up in another: on his father’s back; in a hammock; curled on the wine-stained passenger seat of a stranger’s camper van, the heat rising thready off the playa through the windshield and both his parents passed out beside him. There are other children around sometimes, but he rarely plays with them. Instead he follows his parents through sunbathed wooden rooms where faceless figures wander mystical-naked, sprawling, multi-level cities tattooed across their collarbones in indigo ink. Sometimes Mark chases the water truck between tents, howling with laughter, the water silky on his face as he flies, lifted by his mother and, on the other side, a man who isn’t his father, a friend of his parents who wears a rubber suit and a beard down to Mark’s eye-level. Afterward, his mother combs his hair with her fingers and the man in the rubber suit plays This Land is Your Land on the banjo and his father sings and they all eat tomato and melty cheese with toast. Mark wears wool socks at night because at night, the desert is cold.

Also at night, the desert bursts to wheeling, mesmeric architectures, multi-level cities come to brilliant, psychotic depths on the sand, constructed of nothing but light and wind and steel. Mark grips his father’s hand and stumbles back through the cold between campfires to their tents, his father in nothing but a pair of gym shorts and a paisley
handkerchief, bending to tuck Mark into a sleeping bag. Only once, their final year in the desert, does Mark stay awake to watch the concluding incineration of burning wicker that he nonetheless anticipates every year with manic, boyish desire. Once that same year, he unzips the door of his parents tent and finds his parents and the man in the rubber suit, except without the rubber suit, the man grinding his hips against his mother’s, her eyelids fluttering, her mouth open. Once, in the blue wash of a cold Nevada dawn, Mark’s mother holds him hard against her skinny chest and says, “We used to share a body.”

* * *

Mark dreams about the auditorium of P.S. 167: Eli Ghosh pulls him up on stage during the school talent show. On stage the lights are blinding, the entire school transformed to a faceless tunnel of white. On stage, the auditorium smells like heat and sawdust and the faint, chemical whiff of something that he imagines at the time might be asbestos, piles of which notoriously line the stage under their feet in an invisible, toxic sea. Only later does he realize, that asbestos is scentless.

“I didn’t sign us up,” Mark hisses towards Eli’s shoulder, even though it’s stating the obvious. No one signed them up; that’s what makes Eli cool, no one ever has to sign him for anything and yet everyone treats his presence as the ultimate validation. When Eli moved to Eastern Parkway freshmen year, the two of them somehow bonded in third period biology and Mark found himself rocketed to unlikely popularity as Eli’s brooding straight man.

For a moment they stand squinting into the light. Then someone pushes a mic into Mark’s hand and Eli whispers “Tell the fighter pilot.”

“You do it,” he says, knees weak.
“Dude, no way.” Eli steps forward and throws out his arms, locks his elbows to grip the invisible control yoke of an airplane. He bends his knees like he’s about to jump and, for a moment, Mark thinks he is. There’s a ripple of laughter from somewhere behind the light. Eli grins.

Mark blinks and resigns himself and says deadpan into the mic, “There’s Pierre, the French fighter pilot.” His voice is far too loud over the sound system, loud enough to suck the air from the auditorium. “He’s, uh, taking his girlfriend out for a ride in his plane. Her name is—” but he can’t remember her name, or any name. The silence is immense. So soon he’s been unmasked. He wills himself to think. “Isabella,” he says, his mother’s, the first he thinks of. “Her name is Isabella. Isabella leans over in the cockpit and says, ‘Pierre, kiss me.’ So Pierre grabs a bottle of red wine and throws it in her face. And she’s like, ‘Pierre, what’re you doing?’ And, uh, Pierre says, ‘I am Pierre, ze fighter pilot! When I have red meat, I drink red wine!’”

The audience giggles. The sound warms him up a little. Eli’s eyes are glassy bright. “They start to kiss,” Mark says. “But Isabella stops him and says, ‘Pierre, kiss me lower.’” Delightfully, Eli mouths the words along with Mark, swiveling his hips and then, smooth as anything, flicking open the top two buttons of his shirt. The students start to get louder; Mark can hear the tidal movements of their amusement. “So Pierre rips open Isabella’s shirt and begins pouring white wine all over her,” Mark says. “And when Isabella yells at him he says, ‘I’m Pierre, ze fighter pilot! When I have white meat, I drink white wine!’” Eli throws up his hands in mock-affront, and Mark feels laughter harden in the back of his throat. He gulps it back. “But as soon as he tries to kiss her,
Isabella stops him and says—” Mark lowers his chin a little, and growls into the mic, “‘Pierre, kiss me lower.’”

Eli’s shirt is suddenly almost all the way unbuttoned, and he glances back at Mark and mouths silently, hurry up, and Mark starts talking faster, which only seems to make it funnier. Eli’s chest is almost hairless and concave, paler than his arms and face.

“So Pierre grabs a bottle of cognac and pours it all over Isabella,” Mark says, “and lights a match and throws it in her lap. She bursts into flame and the whole plane is about to burn up and Isabella is screaming, ‘Pierre, you idiot, what the hell are you doing?’” Even obliquely, Mark can tell that Eli’s face is rubbery with grinning and the crowd gets louder but he still has them and there’s movement in the wings and Mark throws up his hands and shouts, forgetting the mic, “‘I’m Pierre, ze fighter pilot! When I go down, I go down in flames!’” Noise explodes in the auditorium, though he still can’t see anything beyond the light he doesn’t need to. He can feel all of them. Out of nowhere there’s a hand like a vise on Mark’s upper arm and he twists right into Principal Chowden, whom everyone calls Chowderhead, and Eli turns to give Mark a high five and his eyes go round and white, his hand levitating between them like he’s about to give a benediction. The auditorium lights flicker and the house lights come up and then Mark can see everything.

“Mark Glass,” Chowderhead says loudly in his ear.

“Hi,” he answers giddily.

“You need to come with me.”
Eli steps forward, but the principal waves him away. A ball of paper lands on the edge of the stage. “We’ll deal with all this—Mark, your father is in my office. There’s been an accident.”

The talent show is the one and only time Mark speaks directly to the entirety of P.S. 167, and the one and only time the principal speaks directly to Mark, and somehow it occurs to him later, that the two things are cause and effect, that he shouldn’t have used his mother’s name. He shouldn’t have said her name to all of them, not like that.

* * *

Mark dreams about the desert: when his father finally kicks him out of the apartment he gets on a bus to Chicago, but he misses the connection and another one after that and ends up in Texas something like two days later. High above the bus are clouds that look like rocks, voluptuous thunderheads fixed in the sky like dormant volcanoes. If he thinks about it he can say that he misses his transfers because he’s too busy looking at them, the clouds that follow him all the way out of the city and then, in the desert, become the city: far-off and multi-level, billowy civilizations crouched on the cliff of the horizon, their foundations shifting to match the curvature of the earth. Watching the clouds, he can ignore the flashing slideshow of peeling clapboard houses and rusty, laddered railroad tracks; gas stations with pumps like twin gravestones; a field crosshatched in bent stalks.

At the last stop on the route, Mark shrugs his backpack out of the adjoining seat and goes to stand in the dust outside the station. An older man in tight jeans comes and pauses next to him and lights an unfiltered cigarette. The sun is just starting to get low in the sky. Everything turning pink reminds Mark of a poem, his mother’s favorite, he can’t remember the name. He remembers it mostly because it had the word naked in it, and
something about rocks: pink rock, rose rock, raised up or raising maybe, crystal by crystal.

The older man turns to him and says, “Travelling alone?”

“I’m in the wrong desert,” Mark says, as though that’s a reply. He’s still holding a Styrofoam cup of iced tea that he bought at a service plaza three hours ago, the ice long ago melted.

“Where were you trying to get to?”

“Nevada.”

The man chuckles.

But could it be Nevada? There is a desert, and a bus station behind him: four cement walls and three rows of plastic seats, maybe they’re orange, a poster probably advertising GREAT CAREERS WITH THE US BORDER PATROL, which strikes him as funny. He tries to picture the land as though from above, to remember what borders Nevada has with anywhere else, from which direction it can be gotten to.

“Gambling?” says the man knowingly.

Reluctantly, Mark turns his back on the clouds and goes inside to check the bus schedule. The bus station seats are yellow. He goes into the bathroom and splashes water on his face, ignoring his own eyes in the foggy mirror.

Sometimes Mark swears he starts to see language, neon bright filaments sweated out over surfaces like broken spider webs, binding, illuminating, whatever fucking words do to a thing. The whole world is covered in it, the glossy heat of discarded descriptions, the whole of everything damaged and dirty by being overspoken. Sometimes when people speak he can see their little puffs of pollution smoke straight from the source,
sugar-spun ringlets of lavender laughter, gobs of mercury drool. Even his own mouth is lime smudged with it. Seductive and the most sinister, the way everything is slippery with its own name.

He goes back to the front of the station, but all the paper schedules are gone from the display. Through the windows, he can see the light coming pink and golden and, oddly, upwards, as though from out of the earth. A bus appears on the road. Mark doesn’t know where it’s going; he simply points to the conical headlights as they turn into the station and says to the gum-chewing woman behind the counter, “Can I please have a ticket on that one?” The sentence spills down over the counter and curdles in the indentation where change goes.

“What’s your destination, sir?”

“The farthest point,” Mark says, and by some miracle she doesn’t ask anything else. When she exhales he can see the braces on her teeth. He’s almost out of money. He goes outside.

The doors of the bus jerk open and Mark walks up the steps and down the aisle to a window seat in the back. The floor sticks a little on his sneakers; the light slides grainy and arc-shaped across the ceiling. Across the parking lot, a woman jumps out of the passenger seat of a car, clutching a swaddled baby. “Please wait,” she shouts, loud enough that even Mark can hear her. The bus driver is still standing below the row of windows, sorting tickets into a zippered blue pouch, and the woman waves, gratefully it seems, and goes to him. Mark can’t hear what they say, but she gets on the bus with the baby and sits near the front, clutching the strap of a nylon duffel bag in one fist. When he
looks back to the road, the car is already gone. The older man in tight jeans isn’t on the bus.

Maybe the poem had something about quartz. At night the desert is darker than he remembers. But then there aren’t many stars over any worthwhile city. Cities speak their own silhouettes across the sky. The bus lumbers onto the road. Mark’s mother liked poetry, but he doesn’t, not really. Pink rock, rose rock, naked flesh. Mark thinks that if he could remember the words it might help. If the bus could shudder the words out of him, maybe then he could sleep without dreaming. Just for a little while, just until they reach the horizon.
She’s sitting cross-legged on my bed and I say, “Tell me something no one else knows.”

“Like a secret?” She’s sucking on her own hair, maybe not quite purposely. It’s dyed black and cut shorter in back than it is in front, more than a little raggedy. I think she did it herself. I wonder if it’ll ink her tongue black.

“Just like a secret,” I say.

“What makes you think I have secrets?”

I grin. “Because I’m only attracted to girls with secrets.”

“I guess I’m the exception,” she says and pushes the hair back behind one ear.

I stand and pull on my bra from where it’s flung over the top of the nightstand. This is my favorite time, usually, when the cooling room still smells like sex and clean sweat, and I’ve been eyeballing this one for a while. But she seems spaced out, now, and I’m losing interest fast.

“You want coffee or something?” I ask, gesturing to the door. Offering coffee is usually a polite way to get a woman to leave. And it’s good to stay polite. There aren’t enough of us here that second fucks aren’t always a potential future outcome.

“It was my brother’s birthday yesterday,” she says instead of answering. “There’s your secret.” She leans forward.

I noticed earlier, she has a gingery birthmark on her butt. It matches the rocks outside my trailer window. “I was thinking more like, a secret about you.”

She shrugs. “I might be the only one who celebrates it.”
“Your brother doesn’t celebrate his own birthday?”

“He’s dead.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, trying to sound as really sorry as I can. She’s still wearing only tube socks, and I have to admit, I like the smooth line her calves make disappearing into those socks. “When’d he die?” I say to keep things from getting awkward.

“Last year. Right before I moved here.” I think about asking if the two are connected but she laughs and says, “Even when he was alive no one remembered his birthday. Baby of the family, I guess. My mom was the only one who remembered everything and she died when I was a kid.”

I can’t tell if I want to know any more about all her dead people. I say, “That’s hard.”

“It’s okay.” She shrugs. “Right after she died was the first time I was out here.”

“Out here as in, the desert?” I ask, and then, when she nods, despite myself: “Why’d you come back?”

* * *

We came in on the blunt hot end of a magic carpet, the road unrolling wooly with rising heat from under the dented bumper of my father’s Ford. A desert runner, a straight line behind us that ended flapping on the stoop of our front door upstate.

After my mom died, my dad decided he had to do something to prove he could save all our lives, or maybe just his own. On the front end of fall break he packed me and my two brothers into the car with pillows and a cooler full of beer. By the time we got to the desert all the beer was gone, and it seemed like we’d been gone longer than I’d ever been anywhere before. I imagined the scrub grass grasping up across our basement
windows back home, neighborhood trees with leaves glowing brown and then shriveled like the skin of dying cavemen, the cardigan I’d left draped over the back of my desk chair beginning its glacial descent onto the floor of my bedroom.

We’d moved upstate after my mom died, purportedly to be closer to her parents. But during this, our first Thanksgiving holiday without her, my maternal grandparents had gone into the city without us, to have dinner with people my grandfather knew, probably middling retired ad men and their wives. Dad was furious.

I don’t think so, no. I think it was desperation misread as maliciousness. We confused those two things a lot in my family.

So anyway, we kept driving and driving. For two days without stopping, give or take, until the earth turned reddish beneath our flight. I rode in the middle of the bench seat in the back. None of us liked to sit next to Dad. Through the window the side of the road was crosshatched in dried stalks, railroad tracks, busted gas stations with pumps like gravestones, all of it powdered in red dust. America’s been dreaming its own falling-down for a long time.

I don’t think that’s melodramatic. I think it’s pretty easy to see if you’re paying attention.

Wasn’t it like Mars, Leo? I asked. Leo: my littler brother, obsessed with space like a lot of kids were back then.

I pointed out the piles of stones, heaped along the side of the road. They’re called karens, I said. I was trying to distract him. We were constantly trying to distract each other then.
My older brother Saul said, *Cairns*. They’re called cairns, Linda, don’t confuse the kid.

Leo said, I’m not a kid, but quietly. Dad always commanded absolute silence when he was driving, which we obeyed a moderate percentage of the time and disobeyed when we did with resolute, electric energy. My dad never liked driving, something to do with an auto accident in his youth. I’d heard my parents fighting about it once when I was a lot littler. Some girl had died. One of those stories I’d probably only know if my mother had lived.

Well, it still looks like Mars, I said. Mars after all the humans move there but they don’t survive, so everyone is dead and it’s just empty houses and schools and offices. The whole planet is a museum of failed civilization.

No, not as a metaphor for my family. Christ. It’s just—like I said, we were trying to distract each other. How is that even supposed to—Christ.

No, not angry. I just wouldn’t think about it like that.

On the second or third morning we pulled into the lodge. Not much more than a parking lot of crumbling concrete slabs and scrub grass sewn with rusty camper hookups. Behind the office building were three minimally furnished log cabins. The whole thing was on the edge of some national park and owned by a man with hair like Larry Fine. Not a well-known destination, as it turns out.

The only source of heat in the cabins was the fireplace. We didn’t know yet, how cold the desert is at night. Larry gestured at the pyramid of wood by the door and asked if we’d like a wood chopping demonstration. I don’t doubt we looked that helpless but Dad was offended to be asked.
After he paid Larry, Dad sent me to get the pillows and blankets and make up the cots. Saul was in charge of organizing the food. Leonard, Dad said, was going to learn how to chop wood.

When Saul and I walked into the cabin we realized: only three cots, springs on metal frames and a canvas mattress, too small for any of us to share even with Leo. I guess I’m sleeping on the ground, Saul said.

Though he probably would have slept on the floor regardless. Saul was that kind of kid. Oh, I don’t know. He just had odd habits for a teenage boy, especially back then.

While Saul unloaded canned goods from the trunk, I went around to the back of the cabin. My dad was leaning over Leo, their four hands on the handle of an axe. Dad counted to three and the axe swung wildly up against the sky, from which it descended like a horizontal pendulum. The axe seemed to control them rather than vise-versa. I could see Leo flinching when the blade went into the wood but the whole thing looked remarkably smooth to me, divisive without being destructive.

Dad saw me and called, Linda, come and try, but I turned and ran back into the cabin pretending I hadn’t heard.

Saul and Dad made toast with spam and baked beans, using a cast iron pan my father produced and which none of us had ever seen. We ate in a semi-circle around the fire, crouched on the cots.

Aren’t we s’posed to have turkey? Leo asked.

I shushed him, but Saul said, What d’you think the astronauts ate on Snoopy, huh Buddy? Thanksgiving in space is probably one-hundred-percent spam.

I shot Saul a look over Leo’s head.
You really think so? Leo said.

Sure, Saul said.

I bet we’re the only family on earth eating Thanksgiving like they do in space, Leo said.

It’s true, not many people eat spam on Thanksgiving, Saul said, looking hard at Dad as he spoke.

Without missing a beat Dad said, If you want to become an astronaut, Leonard, you should join up. Like Saulie here.

I watched Dad and Saul stare at each other. Even then I was aware of something hard and unnamable materializing between them.

I didn’t join, Saul said. I got drafted.

And maybe you’ll fly planes just like all those astro boys did, Dad said.

Saulie’s gonna be an astronaut? asked Leo.

They don’t send yids to space, Buddy, said Saul.

After dinner Dad let us play a few rounds of gin rummy and then next thing I was waking up shivering in the darkness. The desert at dawn was purplish all over, the sky the same color as the ground.

I went outside and Saul was already there, sitting cross-legged in the dirt some ten feet from the back wall of the cabin with his hands on his knees. I stood even with him, blinking hard as the sun came slipping up over the horizon line.

How long’ve you been out here, I said.

When he didn’t answer I looked down and realized his eyes were closed. Saul, I said, Wake up. You fell asleep outside.
But he was already awake. Without opening his eyes he said, Linda, don’t let them put you to sleep when I leave.

You aren’t leaving for ages, I said, confused. It was too cold for me to sleep.

Saul opened his eyes and grinned at me. He had a good smile for an older brother. Very toothy, like my dad’s.

In the sunlight every scrubby plant was made of golden thread and honey drips. I remember feeling like I was on the edge of an old world. Even the sunrise only illuminated something nearly unchanging. I guess I’ve always taken a certain amount of reassurance in the long view.

Saul, I asked him, Think we’d survive if we got lost out there?

We aren’t built to survive, said Saul.

Then he stood and brushed the dirt from the backs of his legs and went back into the cabin. Dad was awake and making instant coffee on the fireplace. I shook Leo awake and gave him dry breakfast cereal and our last orange. Leo wanted to play tag but Dad made us get back in the car almost immediately.

Just before the state line we started seeing signs for a lookout point, and for some reason Dad pulled off and parked the Ford in the adjacent parking lot. A creosote-strewn dust plane with a wooden platform attached to it, with a metal railing and one of those face-shaped fifty cent machines to magnify the view. Below the platform I could see the tangled thread of a massive red riverbed, not like the Grand Canyon or anything but still pretty impressive to three kids who’d never left the Tri-State area.

Why’d we have to stop here, Leo said, kicking the ground.

We’re on a road trip, Dad said.
I hate roads, Leo said. And then, with more vehemence: I hate this place. I want to go home.

If my mom had been alive I think she would have laughed and ordered us to line up against the railing for a picture. She had an old film camera that sat for years on a bookshelf in my dad’s office. The final undeveloped roll is probably still in there.

Dad said, I would have buried your mother here.

I remember looking down at the toes of my white sneakers when he said it. They were stained with red dirt. They were pinkish forever after that trip, cottony pink like raw meat. I had gained Dad’s ancient binoculars around my neck, but I didn’t use them. I felt like the cliffs were watching me, and I didn’t want to look.

If I had looked up I would have seen Dad’s cliff face profile, his craggy brow, the caves of his eyes. I would never again see him crawl out of those caves, if you want to know the truth. He’d always be in there, the flame of his campfire pushed to smoldering against the soot-blackened back wall.

Your mother felt alive here, he said. I was alive here, too. Then, after a pause, he said, Maybe she still is.

Then Dad turned and walked back to the car. The three of us stood there for a minute. Leo looked up at me and said, Is Mom actually still alive?

I wasn’t sure what to say. I still don’t know exactly what Dad was talking about.

Saul said, Nothing is alive out here. You should know that. Nothing and no one.

He looked at me when he said it, even though he was talking to Leo.

Leo started cry. By then we were all semi-used to whatever thing was growing tight and twisted inside of Saul, like the rubber band propeller in one of those gliding
I stood there watching my little brother cry until Saul yelled at us to hurry up.

* * *

She stops talking.

“Is that it?” I say, and then immediately regret it. I say quickly, “You introduced yourself to me as Melinda.”

“Right.”

“But just now you called yourself Linda.”

“My brothers called me that, always. I never really went by Melinda until my first girlfriend told me it was prettier. She said it balanced out my personality or something.”

I sit on the edge of the bed. I think about reaching for her hand, or maybe just brushing it with my fingers. “So you like it out here?”

She cocks her head to the side, watching me. “Weren’t you going to make coffee?”

I can’t tell if she’s answered my question or not. I say, “Look, you don’t have to tell me anything. But I can’t help wondering, since I don’t really have a traditional family or anything—” I’m holding my breath but inelegantly. I came here so long ago and it’s hard now, to remember in my gut the thing that drove me out. Something is crystallizing in our interaction but I don’t know what it is. I wonder if it’s something I’ve been waiting to feel for a long time.

Melinda raises an eyebrow. She has a funny way of talking, I’ve noticed. I haven’t really seen a person do a thing like it before, pressing her tongue subtly up
against her front two teeth. It gives the ends of some words a funny lisping stop, because her tongue seems so eager to get back up there, back to start again against her teeth.
Fear or fascination can cause our minds to expand in unexpected ways, I remember his father saying on the sidewalk in front of the abortion clinic where he took me and Andrés every weekend. When we were children, the sidewalk was a fascination: fissured, crusty like cheese, the spackled surface of a foreign moon. In the hottest part of the day, Andrés and I were permitted to lay down our signs in the clinic yard and play an improvised form of hopscotch across the sidewalk, bouncing slowly over the cracks like astronauts until a car came into the clinic parking lot.

In the heat everything seemed to expand, the air tumefying from between the twiggy trees and trembling upward out of the brown earthen squares beneath them. His father watched us with seeming approval, never laying down his own sign. Andrés always informed me before playing, that hopscotch was a girl’s game, but he still played. Even during the hottest summers I don’t remember either of us complaining much. We held the same pair of signs, both hand-lettered, reading I AM SACRED. In one of my earliest memories, Andrés wraps the wooden handle of my sign in scotch tape, to lock in the splinters. I don’t think I ever stopped loving him after that.

Whenever a girl started toward us down the sidewalk, she never avoided stepping on the cracks.

Now on my twenty-fifth birthday I stand over his father’s bed at St. Augustine’s. His father asks repeatedly if it’s time yet to visit the moon clinic. He grabs my wrist so
hard that water sloshes out of the paper cone I filled at the hallway water fountain. Is it
time, Lydia? he asks. I have to get in before it’s too late. I’m ready. Is it time?

We’re already there, I say finally, defeated. Ask me about getting out. That’s the
hard part.

Where’s Andrés? he asks.

He’s dead, I say. He died.

You were always my troublemaker, he says. Andrés never gives any lip.

He’s dead, Gabbo, I say again.

Who’s dead? his father says, shivering miserably toward the window. Without
waiting for my answer he adds, I don’t remember anything anymore.

I’m twenty-five years old and it only just occurred to me, that his father might be
the luckiest of the three of us.

When you know something for certain, it makes you strong, I think I remember
his father saying to us in the evenings after dinner. There was a windowless antechamber
off the kitchen, maybe it had once been a pantry, where his father installed a moth-eaten
plaid chair and a lamp and an altar of whichever six or seven books he was reading at the
time. After dinner every night, he read there for hours, often aloud. In later years, after he
figured out that I was paying attention, he read aloud every night and was always a little
hoarse.

The books were everywhere in that apartment, thousands of them probably, on
plywood shelves and piled in milk crates, stacked on the refrigerator and the toilet tank
and tilted in rows three-deep along the baseboards, vertical like the labyrinths of
dominoes we built, sprawled belly-up on the linoleum floor under the kitchen table, methodically walling ourselves in like a pair of confused Montresors.

Sometimes now I read aloud to his father. For the first year after he moved to St. Augustine’s, I read our favorites. We took turns choosing: Aristotle, Einstein, Pascal en Français, Bécquer en Español, Scheler in English translation. Now he insists paperbacks only, almost all pulp mysteries or thrillers that shed ink onto my hands, stories he spent a lifetime forbidding us. Now while I’m reading, the nuns come lingering in the doorway like shadows to listen until the light is gone and they are forced to shoo me from his room. The nuns at St. Aug’s are tall, scrubbed Amazons in curtains, wobbling down the linoleum halls in triangular formation like bowling pins. I don’t care for them, but in deference to their presence I wear a bra and no mascara.

I wonder if they find, as I do, that beliefs hang on a person like veils, never replaced but growing steadily heavier, harder to see through.

Even after his father falls asleep, I keep reading for the nuns, determined to hold them in thrall for as long as possible. I read dramatically, speaking fast. I do the police in different voices. I imagine Andrés laughing.

Out on the sidewalk, his father was never aggressive with them, the skinny round girls who came bearing alien offerings. More than once we stood bewildered as he chased off a truckload of people from a neighboring town, balding men and women who came with stacks of cheaply-bound bibles and laminated posters. They don’t understand their own pilgrimage, I remember him saying. Or maybe he just grumbled, Rednecks.

Like a sphinx guarding the Egyptian temples, when the girls appeared he asked only questions.
When Andrés and I saw our girl for the first time, she was alone, stepping off the bus in rubber sandals and a threadbare sweatshirt, her backpack unzipped, a stack of neon bright paper under one arm. It was early fall, or the end of summer, and her braided hair was dyed to a black, even darker than mine was naturally, the strands so dry they sucked light instead of reflecting it like a tattoo on the air.

His father said, Will you talk to us for a minute?

She paused, shifting the stack of papers to one hip. She looked at us. She wore gloves with the fingertips cut off, and indigo nail polish. How old are you? she asked me. It wasn’t the first time one of them had talked to us, but they usually said things like, I almost feel bad for you or Your dad is a real asshole. Andrés always answered for both of us. Fourteen, he said clearly.

How old is your sister? she said, glancing at me.

Half-sister, he said. Fifteen.

Not much younger than you, suggested his father.

The girl ignored him. She said to Andrés, I’m starting a meeting for ex-fundamentalists. Kind of a combo support group social thing. It’s on the community college campus. You know where that is, right? You’re a little young but—

She handed Andrés one of the papers.

What makes you think we’re fundamentalists? his father interrupted.

You think your God dictates right and wrong for everyone, she said.

You don’t believe in right and wrong?

You don’t believe in a woman’s right to choose.

Human rights depend on a belief in human worth.
I don’t need God to tell me about human worth.

What’s your name? Andrés asked suddenly. I turned and saw the way he was looking at her. I’d never seen him look at anyone like that. Certainly not at me.

My name is Kaitlin, the girl said. Kate.

I’m Andrés, he said.

After that sometimes we took turns walking slowly the perimeter of the clinic property, squinting across the street, hoping to see her. When I eventually got accepted to community college the admissions counselor who helped me register for the SATs told me I had a funny way of talking. When I told his father I’d been accepted on scholarship for my perfect scores, he said, If this is what you really want.

Andrés didn’t say anything.

I started studying English literature. Then Spanish literature, then anthropology, then philosophy, then geography. I worked at a diner near campus in the evenings after I finished class. I bought a car and then moved across town. On nights I worked Andrés usually rode the bus across town to sit with me after closing at the picnic table in the back parking lot. We ate onion rings, battered hoops in a paper nest as translucent with grease as the onion skins themselves, as the skin on the insides of his wrists where the maps of his veins were visible. My heart jumped whenever our fingers brushed.

I wanted him to keep knowing everything I knew.

Do you think it’s possible, I asked him, that a person’s existence can be justified only on psychological characteristics, not moral ones?

What would you think, I asked him, If I told you that every girl in my dorm has already had sex?
Do you think it’s possible, I asked him, that Gabbo really fucked us up?

Sometimes he asked if I’d seen the girl. We’d never been able to find her again, or her group.

It wasn’t until he told me he was leaving, that I realized what I hadn’t told him. By then he was wearing his hair tall, a greasy swelling like a flexed bicep on the ridge of his skull. It was spring, just warm enough to sit outside. After he told me he was leaving, I realized there was only one thing I’d ever known for sure. Andrés, I said, I think there’s something between us.

He didn’t look at me. He said, You mean the table?

I couldn’t say anything. He said, C’mon, Lyd. You knew this was coming. You told me to get out while I still can.

I said, I don’t remember saying that.

He said, Don’t tell my father.

I gave him money for a bus ticket and extra. That was the last time I saw him.

I imagine all the time, what I would do if I could relive that conversation. I tell a different story, and I don’t give him any money. I don’t give him anything, and when he tries to speak I cut him off, pull him up by the arm, bump his knees on the picnic table, scattering the onion rings across the pavement in crumbs. I pull him toward the road and then down the sidewalk, ignoring the wind, ignoring the trees or the cracks in the cement, until we’re ten blocks east of the diner.

Gross, Lydia, he says when he realizes where I’m taking him.

The building is still unmarked. There’s no one outside.

Maybe it’s not like we think, I say.
We walk inside. It’s easy as anything, to sit side by side in beige plastic chairs the same color as the walls and the floor and the ceiling. It’s silent. He squeezes my hand, a pilgrim’s kiss. We wait for someone to call my name.

I can’t really guess at what they look like, but I imagine them in dark clothes, perhaps the pleated robes of an exorcist. They undress me gently, help me into a clean paper gown, and bid me lay down on their altar. When they ask me, What do you want to offer? I will say, everything. Take everything. I’ve heard stories of what they’ll do to my insides, from the bottom up, but this time they start with my mind. They have kind faces.

When I come out of the room, I am empty. I’ve forgotten everything I’ve ever known. Andrés stands, holding out his arms to me, and says, I’ve always known that you’re the only one who can save me.

Now on my twenty-fifth birthday I am leaning over his father’s bed at St. Augustine’s. His father is awake, but I am too exhausted to keep reading. No more stories today, I say. Visiting hours are almost over.

As I speak I hear a noise in the hall. On the threshold of his father’s room, the nuns appear, holding a cake between them, white-frosted, full as the moon, a grocery store cake reading HAPPY BIRTHDAY LYDIA in purple letters. In the waning light it levitates on a sea of human hands, wreathed in flame.

No, whimpers his father, I take it back. I’m not ready.

I don’t reply. Instead I reach for his hand and hold on as hard as I can, pretending it’s enough, pretending I might once have had the tools to make a real life.
The first time Saul saw Bella it was as though from across a crowded room. Here she was in two pairs of socks, Isabella padding down their hall, tugging a deflated suitcase empty mostly but for a tangle of underwear and a pair of silk dance shoes wrapped in coffee-colored tissue. And a stack of postcards not even postcards, just ashy slices of cardboard without stamps or pictures, elaborate with an alphabet Saul couldn’t read. Isabella wasn’t even her real name.

How was he supposed to know, when his brother Leo said, “My friend’s sister needs a place to stay,” that Leo had already offered the stranger his bed and himself along with it.

From across a crowded room because Saul’s ability to see her seemed to depend entirely on the confluence of small events. Exactly un-reproducible, is what: the flicker of a pigeon on the sill, a piano being tuned behind a featureless wall, their shadows like a silhouette cut from a brown paper bag. The future would never fall into exact place again, like the pins in a lock, to reveal her so exactly. Later on, up close, she would always seem abstracted in comparison.

From across a crowded room because in his own oblique way, Saul had every intention of leaving without ever learning her name.

There was no question, it wasn’t a good idea to love his brother’s—but what was she, really? How many nights already had Saul spent curled on Leo’s couch, his feet dangling over the armrest. How many mornings had he stumbled over the back of the
couch and out the apartment’s only window with the ridges of corduroy still imprinted in his cheek, the pigeons berzerking into the air in front of him. How many afternoons had he spent crouched on the fire escape like a lidless, stoned gargoyle, the former tenant’s cigarette butts curled like larvae on the facing side of the bodega awning below him.

He’d always believed, without thinking it exactly, that he was immune to change. But perhaps it had only been the burden of what he couldn’t do alone: Bella pulled him into bed and her lips fell open against his sternum, and on the other side his heart did the same. Afterward, he stumbled from the apartment and wandered into the park. In the fading summer light bicycles went around the track, blinking red lights each guided by a mind as insular, as fast and as fragile, as a bottle being filled on a factory conveyer belt.

***

Leo had offered Saul the bed once, perfunctorily, early on. Saul’d refused. At least, that’s what he told me.

First time I met Saul was only a little after my dad died in the terrorist attack. Dad’d finally gotten something stable, maintenance team in the north tower and the job not even a week old when it came down on top of him. I’m sure that even if he made it out he went right back in to pull people to safety. I’ll never have proof, of course, but he was that kind of guy.

And I couldn’t go it without him. He and I had already been this close to being evicted and from our third place in as many years. No one at school was about to help me, my only aunt was long gone and her only son busy killing himself on drugs. I could spend what I had on a one-way bus ticket out of town or lie about my age and try for somewhere they wouldn’t try and stick me in the system.
Start hearing things, though, and these routine matters aren’t so easy.

“Silvia,” said the abandoned sneaker, mate gone, treads gone, laces gone, nothing but damp canvas and bunch of rusty rivets. And again, “Silvia,” said the sneaker and the whole universe was the sneaker and I grabbed the universe and hurled it upwards, not knowing not caring whatever happened and shouting, “Fuck you, too!” at the top of my lungs.

The night I met Saul I’d stumbled to the park, to where all these blanquitos in spandex were going in circles, trying to pretend that summer wasn’t about to give up the ghost. I went right in the front of one of them. It was Saul saw that cycler coming for me and pulled me out. When we tripped over each other I was pretty sure that he was the first full-on human shaped construction of my insanity. But then he looked at me oddly and said, “Isabella?” and I knew I couldn’t have made him up. No hallucination would ever get my name wrong.

***

Bella began every day bent at the hips over the back of formerly Saul’s couch, knees on the cushions and elbows on the sill of the open window while she smoked and shooed away the pigeons. Saul told her, just smoke inside like a person and she laughed and said, “Your brother’s problem,” which Saul assumed meant Leo’s asthma. Saul suggested she join him on the fire escape and Bella laughed louder and said, “It makes me feel like I am to fall.” Then she forgot to shut the window and avian mites migrated efficiently off the pigeons and into the couch. Leo installed metal spikes on the sill but the pigeons only nested around them. Bella said, “I sense the spears are for bigger than this animal.”
“There is one couch in this damn apartment,” Saul complained to Leo while she was in the shower. “And it was mine first.”

Leo shrugged without looking up from his comic book. “I pay the rent, Saulie,” he said. Then Bella came out of the shower wearing one of Leo’s old t-shirts and went into the bedroom and Leo followed her. Saul pulled a joint out of his wallet and lit it and lay back on the couch and looked at his own bare toes, which appeared to be the same color as the wall. Everything he could see was the same color as everything else.

Even though Saul was no expert in love affairs, he liked to think he was practically a professional compared to his little brother. It wasn’t that Leo never brought a date home, but they were usually midtown girls he met while on lunch break from his job sorting mail, always a little dull-eyed or stiff-haired, harnessed in garters or throttling weak drinks, embarrassed by runs in their stockings. Leo’s dates made Saul embarrassed. He was embarrassed by their gentleness and even more by Leo’s desire for it. Most of all he was embarrassed by his own standoffishness, his own lack, his own disinterest in touching.

Bella’s hair was dark red, with the pleasing disorder of something beautiful that had been unraveled, a medieval tapestry fallen to ruin. Saul imagined climbing vines come to life if she braided it, or maypoles, or scenes from Shakespeare.

* * *

Saul realized right away, of course, that I was not Isabella. Maybe our resemblance was a trick of the season, of summer ending when the air becomes weighted like the whole city is trying to shut your eyes for you.
Or maybe the whole city was just as mixed up as I was right then, all of us disintegrating like ash and Saul too addled to mistake me for anyone but his own redhead.

In any case, I growled and shook off his hand. Even rapidly maddening I could do that much. Saul threw a disappointed look. Of course I wasn’t her.

Then my dented and demented glimmered it to me: a young white man with brown hair, standing where I am now. The edge of the bicycle track in the fading light, and the guy only recently escaped here from his brother’s bed, where he’s just spent the day with his brother’s—well, like a parenthetical her body opened to him and he closed her and between them her name becomes the great potential subtext of his entire life—

and then something else, a blurry man in a windbreaker and work boots, a ringlet-headed kid beside him in a homemade Ghostbusters costume which is a five-gallon water jug and a plastic hose plus maybe three or four belts—

“How’d you do that?” Saul said, looking startled.

The something else was me, of course, on Halloween the year I was six. The last holiday before my mom left. You gotta be one to know one, Dad always said, and I guess if by one he meant human my life has become entirely his proof. He’d been so close.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said.

“I swear I know you from somewhere,” Saul said.

“Of course,” I said. Of course you also have to add in my knowing, suddenly, that Saul was my dad and dad was me and I was Bella and and and

* * *

In September Leo told Saul that he’d asked Bella to marry him. “I asked Bella to marry me,” Leo said, “and we’re going to courthouse this weekend and I want you there.”
Since Bella had pulled him into Leo’s bed, Saul’d been avoiding them both, working odd carpentry jobs and graveyard shifts at the parking garage and equipment hauling for the magazine photographer who lived down the hall. He didn’t know what to say to his brother.

“I shouldn’t have to tell you,” Leo said, “What this means to me.” Then Leo left for work and Saul went onto the fire escape and the light came slipping down the side of the building. He saw Bella come into the kitchen wearing nylon gym shorts and an extra-large fisherman’s sweater that the brothers had stolen out of a Salvation Army donation box in some distant past. Saul waited until she began chopping onions, then pushed open the window and stepped onto the couch and announced, swaying, “You can’t marry my brother.”

Bella nodded. “And for what reasons?”

“You just can’t.”

“Yet I ask him and he agrees.”

“You ask?” He was startled. Saul had heard many definitions of the word love, and they all raised too many unspeakable questions. He said, already knowing the answer, “Did you tell Leo what happened?”

Bella shook her head. “When I get here, it is said to us as the only way to stay,” she said as though he hadn’t spoken.

“Us?”

“My cousin. He works in the mailroom with your brother, says he needs person to marry a girl. Leo tells, yes. He will do it.” She paused to turn and shuffle the onions into a pan. “Why do you think I am coming here to your apartment the first time?”
“Why didn’t I know about this?”

She shrugged. “Maybe because you are yelling at Leo if you know.”

“Why would—” Saul said, lowering his voice self-consciously. “I barely talk around here, why would—”

Bella gave him a funny look. “To marry your brother,” she said, “How are you saying, I need it.”

“So you didn’t tell him.”

“I can’t go back,” Bella said.

“You’re an operator.” Saul leaned toward her. Even with the onions sweating on the stove he could smell her bittersweet, almost medicinal heat. He could feel his unhappiness transforming into something hungrier. “Leo might feel differently, y’know,” Saul said. “If he knew what happened.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said. “But I can’t go back.”

Saul hesitated. Then, “You could marry me instead,” he said, no longer able to tell who he was protecting.

Something deflated between them. “Oh, you are not asking, Saulie,” she said as though scolding him. “I know this the minute I see you.”

“But what if I did,” he insisted. “What would you say?”

“What if,” she said, and then leaned forward and didn’t quite kiss him so much as laugh into his mouth.

* * *

So that’s the story of how I whacked out and started seeing people’s minds. Saul called it all kinds of things: Silvia’s glimmer sight, Silvia’s killer brain, Silvia’s cosmic empathy.
That first time, though, he called it intuition. “Some kind of magical intuition,” he said, sitting beside me on a bench at the bicycle track.

I said that to my knowledge intuition didn’t usually come at a person complete with cinematography and I wasn’t looking for a diagnosis. Besides, Saul’s had been the first memory I’d seen and maybe he’d be the last.

I made to get up and leave but Saul said, “See if you can do it again.”

To which I replied, “Who the hell are you?”

“Right,” Saul said. “You’ve gotta be what, sixteen?”

When I didn’t answer, he pulled a business card out of his pocket and turned it over. Then he wrote an address on the back with a golf pencil retrieved from another pocket. “I don’t live here anymore,” he said. “I couldn’t take it.” He handed me the business card. “This is where I live now.” The address was way up north. The business card was for a record store uptown.

I didn’t say anything. It was almost dark. Saul said, “I have a son only a little older than you. He doesn’t know I exist.”

“The girl with red hair.”

Saul nodded. “His mother.”

But the weird thing was, I’d already known that. Two days later I was on a bus to a place I’d never been. It seemed like my only choice at the time, because I wanted to see him again. I wanted to try and see my father again.

* * *

Saul borrowed a jacket from Leo and put on his least ripped pair of pants. He got on the train with them and even sat down, or tried to. Leo was grinning, tapping his feet on the
floor of the train, his fingers against the railing, against his own knees, up and down Bella’s arm until she flattened his hand under one of her own. Saul pretended not to see them touch. When the train went underground everything made a little more sense, if only because the psychic weight of the city helped hold him closed. Bella wore a navy dress with bare legs. The shoulder pads in the dress made her look hunched over.

They exited at Chambers Street and walked toward the courthouse without speaking. Saul knew he couldn’t do it by the end of the second block. There was some scaffolding, men washing windows. When they crossed the street Saul bent as though to tie his shoe, then stood and stepped sideways into the brief press of people. It was too easy. He walked down a side street, wondering how long it would take Bella to realize he’d given them the slip.

A wind came down hard through the narrows between buildings and he hunched forward against it, pulling his jacket closed. He passed an art gallery. In the window was a huge black and white photograph, two Saguaro cactuses with their characteristic hooked arms raised as though begging for reprieve.

He imagined she touched his arm. What was that, the sound of a popping tire and then, she pushes him hard. He didn’t know she was so strong. He falls forward and behind them a yellow city cab jumps the curb with a grinding noise, its driver’s shocked face just visible over the wheel. They land, flung over each other, unhurt, and she says something he can’t understand and touches his face. There’s glass everywhere. She speaks again and he realizes the word that she’s repeating is his own name.

There was glass everywhere but it was only a broken bottle and his reflection in the gallery window. He imagined trying to tell Leo—but what was there to say. Maybe it
would be easier if they were all dead, if some disaster just fell down them. The rumble of the train could be an earthquake; the city could fold up out of the ground, flagpoles snapping like bones, skyscrapers exploding in columns of ash. Maybe Leo would die and he would survive with Bella holding him as everything crumbled.

“Watch where you’re goin, kid.” A man in a bowler pushed by Saul. He’d come much further than he intended. The wind was even stronger now, and cold. In front of him was at the crescent of concrete marking the very lowest point of the island. It struck Saul that in all of his morbid fantasies, Bella was the one saving him. He walked across the grass to the railing overlooking the river and pulled off his jacket and held it like a flag over the railing. It flapped hard and when he let it go it flew suspended for much longer than he expected, twisting out over the pilings and onto the water.

* * *

What’s funny about knowing the past is how easy it becomes to defend every possible ending for it. How easy it becomes, to fool ourselves into imagining that our story will be the one to play out differently. Saul says I’m like the vine on the trunk of a tree, which instead of growing toward the light only bends to grip its own roots.

Sometime in the future my father stands on the edge of the train platform, looking for me. I’ve disappeared into the crowd. I used to do that when I was angry at him, when he wouldn’t let me do whatever it was I thought I was old enough for. I’d twist my arm out of his grip and slide easily into the dangerous kind of anonymity that only a crowded subway platform can afford. There’s no chance it didn’t torture him.

He never called for help. He’d always go back to wherever we lived at the time and sit at the table and wait, and somehow I always made it back home and
The whole thing about living is that it’s basically an assurance of death. To be alive is to spend a lot of time being just one delicate urge away from getting right back into the earth. When I knocked on Saul’s door he only smiled and said, “You’re back.”

he always told me to be grateful that I had someone waiting for me. As though he alone had called me home again and of course I don’t think he’s been proven wrong yet.
I.

Two weeks after she won a Pushcart Prize, I married him. For our honeymoon I suggested the desert because of her story, so after the wedding we drove to a national park on the border of Mexico, threading his station wagon between the striated humps of rock that pass for mountains everywhere west of San Antonio. Camping on the first night, we were awakened by a geology student whose friends had hiked into the canyon and never returned.¹

I hate this story but I can’t stop writing it.

It would be convenient if I could say: I knew we’d end up married when I met him. But when I met him, he was her boyfriend. I was still in graduate school. A classmate introduced us at a book signing, pulling me over to the cheese plates and asking me, “Have you met Alex Tate and his girlfriend Aviva? Alex is the only person I know more obsessed with David Foster Wallace than you.” Alex was attractive, freckled, distracted-looking. Aviva was short, with short hair. She said, “I mostly go by Avi,” and then, to him, “We’ll be late if we don’t get outta here.” I don’t remember where they were going to.

After they broke up I ran into him at a party. He asked for my number and then he took three weeks to call, which gave our mutual acquaintances plenty of time to warn me:

¹ Her story was set on a nonspecific frontier, where a small cadre of post-apocalyptic humans determinedly rebuilt civilization in a red rock desert, sucking manufactured oxygen into their lungs down tender, fibrous tubes by which they remained forever tethered to their own homes. When she found out she won the Pushcart, he was the first person she called.
that Alex Tate is too smart and too insensitive; he likes to pick fights in bars; his posts on Facebook are like absurdist poetry; he’s a bad tipper. After the wedding I changed my name even though he said he didn’t care.\(^2\)

Out in the desert, the clouds were high-altitude and stirrup shaped, snagged sideways in the sky. The ground was flat and tan, the shoulder of the road piled in small rocks. While I drove, he watched the clouds limbo across the passenger-side window. Our wedding hadn’t been chaotic but I was still glad it was over. “If you could have the ability to read minds, would you want it?” I asked him.

He put his hand on my knee without taking his eyes off the clouds. “Could I control it? Because if it was just getting barraged by people’s thoughts all day every day, no way. My own thoughts make me crazy enough.”

“I think it would have to be something you couldn’t control,” I said. “You either get everything, all the time, or nothing.”

“Then no,” he said. “Nothing.”

We stopped in Marathon, a one-street town seventy miles from the border of the park. He pumped gas while I wandered along the road, past a hardware store and a bar with boarded-up windows. The scrub grass was flecked with bluets. At the end of the street, a trio of spindly horses made from soldered-together truck parts and a sign:

\[^2\] Her story was told in first person. The unnamed narrator had recently been diagnosed with the early stages of the eponymous Wild Mind, a survivor’s mental illness wherein the sufferer began to recognize oneself in an uninhabitable world, in the red rocks and unbreathable air. In the opening scene, the unnamed narrator begged her husband to unstrap her breathing tube while he sobbed. Your mind is playing tricks on you, he begged her. It’s a compulsion. It was unclear whether Wild Mind represented salvation or destruction, the dissolution of humanity, or the evolution of human consciousness into something—else. I read it as an identification with that which could not recognize the self in return. You depress me, cried the unnamed narrator’s husband: I am depressed.

To which the unnamed narrator replied, I’m the one that should be depressed. But she didn’t make him do it.
MARATHON, TX: POP 433. Scrawled across the road in spray paint: WELCUM, TRAMPS! though everything else looked startlingly clean. Behind me, the clapboard gas station sloped up against the sky like an animal skull.

Alex was the first person Aviva told about the prize.³ On Skype with him she’d cackled almost hysterically over the words *your fiancé*. From the way he laughed I could tell he couldn’t hear her pain. Listening to their conversation through the bedroom door made me shudder with jealousy, and fear of something I lacked and didn’t want, and wanted.⁴

Back at the gas station, an elderly couple loitered by a tan car, a woman and a man in cargo pants and expensive-looking boots. Alex appeared behind them. His hair was spiky with sweat, and he’d knotted a bandanna around his forehead. “They’re French,” he said. “They were freaking out.”

“I don’t get it,” I said.

“Their cards don’t work at the pump,” he said. “European credit cards, I guess. They were gonna be stranded.”

“You filled their tank?”

“Yep.”

“You’re the best,” I said, meaning it.

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³ When it won I’d already read her story so many times I could basically recite it verbatim. One of the best things I’d read in years and so I read it purely to quantify its flaws: literal central conceit; lyricism masquerading as emotional specificity; boring reliance on the ennui of privileged twentysomething life; too confessional. I wondered constantly whether we would be best friends in some alternate universe.

⁴ I’d been told repeatedly in school that my stories were animated but heartless, my characters oversized craniums with no oxygen in their lungs. That until I peeled back my own skin I would remain artistically impotent. Aviva’s writing: nothing but blood.
“Now we are prepared,” said the Frenchmen, nodding seriously at both of us, “Thanks to your saving forces,” his wife saying, “Merci, Alexander,” and gesturing with a fistful of paper Euros.

Alex waved them off and grabbed my shoulder.

“Hey,” he said. “Race you to that tree.”

My legs were longer but he was in better shape. When I slowed he shouted, “C’mon, come on,” from where he was standing, one hand already tangled in the branches of a scrubby creosote. My fingers brushed his, and he hooked his elbows into my armpits. We stumbled, giggling. The Frenchmen honked the horn of the rental car as they passed. I yelled, “Hope you like America,” at their rolled-up windows.

We walked back to the station wagon. “Alexander,” I mused in a terrible French accent. “Très grown-up. Maybe I should start calling you that.”

He slid a hand into the back pocket of my shorts. “I’m never growing up,” he said.

At the park’s main lodge, a plump, androgynous ranger sold us a backcountry permit for fifteen dollars. “Oh, sure,” she said when we told her our planned route. “That trail’s a local rite of passage. Kids like to go in with nothing but a single water bottle and all that. Been cracking down on em this year.” The permit came on twinned silver wires. While Alex signed the detachable receipt the ranger fanned herself with the wide brim of her hat. “This great state doesn’t have dollars to waste airlifting stupids out of the desert,” she said. I could tell by how Alex pushed open the door without looking back: he thought she was calling us stupids. “Y’all enjoy yerselves now,” she called.
I wondered if I could make it with nothing but a single water bottle. As instructed by the Canadian ex-cop whose trekking guides I’d watched on YouTube, I’d stuffed all our gear into trash bags and pressed the air out before filling our packs: sleeping bags good to below-zero weather, hiking socks, instant mashed potatoes, the half-pound of gorp we’d stolen out of the bulk aisle at Whole Foods, etc. Alex helped me bungee cord the tent to the outside of my pack. He carried my wedding present to him, a silver basin of whooshing blue fire on spider legs. Outside of the lodge, a dark metal sign proclaimed *MTN LOOP TRAILHEAD 1/2 M* >. I stood behind him and hoisted his pack to waist height while he tightened the hip belts.

“It’s like a super fat bean,” I said. “It’s like a nylon fetus.”

“Weird images,” he said.

The trail was flat, then steep, then flat. At first, every switchback was crowded with flame-bright flowers and green cacti with yellow needles. Then the trail turned sandy and boulder-strewn. The ground was yellow. Trees thinned to twisted beige bodies clung with yellow needles. Alex hiked faster than me. I watched the threads of his canvas cutoffs swaying across the backs of his knees. We topped the first ridge and started sideways along the crest of rock. We didn’t speak. I couldn’t really speak. I wondered if there was an anatomical name for the flat skin behind the knee.

Then Alex stopped. I almost ran into him. “You hear that?” he asked.

“What?”

“Thunder.” He didn’t even sound winded. He stretched his interlaced fingers over his head. “I definitely heard thunder.”

“You’re sure?”
Instead of answering, Alex shrugged off his backpack and pulled out the topographical map. “Look,” he said. Squatting in the sagebrush, tracing the concentric circular fingerprint of the surrounding mountains: “We’re here. And we want to camp—here.” He pressed a finger to lower altitude. “The confluence of the riverbeds.”

“Confluence,” I repeated, wiping water from my mouth. As I spoke, an unmistakable rumble of thunder sounded. The air felt immediately heavier, though it might have been in my head. I wanted to sit but I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to stand up again.

Alex squinted up at me. “There’s plenty of flash flooding here, y’know. We have to make it to the campground.”

“Hey,” I said. “I may look like I’m dying but I feel great.”

“Right,” he said.

“That was your cue to tell me how strong I am,” I said.

Instead of answering, he walked toward the edge of the trail, where the slope fell away. He stood on one foot. Then he cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted, “YAWWWWWWWWP!” The mountains answered in his voice.

Alex’s mouth was a little too low-slung on his face for him to be conventionally beautiful, but that grin: it made me nuts. I pulled down my baseball cap and said, “Nerd,” under my breath.

“You love me,” he said.

One night a couple weeks after she won the prize, I woke up and Alex wasn’t in bed. When I heard voices in the front of the house, I crept to the threshold of the bedroom and sat on one of our unpacked boxes. Of course I’d always assumed he had secrets,
same as me, but I was still surprised when there she was, Aviva herself, sitting on our
couch. Alex was saying something like, Maybe I just can’t feel the same things you do.

To which she replied something like, I messed up, or maybe, I’m messed up. You
love me, she said.

After she left I heard him lock the door. Then he came back to the bedroom. He
didn’t seem surprised to find me awake. Still standing, he said, “I don’t want you to feel
uncomfortable about this.”

“Hey, I’m a tough person,” I said. “I’m strong.” I showed him my bicep.

“If there’s a chance I can make it work with her—” he said.

“Don’t finish that sentence,” I said. “I don’t want to know how it ends.”

“I don’t believe there’s just one person for each of us,” he said. “That’s the end.”

He was almost laughing. “She came here to say that she wants to marry me. What d’you
think about that?”

“Marry me instead,” I said. The truth: I’m still not sure that was the right thing to
say.

By the time we found the two rivers the clouds were bruised to lavender. We
followed the trail up to the flat V of rock between them and threw down our packs and
threw up the tent and tossed everything inside and then it was over us, sheets of rain so
thick that I couldn’t see the mountains when I lifted the rain fly. Alex leaned over our
gear and palmed the base of my skull and pulled me toward him. I put my palm on his
sternum, over his heart, where his chest gets concave. We sat like that for a while, too hot
to do anything else. The storm raged while the sweat dried on both of us.
I woke up not knowing where I was. The rain had stopped. A lantern flashed on the wall of the tent. Then the voice: “Are there people in there?” It was someone young. I wasn’t afraid.

“Alex,” I said. He was sleeping on his back, the sleeping bag unzipped and twisted around his waist. I touched his shoulder. “Alex. There’s someone out there.”

When we unzipped the tent, there he was: a kid, shine-faced in shorts and a holey university of somewhere shirt. He had longish hair and eyes that looked black in Alex’s cheap flashlight beam. He had a child-sized knapsack. “What the hell time is it?” grumbled Alex. And then, out loud, though I knew he knew the answer: “You a ranger or something?”

“Sorry for waking you up,” the kid said. He told us his story: a geology student in a masters program, on a class trip to the park, three of his friends had left the main lodge on a day hike in the afternoon and never returned. The parks service was called, but then it was thundering and they couldn’t do anything; the trail was too steep and flash flooding too dangerous. So the kid had slipped off alone, a search party of one. “Did you see anyone today?” he asked, “Or anything weird?”

“When did they call the parks service?” Alex said. We were kneeling side-by-side, in the opening of the tent.

“We didn’t see anyone,” I said. “But we came in from the opposite direction as your friends. We weren’t at the lodge.”

“You could have died, y’know,” Alex said. “Do you know how long it’d take them to find you?”

“My friends might be dead,” the kid said.
“Is that all you have with you?” I asked, pointing to his backpack.

He nodded. “Actually, do you guys have water? I’m really thirsty.” He waved an empty Gatorade bottle.

“You should have thought of that,” Alex said, sounding mad enough to make me hesitate.

I felt suddenly how flimsy the tent was, how exposed we were out under the sky. And then, even worse occurring to me, “You were out in the thunderstorm?”

“Yeah,” said the kid. “I’ve never seen lightning up close like that. It was crazy.” He was talking past us, not quite making eye contact. “I drank rainwater.”

“Well I guess you should spend the night here,” I said.

“He can’t stay.” Alex said.

“In your tent?” the kid said.

“Alex, Jeez.” The ground was starting to hurt my knees. “We can’t let you—I can’t just let him walk away,” I wasn’t sure which one of them I was talking to.

“That’s exactly what we’re doing. In fact, if he doesn’t get lost—”

“I’m really thirsty,” said the kid.

“You got yourself into trouble,” Alex said as though he hadn’t heard. “You should be dead.” It wasn’t the first time I’d heard him talk like that, but it was the first time I realized: I didn’t know how long I could last.

“My friends might be dead,” said the kid. “But I’m a survivor.”

5 In the end of Aviva’s story, the unnamed narrator’s husband sits up in bed, shakes her awake and accuses her of wanting him to get Wild Mind, too. He says, You think that’s the only way we’ll survive this together. I recognize the unnamed narrator’s husband: thrice-broken nose, freckled shoulders, the way crescents of shadows cling along his curved spine. I recognize the way the unnamed narrator’s husband closes his eyes and says, I used to dream all the time but
II.

Monday, w comments on Sunday:

Alex makes me want to write my heart right out of my body. I’m at the corner of St. Louis & Royal when the thought occurs to me, still in my navy work pants and the ribbed and yellowing tank top I wear under my dress shirt while serving. It’s three-thirty-ish in the afternoon and already the tank top is pouched with sweat and not enough washing. My tie is rolled tight and cylindrical like a rib nap and tucked up into my armpit.

I step into the street. I imagine pulling a crumpled, ink-blackened dinner napkin from my chest like a birthday party magician doing a scarf trick. A whole string of them maybe, a row of fisted knots and flags, knots and flags, my heart transformed to a white symbol of surrender but stained by the words I can’t live without. Blotted punctuation, letters in black blood. A parade of winged or wounded animals. Alex was the one who told me I have to surrender to it, the thing he named talent but I call need. Start calling yourself a writer, he said. Give in & get over using the word or you’ll never actually write anything.

Secretly, though, I feel like it’s him I really can’t live without. Sometimes in bed with my lips against the back of his neck I form the words silently, telling him I’ll never write again if he’ll just let me need him instead. He mumbles, half awake, tells me stop mouth breathing on the base of his skull.

Last night I spent the final slow hour of dinner service on the edge of the floor with two of the other front waiters, playing marry/fuck/kill about guests and then, more dangerously, about our coworkers. They kept pressing me so I admitted that I think the now I never dream at all. And you, he accuses: You can’t stop dreaming. That’s wrong, she says. I don’t want to stop. I dream my own survival.
upstairs dishwasher is cute, partially/mostly because he’d saved me from dropping a big tray of red wine glasses on my first day. Amy with the ironed hair started teasing me, saying, O Aviva, you dig the big black guys? How about the fatbelly ones, like Paulie or Raymond? they your type? The other—blonde, square-jawed, I disliked her on sight but tried to quash it—looked me up and down and said, You’re into that nigger shit?

After work I drove to Alex’s house, bloated with some combination of self-loathing & money in my pocket & with half a lukewarm hundred-dollar bottle of wine sandwiched between my thighs. Instead of thinking I blasted the pop music on the radio loud enough to drown out the rattling of the streetcar as it ran parallel to my open window.

I could see him even before I parked, smoking on the front stoop of his house. For no reason I left my clogs on the floor of the car and walked down the sidewalk barefoot, watching for broken glass and pretending the whole time that he was watching me. When I’m barefoot it’s easier to feel beautiful, especially with sweat-flattened hair and ketchup smudges on my pants. Music was bleating down Frenchmen, a damp horn keening in a humid throat & my arms long and white as teeth after a month spent indoors. The fangs of some prehistoric tiger, jellied to near translucence. I stopped in front of Alex, stood on one foot, and waved the bottle of wine sideways, by the neck. I brought you wine, I said, even though that wasn’t at all what I wanted to say. I added, stupidly: I mean, us. He just blinked and watched me. When I kissed him, closed-lipped, the cigarettes and the weird tongue-heat of his mouth tingled in my nostrils. Sometimes Alex just makes me want to write my whole heart right out of my body. I think I would be in less pain, then.
Tuesday:
Another dream this morning about the first time

Wednesday:
The upstairs dishwasher is named Kendall. He’s twenty-one and his family moved to the city when he was three and he’s never crossed a state line. He keeps asking how old I am so last night I told him to guess. He said twenty-three and I laughed but didn’t correct him, even though twenty-three feels like a long time ago and twenty-one way longer, like basically a glorified second level teenager. Sometimes when I’m scraping plates, Kendall pulls off his Hornets cap and leans under the dish racks to say my name. Avi I missed ya, he said when I came upstairs with the bread trays. Avi you look beautiful, he said when the industrial fan ran my hair sideways across my eyes. Sometimes the dishroom reminds me of the steam room at the Russian baths on Brighton where Kat and I used to go. The perogies there always tasted slightly chlorinated, but I bet the owners paid their staff more than minimum wage. Maybe not.

Tonight at the wet station Kendall came up behind me with an armful of glass racks and said, Avi you like poetry? I said, Sure I do, and he mumbled, Maybe I could read you some of my poems sometime. Which made me feel a little protective of him, though I know I tend to romanticize my relationships with artistic kids. I said, No way, you’re a writer? I’m a writer! with a surge of pride I now find hard to quantify. He brightened considerably and said, Whatchu like to write? Stories, I said. Short stories. How long you been writing? he asked and I told him, My whole life. Which I guess is
actually true. We nodded seriously at each other. Dope, he said. Me too. I’ll read you some my poems.

Last time I got my hair cut Alex told me I looked like a shelf fungus and then I spent an hour googling images of shelf fungi. They’re actually kind of beautiful.

Thursday:

Every time I work a double I park in the Marigny, even though Alex gives me shit about walking through the Quarter alone at night. But there’s no metered parking in the neighborhoods across Elysian Fields, and I’ve never felt afraid. Ironic, he says, considering how paranoid you are about everything else.

I’ve never thought of myself as a neurotic person, but this afternoon during lunch service, waddling down the stairs with a chair under each arm, I tangled my foot in the hose of the vacuum on the landing and saw in a flash my own twisted ankle, the clatter of chairs, the impact of my skull on the cement floor. Do I obsess over things that could cause me harm? such as drivers who cut me off on I-10, the glass Amy broke in the ice bin, a mysterious national increase in tunnel fires. I read an interview last week in the Gambit with a woman who no longer recognizes her own children since a ceiling fan fell on her head. Walking down Chartres today I saw a guy I danced with once or twice at swing on St. Claude, first to grab me when I’d called tipsily into the bar, Who wants to dance? Kat would remember his name. I really only recognized him because he was the last person I kissed before I started kissing Alex.

When I told Alex that I don’t think I’m paranoid he said, I didn’t mean it like a bad thing. Fear is a natural response when the world is this fucked up.
To which I replied, I love you quite a lot.

Anyway, swing dance guy saw me right away and called across the street, Aviva how you doin baby! He was surrounded by elderly people in white ankle socks and Canons and it took me a sec to realize he was giving a walking tour. I waved/he winked. As I kept walking I heard him say, People still see the ghost pretty regularly so keep your eyes peeled when we go inside.

Between lunch and dinner service I sat on the curb and ate carrot sticks. Two of the food runners came outside to smoke, J.P. and a new guy whose name I don’t know. J.P. said, Hey Avi you hate this place yet? and I said, I don’t think so. You will soon, he said, but I couldn’t tell if he meant the restaurant or the Quarter or the whole city or something else. The food runner whose name I don’t know said, Let a girl eat son. A man walked by tugging a calico kitten behind him on a leash & J.P. said, Was that man walking a cat on a leash? I said, I know right? The food runner whose name I don’t know said, Y’all gotta be more positive.

Friday, with weather:
Thunderstorms predicted all weekend. I got to work at four and tall, pronged utensils of lightening were already breaking open the sky along St. Louis. By midway through dinner the restaurant had filled with jungle warmth, tourists huddled over bowls of gumbo in front of the fogged windows, plastic ponchos dripping onto the wooden floors like transparent Cretaceous foliage. My second table was a deuce, a soccer mom and her conversely waifish and studded daughter, who coincidentally had a blue jellyfish tattooed across her collarbone. While I poured water they asked me questions like, Is it always
this rainy? and told me they were from California and that they liked my smile. Have you worked here very long? they asked and then, Do you want to run a place like this someday? I admitted that my ambitions lie generally outside of the service industry. What do you want to do instead? they asked and I admitted that I was a writer. Oh shit I write screenplays, said the daughter. And I bartend in San Francisco but I want to move here. It seems rad. I told her she should and then brought them extra apple cornbread muffins and my email address on a napkin. Let me know if you end up moving here, I said, and then added, I’ll probably always work in the service industry.

I got cut early and had a text from Alex: Come over when yr done? He doesn’t normally text while he’s working unless he wants a ride, so I drove over to Tulane. It was still raining pretty hard and my front bumper pushed up brown waves in the headlights. I had a feeling that the bar was empty but Charlie and Lucas were eating dollar tacos at the rail when I walked in while a bunch of kids in scrubs played Wild Horses on the jukebox. Lucas offered me a bite of his pork taco, which I refused. Still a dirty hippy? he said. He rubbed my shoulders while Alex made me a veggie taco and poured me whiskey. Charlie was telling a story about another buddy from Monroe who’d gotten so hammered last weekend that he’d passed out on a stoop and been woken up by a stray cat licking his face.

Alex decided to give last call a little early so the guys helped put his bike into my trunk and he came home with me. He doesn’t really like sleeping at my house but I wasn’t driving all the way to the Marigny and for once he didn’t argue.

Then on the way home I almost hit a biker. Probably the closest I’ve ever come to killing a human being. Everything was veiled in rain & the biker went across Scott right
in front of me & I slammed on the breaks & honestly, missed by mere inches. The worst part was, I laid on the horn. For a long second too, but the biker didn’t even look at me, just kept going. I must have been shaking because Alex asked if I wanted him to drive even though we were blocks from my house.

I said, I just almost killed someone & then honked at them like it was their fault.

Hey but you didn’t, Alex said. Everyone is okay here. He touched me on the shoulder. When we got home he wanted to have sex. I told him I wasn’t in the mood. I could tell he was irritated but just because he doesn’t really like sleeping at my house. He says the sun is too bright.

At least it’s supposed to rain tomorrow, I pointed out. The first time we had sex it was also during a thunderstorm. Sometimes I wonder if he remembers little details like that.

Saturday:

I wake up freezing and thinking I’m late for work. Then I realize it’s my day off, that it’s still raining, that Alex is asleep beside me on his stomach, breathing so faintly that I suppress the urge to hold my hand in front of his mouth. I come back from turning off the AC and lie down beside him, so that our shoulders barely touch, and then I can feel him inhaling. His skin always feels hotter than mine.

The first time we had sex it was also during a thunderstorm. It was at night, though. We’d walked back to my house from a bar around the corner, both drunk, and I was thinking about how intimidatingly smart he is for someone who listens to Fall Out Boy unironically and how, when I splashed him with rainwater from the middle of the
road, laughing, he looked at me as though stunned with his good luck. Or at least, that’s what I thought the look meant. That’s why I invited him in.

Alex’s phone makes a noise and he rolls over and looks at it. Wanna see that show tonight? he asks. Lucas put us on the list. Sure, I say, Is the band even that good? Probably not, he says, They have good food there though. He puts his hand on my stomach. You’re pretty cute as a bedhead, y’know, he says. He runs his fingers over my hip and pulls me toward him. I’m listening to the rain against the window. Maybe it’d be good just to write it out, what happened the first time had sex. It was also during a thunderstorm. We’d walked home and I invited him in and he kissed me for a couple minutes, standing in my bedroom, and then we sat down and then he got on top of me somehow/we ended up on my mattress. He pulled my hands up above my head and leaned on my wrists. I was probably a lot drunker than him, if I think about it, but I definitely remember the weight of his body and how tense he was against me. I didn’t stop him fumbling with my skirt or when he just unzipped and pushed himself into me. I didn’t make a single noise or/I froze, even though I knew right away, whatever he was about to do to me was going to hurt for days. Sometimes I like that feeling, or I have in the past. But I don’t know if I could have stopped him.

Maybe now that I wrote that down I can forget it.

Alex peels off my shirt. I’m supposed to meet Kat’s friend the editor later today, since her office is open Saturdays. When I tell Alex he will probably say, Get hired for anything please, just so I don’t have to hear about the restaurant anymore. When he bites my nipple I grab his shoulder. I count his freckles.
After the first time I had bruises on my inner thighs and my wrists. He said, I’ll call you and left. I desperately wanted him to call. I needed him to call, actually, just so we could have sex again and I could forgive both of us for the imperfect expression of whatever fucked up magic I felt between us.

& he did call. But sometimes while we have sex now there’s some part of my brain that goes off and can’t concentrate. So he’s thrusting and I’m thinking, Arugula salad, goat cheese and candied pecans. Summer salad, melons and mustard glaze. Caesar salad, house-made croutons and shaved parm. Alex says, Motherfucker, when he comes. Then I tell him that I have to go meet Kat’s friend the editor & he says, Break a leg babe, and I get up and shower. The rain is starting to let up. I leave him dozing in my bed.

Chicken wings, deboned and stuffed with pork and rice noodles and served with hoisin dipping sauce. The bony wingtips are the only thing people don’t eat, so the app plates are always crowded with them. They look like pointed toes, the crispy-skinned haunches of elfin deer, the only remainder of a taut and fragile body. I wonder if there’s something really wrong with me or just a little bit.

Sunday, w comments on Saturday night:
Last night after we left Lucas and his girlfriend we walked up to Rampart to get a drink. I was sweating whiskey out of my pores at that point, the earth swelling unevenly under my feet and Alex’s arm around me. He suggested we go home & I said yes, feeling so, so happy, ballooning with happiness like one of those birds with the sky blue feet and bright pouchd throats. If I had sky blue feet I’m sure I would be happy all the time. I would be an optimist.
I think I was saying things, things about how we can do everything, this being everything. I’m sure he didn’t understand any of it but the point is, neither of us noticed the kid until he was right up behind us, materialized from out of an empty doorway saying, I’ve got a gun. He was gesturing with one hand stuffed in the front pocket of a hooded Alabama sweatshirt. He was no taller than me.

I think I said something smart like, This isn’t happening.

Empty yer pockets, said the kid.

I only have a twenty, I said. He took it. He said, Phones too, and I said, C’mon Alex, because he still hadn’t moved.

Then Alex said, You have a gun?

Yeah asshole, the kid said.

Somehow the two of them were probably close enough to smell each other at that point. Show me, said Alex. He dropped my hand. If you have a gun in there show it to me, he said again.

I’m pretty sure I was telling him to shut up, or pleading with someone, but the kid said, I don’t need to show you motherfucker. I’ll shoot you.

And then Alex said, Do it. There was no one around. I was alone with the two of them and Alex said, Do it! louder than before and me and kid both jumped and I think I could tell then, obscurely, that Alex knew he’d won. He said, DO IT. SHOOT ME THEN.

I think I screamed then, his name or something else. But Alex just screamed louder, SHOOT ME, and the kid stepped backwards and for a second I could see his eyes under the streetlamp, trembling convex darkness like dark liquid. & then Alex said it one
more time, DO IT and the kid just turned and bolted down Dumaine. I wasn’t drunk anymore, but Alex turned and grabbed my hand and shouted, Go! and we sprinted hand-in-hand all the way to his house. Like children in a fairytale. I can’t remember if Hansel & Gretel were brother & sister or not. As soon as we got inside Alex was basically sobbing with laughter. I don’t remember what I saying, only how angry I was. He just kept gasping in response. It worked, he kept saying. It worked.

When I went to see Kat’s friend the editor she told me I had a very impressive resume and then said, Listen Avi I’ll be honest with you and say we’re looking for someone a little more established. Please definitely look into an internship with us. It might make a great stepping-stone for you.

The office was in a mildewed, lemon-colored shotgun. I don’t think I want to work there anyway.

After the meeting I went and drank a coffee and read the Gambit. There was an interview with a local journalist, a woman who is publishing a memoir about what it’s like to live in a warzone. The interviewer called her book A Fiery Self-Examination of Cultural Counterphobia. This morning I googled counterphobia and found out that it is a counter-intuitive response to anxiety causing one to actively seek out the source of fear in hopes of overcoming the original phobia. See also, Wikipedia told me, Codependency.

I wondered if that describes something I know about and then decided, it’s probably majestically foolhardy to compare my boyfriend to a warzone. Yesterday when I told Alex I’m keeping a journal he said, I’m glad to hear it. You’re going to be a big deal babe.
I said, I never know if I’m writing the right things. I wish I could record everything at once, every thought like a fingerprint of my brain. Then I wouldn’t have to choose what to remember.

Alex said, Don’t say that. The whole beauty of any written work is that something is always withheld. That’s what makes it your own vision.

I think I withhold the wrong things, I said, thinking he was right but not wanting to admit it. It’s like I’m keeping secrets from myself.

But Alex is always right.

Here is something withheld:
Vita

Dana R. Glass was born in Michigan, did a little growing up in Philadelphia and a lot of growing up in Maine, got some formal education in Massachusetts, spent a minute in Brooklyn and, after putting in considerable time on the road both in the U.S. and abroad, landed in New Orleans, where she was raised by a communal web of thirteen octopi, each imparting upon her a spirit of passive, limber hunger.