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This is What You Want: Stories

Savannah Blake Horton
Bowdoin College

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An Honors Paper for the Department of English

By Savannah Blake Horton

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Grubbing

The funeral isn't over, but Nina needs to use the toilet. She keeps her legs crossed, no whining, as her mother, Zoe, empties the urn. It is a long thirty minutes—too long for a four-year-old. Zoe doesn't notice—she is mildly distracted—and so when the emptying is done, she is surprised to find her daughter squirming.

The outhouse is by the main camp. They put on their masks and walk with their faces to the ground. They can smell it before they see it—the sour urine, a sharpness seeping into their eyes. Zoe opens the door and lifts Nina inside. A small room—four by four, rotting and dark. She holds Nina over the seat and thinks of her own father, his hands that built the wooden walls, his missing left thumb. The shit is high. The peaks are pointed and hard, laced with blood and toilet paper and speckles of dead ants.

Nina wants to leave. She jumps off the seat and runs into the corner, a hand over her face. Zoe stares through the porcelain ring into the tunnel. It is a strange compulsion; one she doesn't bother to correct. An outhouse tells a story—chronicles a lifetime. The piles have swelled, clotted like fossils into a shocking community portrait. It is a strange way to measure time.

There is latent danger, Zoe feels it in her throat. An old fear, like clown lips or dying alone. It is hard to escape from under the outhouse, or so she imagines. The boards are low to the ground, the pile ever growing—slick like a swamp bottom. As a child, she had nightmares about a life under the outhouse. A warm hell, too thick to drown in. She'd befriend the pill bugs and scream up for help when she saw pale cheeks over the seat.

She feels briefly ashamed, with her daughter watching. She is staring into an old

toilet—an indication, she is sure, of wild desperation. Zoe understands what she is supposed to be doing, how she is supposed to feel. But the air is warm and there is sweetness in remembering.

She was naked when the hospital called. Things seemed to happen like that. One minute, she was picking skin from her knees and the next her father was dead. It was Sunday evening. Zoe was in her bedroom, in front of the full-length mirror. Nina was asleep. It had stopped raining—a thrill because summer had so far been a ceaseless storm. Too much water for Rhode Island, enough to drown gardens. That night, she could see a star or two.

She was watching a documentary—half watching, glancing every few minutes at the television when the screams grew loud. She seemed to encounter the most disturbing television at night—specifically on Sundays, specifically after she had removed her clothes. It was Discovery or Animal Planet, she didn't know. A show about about wild children, with fake blood and reenactments. Something Nina would love. A child actor bit into his arm and her phone rang.

A hospital in New Brunswick.

A doctor.

There was not much to say—an introduction, an apology. Heart attack, severe and fatal. The culmination of ho-hos and cheesy fries and hot salami. Zoe hadn't seen her father in three years. The doctor said the medicine had become "inadequate." He had stuck her father with needles and tubes. He had watched him choke and die or—at least—had heard of his choking and dying before she had. He spoke with long pauses, like he

was forgetting.

"There was nothing we could have done," he said. "I'm very sorry. He'd been gone a few days. They found him under a clothesline."

Zoe wrapped an arm around her chest. She maintained eye contact with herself in the mirror. If she stared at her own face too long, her features turned cruel. The doctor mentioned the clothesline again, as if hoping its innocuousness would comfort her. She wondered if her father had been hanging or retrieving his clothes—for some reason, this mattered. She knew the clothesline, the two thin ropes dangling over the garden. His shirts always ended up in the dirt.

"It was raining," said the doctor. "I'm surprised anyone was able to see him. Lucky we found him before the storms."

"Storms?"

"Better for you, too—no mess." The doctor coughed for a very long time. "What was he doing up there?"

Zoe's father ran a research station on Sparrow Island, a land mass off Northern Maine. A haven for bird enthusiasts. He studied seagulls and petrel eggs, the evolution of sexual selection. It was a complicated and laborious business, important for reasons Zoe didn't know.

"He's a researcher," she said. "A scientist."

"Huh," said the doctor. "I haven't heard of him."

Zoe spoke with two men about the funeral procedure. She didn't know either of them. They read her his will and told her what to do. There was a series of steps—who to

contact, what to collect. It was all very methodical, like an orientation. Everything needed to be completed in order, on time. Zoe was still naked, supine on her carpet with her feet in the air.

Her father wanted cremation. Zoe said sure. There was a strange comfort in knowing his body wouldn't rot underground, a feast for termites. She called her mother, Daphne, with the news. Daphne didn't cry. She'd had theories for months that he'd already drowned, stumbled into the ocean and cracked his head on a rock.

"He's careless," she'd told Zoe, weeks ago. They spoke every Friday, phone calls from their cars. "He'll break his neck and he won't have anyone to help him. I told him every summer, I said, *be careful*. I said, *you idiot*. I said a lot of things. He never listened."

Daphne had divorced Zoe's father twenty years ago, an easy goodbye. Zoe went with her, to Pennsylvania. Inland, to a house with plumbing and electricity and a man named Cyrus whom Daphne said she loved. She'd started wearing sunhats and selling beauty products from their living room. Cyrus worked real estate in the suburbs of Philadelphia. He had his face on fliers and a bus stop.

Zoe told Daphne a research team had found her father dead in the fields. She didn't mention the clothesline.

"I believe it," Daphne said.

Zoe was crying. She hadn't woken Nina. The children on the TV lathered mud on their faces and licked each other. She wondered if she should get dressed.

"I did everything I could," said Daphne. "Not like it was my responsibility, or yours. He's a grown person. I know he's your father. I mean, sort of—because of Cyrus,

who says *hello*! But sweetheart, he never took care of himself. What did you expect?"

Zoe remembered her last meal with her father. Years ago. He'd driven them through a Wendy's and ordered two large fries and three chicken sandwiches, all moist and flattened in the paper bag. He'd been staying on the mainland for winter, working out of a lab in Portland. He was visiting for a weekend and she'd watched him gorge the food with twitching fingers.

"It's still sad," Zoe said.

"Of course it's sad," said Daphne. "Sweetheart, of course. Believe me, I'm sad. I'm just not surprised. I'm just disappointed."

"You're in his will," said Zoe.

"What does he have to give away?"

Zoe could tell her mother was reading. Her voice had deepened; her words had lengthened. She was studying something—a magazine, a receipt.

"He wants you to bring his ashes to the island," Zoe said. "The lawyer's going to call you tomorrow. I told them you wouldn't be interested. They said he's asked you to scatter them."

"I'm in Pennsylvania."

"I'm just telling you what they said. I don't think you have much of a choice."

Daphne paused. She was whispering to someone, giggling. "He's not going to know," she said to Zoe. "I'm sorry if that's insensitive, sweetheart, but it's an eight-hour trip, at least. Much longer, really. Probably twelve—including stops, including packing. When is the funeral?"

"As soon as possible."

"It's not very convenient."

"I don't know what to tell you."

"I guess I'm not surprised," Daphne said. "It's just like him. Dragging me back to that dump to throw him in the same ocean you could toss him into right now. We could do the ceremony over the phone."

"I'm sure there's a reason."

"Of course you're sure, sweetheart. You're always sure. But sometimes, and more often than not, there is no reason."

"No rhyme or reason!" said Cyrus.

"Exactly," said Daphne. "I'm sort of surprised you haven't learned this, sweetheart. You've been divorced."

Zoe had never been divorced. Her boyfriend of six years had disappeared when Nina was three months, which was fine—eventually—because he most likely stole from the savings under her bed and was all around good for nothing. But he had nice eyes. A sweet singing voice.

"Some things don't have a reason," said Daphne. "Some things just happen, and they hurt you, and there's nothing good that comes from it. Like your father, for example."

Zoe didn't say anything. The carpet was rough against her back but she didn't sit up. She didn't want to be the only person at the funeral. What had one's life amounted to if only a daughter said goodbye? Daphne was still giggling. Zoe could hear Cyrus' low breathing, like a dog falling asleep.

"Are you there, sweetheart?" Daphne asked.

She wasn't on bad terms with her father. The last time she'd seen him, she'd hugged him and smiled and he'd said he would miss her. He was wrinkled and his eyes looked so fragile, like they could fall right out of his skin. He was going full time to the station, living off grants and funding from a Canadian university. Zoe had sent letters until she grew tired of writing.

They were unfamiliar with each other. They'd drifted into their own spheres. Zoe taught fifth grade social studies at a school in the city. Her father lived miles off the coast, drawing blood from baby birds and counting algae. He knew sparrow calls and muskrat tracks and the way petrels waddled underground. She knew how to explain Ancient Egypt to ten year olds. She knew how to lie, how to make her daughter believe that her grandfather, the scientist, made the world spin—that he rescued birds and kept the sun in the sky.

Zoe explained the situation to Nina the next morning. She promised that her grandfather was safe and happy. She tried to think of other things a child would like to hear—how he'll always be beside her, how she could find him in the stars.

"No one can live forever," Zoe said.

She held Nina's hands tightly. She felt vaguely proud of herself. Her parenting had thus far not required excessive emotional support. Empathy took practice. Nina looked very confused.

"Not even Harold?" she asked.

Harold was their neighbor's dog. He was nine and suffered the unfortunate

combination of diabetes and canine eczema. Nina liked to lay beside him on the porch where he was chained and pull loose fur from his ears.

"No," said Zoe. "Not even Harold."

Nina let go of her hands and pounded the table. She cried and her wet eyelashes looked so long. She refused to leave the room unless she could visit the dog.

"He's going to die!" screamed Nina.

Zoe called them in sick to school. A man named Jonathan had contacted her mother to discuss transportation. They were leaving in the afternoon. A boat was heading to Sparrow Island from the Big Island's ferry dock. It was three hours from the mainland, two boat rides. Daphne related the news to Zoe in a low whine over the phone. She was going to fly from Philadelphia to Portland and take a cab to the ferry.

"I don't have much of a choice," she said, "if I want my share."

"What did he leave you?"

"That bracelet—his mother's. It's beautiful, unfortunately. He knew I wanted it, I told him over and over. Cyrus could afford something like it, I guess, but he has such bad taste. Did I show you the pendant he bought me for Mother's Day? I don't understand what goes through his head. I think he's color blind. I don't know. I hid it in the guest room and told him the cleaning lady stole it—which isn't far from the truth. She's taken a plate."

"He left you the bracelet?"

"You're getting the whole stash," said Daphne. "All that junk you used to play with. Most of the equipment is going to the lab, but you'll get some. If you want it. I don't know what you would do with it all."

"I want it."

"Sure," Daphne said. "Do you have something to wear? I think a black dress would be appropriate. I don't know. There isn't an established dress code for *island* funerals. You should wear a nice jacket, though, not one of those big ones. You know the ones I'm talking about. I don't even think anyone else is coming. It may be a very small ceremony."

They were early to the ferry. Zoe bought return tickets and waited for Daphne on board. She fed Nina curly fries from the cafeteria. Her daughter had a strange way of eating—she liked to keep eye contact as she chewed, her mouth open. If Zoe looked away, Nina would grab her face and pull her back. She watched Nina cough and stuff three fries into her mouth.

"Slow down," Zoe said.

"Slow down," said Nina.

Nina had recently acquired an understanding of repetition. It made her laugh, copying Zoe. It turned conversations redundant, cut Zoe's patience short.

"You're going to gag," said Zoe. "One at a time."

"You're going to gag," said Nina. "You're going to gag."

Zoe hadn't seen the island since she was Nina's age. Barely a child. She'd worn seaweed like necklaces, stuck her hands into the compost bin. She remembered small things—the sky after rain, the choke of her sleeping bag. She remembered Daphne with long hair, holding shells and green crabs.

The ferry horn blew as Daphne hurried with two handbags down the narrow

hallway. A diamond studded Cross swung from her neck. Cyrus had inspired a fervent religious revival. Their house was plastered with Jesus—Jesus portraits, Jesus dish-ware. Nina liked to call Jesus the Homeless Man. Zoe hadn't bothered to correct her.

The ferry turned slowly and Daphne grabbed the edge of their booth. She dropped her bags onto the floor and hunched over. Six years with Zoe's father had not quelled her seasickness. Her fists closed tightly, the skin around them dry and slightly blue.

"Those stairs are unacceptable," Daphne said. She wiped her face with a thin hand. "I practically cracked my head. I would've flattened this little woman in front of me. You should've seen her. Like an elf."

"Elf," said Nina.

"I was starting to think you weren't coming." Zoe handed Nina a French fry and slid towards the wall. Nina picked out the soft insides with a fingernail.

"So was I," Daphne said. Her hair was pulled into a tight bun, her forehead stretched too wide. She wore a black blouse and black pants and tiny black earrings—appropriately solemn. Zoe was wearing navy; the darkest dress she could find.

"How's Cyrus?" Zoe asked.

"Fine," said Daphne. "He's always fine. "How are you?"

"Fine," said Nina.

"Huh," said Daphne. "I didn't know she was coming."

"She's never been to the island," said Zoe.

"Of course."

"She's very excited."

"Very excited," said Nina.

"What a trained little monkey," said Daphne. "Can she speak for herself?"

"I can speak everything," said Nina.

The view from their window was gray, a thick fog floating over the water. Nina pressed her hands and tongue against the glass. Zoe watched her lick slow circles.

"I'm sure windows don't taste very good," Daphne said.

"We're still learning about germs." Zoe pulled Nina from the window. "Remember germs?"

"You should watch what you're feeding her," Daphne said. "She's looking bigger."

"She's four," said Zoe.

"You were big by three."

The first summer on Sparrow Island, it had rained every day. Zoe's mother had kept track on an old yellow calendar. Zoe had spent most of her time inside, watching puddles grow. One evening, the sky had calmed and she was allowed, finally, to accompany her father as he grubbed. They set out at midnight, when the birds were awake. He hoped to take blood samples, to poke the small birds and place them back in their burrows. The petrels nested underground.

Zoe followed behind her father on the dirt path, down to the water and over the wooden bridge into the fields. They wore paint clothes and headlamps, searching slowly for nests. They knelt by trees and stuck their hands into holes, careful of muskrats. Zoe couldn't find anything. She stuck her arms into so many empty tunnels. The flies swarmed and she couldn't see the stars through the fog. It was a smothering sort of darkness.

Her father had known where to look. He could reach deep into the holes and pet the shy birds with gentle fingers. He knew how to touch them. He clutched one at a time, lifting each into open air and pricking quickly with the needle. Ten birds, eleven. Zoe had fallen asleep, her face in the dirt. Her father touched her shoulder. He was holding a chick the size of her fist. It tried to burrow into his fingers. Zoe stroked its wings and beak with her thumb. She took its body into her hands. Its wings flitted, and she squeezed tightly—too tightly—worried it would fly away.

She felt its heart stop in her hands. There was nothing she could say. A cold stillness, a body inanimate. She cried and cried and she swore her father had cried too.

The Big Island was barely visible, even as the horn sounded and the cars offloaded. Zoe held Nina to her waist with one arm and tried to keep her legs from cramping. Her circulation was borderline defective—some nights she couldn't feel her toes.

On the deck, Daphne moaned loudly. She didn't like waiting—she claimed it aged her. She stood behind Zoe in a long line that wound through the hallway. Nina drooled on Zoe's shoulder. They were out of state and out of patience, sick of the fog and the spittle of almost-rain.

At the dock, they searched for Jonathan. They had no idea what he looked like. Zoe imagined a gray beard and an old hat. Daphne shouted his name, waving her handbags like heavy wings. Nina sat on the ground and picked up a spider.

"A new pet," she said.

"No, sweetheart," said Zoe.

They found Jonathan in the parking lot. He was standing in front of an old SUV,

itching a thick mustache. He wore green rain boots and a pair of small binoculars around his neck. His hair hung past his shoulders.

"You made it," he said. "Welcome back."

Daphne dropped her bags to the ground breathed deeply. Her balance was slow to return.

"I'm Daphne," she said.

"We've met before," said Jonathan.

"Oh," said Daphne. "I know."

On the Big Island, the air was heavy and full of salt. The wind collected soil and gasoline and strung it through the sky. Daphne rubbed her Cross between two fingers. Jonathan drove quickly, swerving without a seatbelt down a one-lane road. They passed a Super Mart and a farm full of reindeer.

"That is probably the North Pole," said Nina.

Jonathan's boat would take them from the Big Island to the station, forty-five minutes through open water. Zoe hoped they would see a seal, or a whale. She'd never seen a whale.

Jonathan was the only lawyer she knew who owned a fishing boat. Zoe was half convinced he wasn't a lawyer at all, just a man her father had known in passing. A lobsterman with a young wife and hook scars. Had they really met before? He blasted soft rock through the radio. She could hear him singing when the volume wavered.

"How long have you been my father's lawyer?" Zoe asked. On her lap, Nina stuck two fingers in her ears and wailed.

“I’m not his lawyer,” Jonathan said.

“Did you see him?” she asked. “When they found him?”

In the backseat, Daphne’s eyes were closed. Zoe watched her in the mirror, the curl of her lips, tense even in sleep. She’d been on a plane all morning and her makeup had smudged, clotting at the corners of her eyes.

“I haven’t seen the body at all,” Jonathan said.

On the fishing boat, Zoe set Nina between two boxes and told her not to move. She could picture her falling, toppling easily over the railing into the quick, black sea. Her body wouldn’t wash up on the shore. It would sink deep down, pull into pieces. Zoe replayed it in her head. She couldn’t help it.

In the cabin, Daphne clung to Jonathan’s chair. Her face had turned pale. As the waves lurched, she covered her mouth and gagged.

“If you’re gonna boot,” said Jonathan, “do it into the water.”

Daphne stood up. She let go of Jonathan’s chair and smoothed her hair behind her ears. “That’s so rude,” she said.

“Just go outside if you have to hurl. That’s all I’m saying.”

The skin on Jonathan’s cheeks was red and peeling. Zoe rested a hand on Daphne’s shoulder. She led her mother out to the deck.

“I was on that island for years,” Daphne said. “I know things, too.”

“I don’t remember much of anything.”

“You liked the swallows, and the periwinkles,” said Daphne “They always smelled so terrible.”

"I remember the periwinkles," Zoe said. "And the barnacles."

"Barnacles." Daphne smiled. "They have the highest penis to body ratio. Besides Cyrus."

"Jeez."

"Zoe, I'm joking."

Nina whispered loudly. She was still wedged between the boxes. She spoke to herself so often Zoe questioned the success of her future social interactions. Nina turned rocks into friends. Zoe watched her hold a hand to her ear like a cellphone. Nina screamed and shook her head.

"Yes, Bill," Nina said, to no one. "I'm working on it."

From the island, the world was water. Water for miles or days. It was easy to forget how close the mainland was, behind the fog and the waves. Jonathan let Nina sit on his lap as they docked. They watched through the windows as the trees grew larger. There were three men, all in black, waiting in the harbor.

Nina raised both arms and shouted, "Land ho!"

Zoe hadn't expected a crowd. Her father had few acquaintances close enough to mandate funeral attendance. She'd heard him mention a Paul on various occasions, but Paul could be long dead. Paul could be a bird.

It looked different, the island. Twenty-seven years older. But still, something was strange. Like a warped reflection. The shack by the dock had been knocked to a pile. The row boat was half-sunk into the basin. Zoe didn't recognize the men. They were young, wearing cameras and binoculars and white surgical masks. Daphne put on sunglasses and

stared into the fog.

"I almost forgot why we're here," she said.

Jonathan had the urn. He'd picked it up from St. John's and kept it overnight at his house. At the dock, he handed Zoe the large black case. She wanted to smell it, if it still smelled like her father. Was there a fingernail, a button? Zoe held the case but didn't look inside.

The masked men tied the boat to the dock. Zoe held Nina's hand and the black case. Daphne walked slowly behind them, both hands on the railing.

The path to the main camp was closed off with tape. Zoe wondered if they were in the midst of construction, a revamp of old cabins—the kitchen, the outhouse. There was a truck she hadn't noticed before, hidden between thick bushes. The trunk was open. She could see masks and rubber gloves and jugs of sanitizer.

"I bet they're infested," Daphne said. "Bed bugs. Your father never washed anything. Neither did you. You used to stick mud into your pants and cry."

"They're wearing masks."

Two more bodies emerged from the van in full hazmat suits. Zoe couldn't see their faces, just their eyes behind the plastic.

"I admit," said Daphne, "this is a bit extreme."

The hazmats approached and pulled off their masks. A woman and a man—one with green eyes, one with glasses. The woman had a scar down her cheek, like a slash from a steak knife. She asked for their names. Zoe looked around. Were they expecting others? Nina poked the man in the leg over and over.

"We're going to have to ask you to grab a mask," said the woman. When she spoke,

the scar wrinkled, like shrink wrap over dough.

"Why?" Daphne asked.

"The island has been overrun by a significant amount of black mold," said the man. His glasses were foggy, and he rubbed them with a thick finger.

"What?" said Zoe.

"What?" said Daphne.

"Usually, it's not such a big deal," said the man. "But it's highly developed. We have to start burning after the ceremony."

Zoe looked at Nina, her nose inches from the ground. She'd gathered dirt into piles with her fingers. Zoe set down the urn and lifted Nina to her chest.

"Is it toxic?" Daphne asked.

"Only after a lengthy exposure," said the woman. "You're fine in the masks, unless you're here for a few days. Or step inside the buildings."

"When did this happen?" Zoe asked.

"The mold has progressed quickly," said the woman. "We've finally got the permits to set fire."

Zoe looked down the trail. She knew she couldn't see the houses from the dock, but she strained her neck and squinted. Daphne's mouth hung open. She had a habit of shamelessly gaping, her tongue hovering between her lips.

"How long has this been a problem?" Zoe said.

"The mold became hazardous about two and a half years," said the man. "The station's been out of service since. Evacuated, except for Dr. Conway. No one knew he was still out here until we found him on our sweep. You're going to have to stay by the

shore unless you want to wear the suits."

"No one told us anything," said Zoe.

The fog had rolled in, a ring around the tree line. Zoe couldn't see the horizon. The world was one color. There wasn't enough air anymore. Zoe wondered if she would faint.

Nina pointed at the hazmat and shouted, "Astronaut!"

The station had been out of service for over two years. Zoe repeated it in her head. She stared at the bare trees. The branches dangled and cracked, dying hands curled by weather. The gulls whined but Zoe couldn't see them. She could feel the breakdown, smell the low tide and the propane. The dirt path was overgrown, barely passable. She couldn't imagine her father in this place—the one she had known. But the one she had known had been thirty and hopeful and clean. Who knew who he'd been when they'd found him.

Zoe and Daphne accepted the masks. Daphne frowned beneath hers, bending the paper with her lips.

"Does this really make a difference?" she asked. "I mean really? I could tear it in half."

The paper was thin. They could poke fingers through easily. Nina was chewing on hers. Zoe didn't want to put anything over her mouth, so she held the mask inches from her face.

"You can put on the suit," said the woman.

"No, thank you," said Daphne. "Where's the urn?"

They spent a half an hour tossing crumbs into low tide. It was as good as it

sounded—worse because of the smell. They stood at edge of the dock and flung handfuls as far as they could. Zoe didn't wear gloves. Daphne gagged and Nina sat on Zoe's feet, reaching for the dust as it fell. Below was all mud. Zoe's father stuck to it, coated the rocks like parmesan. She didn't know which parts of him she held. She didn't know what had gone wrong—why he had been here. If he'd tried to call. Any sane person would have picked up a phone. There was a radio. There was a landline. There were ways to find help.

Zoe watched Daphne wipe tears. She rubbed an eye with two fingers. It could have been the ashes. She could have been laughing.

"I had dreams about him dying," Daphne said, eventually. "All of the time. They were never sad. Maybe I'm a terrible person."

"I have dreams about you dying," said Zoe.

"You do?"

"Only sometimes."

"I never wanted him to get hurt," Daphne continued. "I just didn't want to have to see him anymore."

"You didn't cause this," said Zoe. "If that's what you're worried about."

"I'm just being honest. Cyrus says we're most honest in our dreams. We speak our truths."

"We're most honest when we're drunk."

"God," said Daphne. "I hope not."

The three men hovered a polite distance behind. They didn't say a prayer, they didn't speak. When the urn was empty, Zoe left it on the dock and turned to introduce

herself. She supposed she should show some charade of civility. It was a funeral, after all. And they had come all this way.

"Who are you?" Zoe asked.

The men couldn't have been older than thirty. They stood close to each other, jackets touching. The smallest took off his mask and pressed it to his chest.

"We were students of Dr. Conway," he said. "He was a very important part of our lives."

"When was the last time you saw him?" Zoe asked.

"We studied here three years ago," said the smallest.

"Six," said another.

"Six. Right. Years go by more quickly than I'd like."

Zoe pulled off the mask and crumpled it in her fist. She didn't know what else to say. She lifted her hand into a motionless wave and left them staring at the sea.

The students stayed in the harbor. Zoe watched them unpack three large backpacks. They'd brought Petri dishes and eye droppers and even a large textbook.

Zoe stared at the backpacks. She'd overestimated the sympathy of the apparent multitaskers—or maybe underestimated their scholarship. She watched the men sift through the tide pools with gloved fingers, pressing algae to their noses. One man found a sparrow's wings in the mud, its feathers bent and shedding. He held it close to his lips and Zoe gagged. The other men snapped quick pictures on large cameras.

Zoe told the hazmats she wanted to see the house. They'd put their helmets back on, identities obscured. They seemed sinister, those orange bodies, ready to set her father's life on fire.

The shorter hazmat told Zoe the house was empty.

"Don't be disappointed." It may have been the woman. "The research teams cleared out the valuables. They're sitting at a school in Buffalo."

"I still want to look," Zoe said.

In the suit, she felt dizzy. The air was filtered and warm. She could smell her breakfast on her breath. Daphne and Nina stayed by the shore.

"Don't take too long," Daphne said. "The ferry won't wait."

It started to rain, small drops like pinpricks on her suit. Zoe couldn't hear it. She followed a hazmat up the hill onto the path. Piles of rotted wood smothered the grass. There were caution signs everywhere, slick yellow bands draped around dead trees.

The house was wrapped in tape. Zoe tried not to look at the clothesline. There was a garden, all weeds, and the remnants of a well. The door to the house was bent off its hinges. The hazmat waited outside.

Zoe checked all the cabinets, the unplugged fridge, the sink. There were dishes still dirty, a tin of brown crackers. His sneakers were by the door. Everything was wrapped in caution tape.

She thought of how he smelled in the morning—her father—after a night of grubbing. He'd come home and his fingers would smell of baby birds—mothballs, faint enough to seem sweet. In the suit, Zoe couldn't smell anything but her own skin.

She walked upstairs slowly. There was just a bedroom and a study. The windows were open, the furniture damp. His bed was still made and she touched it with a gloved hand. She recognized the quilt. It was covered in pink rabbits. Zoe lifted the cover and

lay down beneath it. If she took off the suit, she could die there.

She closed her eyes. All she could see was her father, alone in the forest. How had no one looked for him? Maybe they had left one by one, waving from the boats through the fog. Maybe he had tried to leave too. Maybe he had stood at the dock with his bags and just couldn't let it go.

She'd never liked the island. The birds or the smell of the tides. She felt guilty confessing it, even to herself. She was happy when Daphne had pulled her away. She hadn't cried. She remembered how good the ferry smelled, how the flush of the toilet made her grin.

She sat up and opened the drawers of his bureau. There was a notebook and a Bible. Zoe took them both. In the bottom drawer, there was a toothbrush and a photograph of a baby with blonde hair. Zoe had never been very attractive—particularly through the lens of a camera. She was almost mad he'd kept it, but she stuck it inside the Bible and hid them both under her arms.

Outside, she passed the hazmat quickly. In the suit, she couldn't bend her knees, so she skipped forward with straight legs, her body angled in a strange diagonal.

Zoe took off the suit and dropped it next to the van. Her skin was warm and damp.

"Are you ready?" Daphne asked.

"I have to go to the bathroom," Nina said.

"Now?" said Zoe.

"Be quick," said Daphne. She smiled. "I don't want to die here."

In the outhouse, Zoe tries not to breathe. She pictures the island burning, the rise of

the flames over the wood. She helps Nina off the toilet and sets her in the corner. Nina has fingers in everything. Tonight, Zoe will scrub her down. It will be nice to have a bathtub.

"It smells," says Nina. She kicks the wooden wall with her boot.

"It's an old fashioned bathroom." Zoe say.

"A poop house."

"Correct," says Zoe. "Your grandfather built it."

"It's hot," says Nina. "I hate it."

Zoe starts to cry. She tries to blame the smell, but the tears keep coming and the sadness is strange because she doesn't know what it's based in. She didn't know him. He didn't know her. He knew a photograph and a name and a first word. He still left it.

Maybe more anger than sadness.

"Why are you crying?" Nina asks.

Zoe stares into the hole.

"Why did he want to live on an island?" Zoe asks.

She doesn't expect Nina to know. Her daughter looks so chubby in those yellow rain pants, a doll made of dough. Zoe should have left her at home.

"Everyone wants to live on an island," Nina says.

The Dead Boy

The Dead Boy was murdered on the first of April, so the police were slow to respond. The first of April was a big day for false alarms. My mother worked dispatch for the district and fielded all of the calls. She spent half the morning on the phone, listening as teenagers reported cases of "fatal digestion" or "extremely spontaneous combustion." For a while, she sent the cars, but officers were stretched thin. There were too many feigned robberies to investigate. A representative from the department came to our school and spoke on the intercom.

"It's a crime to fake a crime," he said.

I was in Discrete Math—a low level half-course for borderline morons. My desk mate, Nick, had made three of the fake calls. He grabbed his phone again and redialed the number.

"You're dumb," I said.

"911. What's your emergency?"

My mother had practiced this line to perfection—in the shower, over dinner. There was a specific tone of voice she'd hoped to convey, kind and confident. Today it was neither. I imagined her pressing buttons and stuffing Combos down her throat.

"Put the phone away," said Ms. Charles. She was wearing her shirt backwards for April Fools Day. The tag hung over her chest like a miniature tie.

"I'd like to report a shooting," said Nick.

"Where?" said my mother.

"In your ass!"

Nick knew maybe three jokes, all of which centered around body parts. As children, we'd been neighbors. We'd played naked together in my sprinklers, even when we were old enough to know better. He shouted "ass" again into the phone. Ms. Charles told him to go to the office. We were supposed to be talking about combinatorics—which was a math term, apparently.

"April fools," Nick said.

"Leave the phone here," said Ms. Charles.

"Hello?" said my mother.

I felt very bad. My mother was stuck talking to jerks all day—a cannon of "fuck yous" fired over and over. I knew she was ready to lose it, break from the script and start screaming. Then at three, a jogger called the station. He'd found the Dead Boy in the park. He said someone had sliced a kid ear to ear and my mother said, "Please hold."

I wasn't supposed to call him the Dead Boy. I wasn't supposed to talk about him at all because I wasn't supposed to know about him. There were rules for dispatch about confidentiality, none of which my mother followed. When she picked me up from school, she was shaking. She sneezed into the steering wheel and wiped her nose on her sleeve. My mother was always sick, so she always smelled strange—like an old couch. She wore a jacket too plain to be vintage, with pockets shaped like sunflowers. When she spoke about the Dead Boy she picked at the petals with two fingers.

"They found him in the park, right in plain sight. Anyone could have walked up and called someone." She sneezed and shook her head side to side. "That poor boy. He was wrapped in the net of the soccer goal."

"Is he still there?"

"They're probably examining him," she said, "at the coroner's."

"What about the witness?"

The witness—particularly his convenient running route—fascinated me. Straight through the field. Crime dramas had made it remarkably clear the suspect was often the witness—if not the father.

"I'm sure he's with the police," my mother said. "Can you imagine? A dead body. I probably would have fainted."

"You probably wouldn't have."

"Don't say anything to your father. Or Terra. I'm not supposed talk about it until the police release details."

"What about Gillian?"

Gillian was usually the first person with whom I shared news. We'd been close friends since the fourth grade, when we both threw up on field day—food poisoning from sour milk. In May, Gillian had tried to kill herself. She'd successfully swallowed a whole bottle of nail polish remover—momentarily. Now she was in a center working on feeling like a person again. She couldn't use the phone. I mean she *could* but they wouldn't let her. She still had fingers and ears and everything.

"Gillian shouldn't hear these things," my mother said. "It'll overwhelm her."

"I'm sure Gillian has heard a thousand awful things today," I said. "That's the whole point."

Home was a strange and crowded place—like a hospital's waiting room. It brought distant parts together into forced cohesion. A green condo with a green garden. I lived with my father and two mothers (birth and step), a makeshift family who dwelled together only by necessity. When my parents split, my mother couldn't afford to move out. When my father remarried, she remained. They'd set a deadline—a year—after which she needed to find her own place. Now, she had like two days.

She'd only started at dispatch that winter and was slowly saving up. She planned to move south, so she could wake up and see palm trees through her window.

"Palm trees mean you've made it," she said.

I knew someone whose cousin had died via palm—a tree cutter who'd been suffocated by a large, falling frond. But I didn't say any of that to my mother. Palm trees were like her botanical Holy Grail. She was set on Tucson, its cacti and orange sunset. She'd seen pictures in a travel magazine. My step mother, Terra, was from St. Louis and seemed, to my birth mother, entirely exotic. She was taller than my father and naturally blonde. She wore sweaters in summer. My mother owned one jacket and three pairs of shoes and had never left New England.

The recent and nearby murder of a child seemed—to me—an obvious topic for familial discussion. I explained my theories through pantomime over dinner, slicing my throat with a finger. My mother feigned apathy. She chewed and sneezed and tried not to smile as a I collapsed over the counter.

"Cause of death wasn't blood loss, though," I said. "Right, Mom? Tell them what the cops said. Cops said cause of death was strangulation."

“It was strangulation,” said my mother.

“You shouldn’t pry,” said Terra. “It isn’t any of your business.”

“Forgive me,” said my mother.

“You’re talking about a child,” said Terra, touching her stomach. She was fatter than any pregnant person needed to be, fat enough to crack in half—like a coconut under a hammer. She wasn’t glowing either, but a baby the size of a bullfrog was squirming inside her.

"Who do you think killed him?"

I asked this loudly, to no one. Our family often ate at the same time, unintentionally. We kept to ourselves, wandering through the kitchen as if in parallel universes. I was eating bread out of the bread box. I’d never met a murderer—that I’d known of—and was curious to the point of compulsion. Was he married? Did he wear sneakers?

My mother massaged the bridge of her nose. "The police think it was targeted.”

“So they say,” said my father. He picked ham from a deli bag. Somehow, he was gaining weight, even though he only ever nibbled things. He dangled the meat over his mouth. "They don’t know what they’re talking about. Neither do you.”

My father used any excuse to tell my mother she didn’t know what she was talking about.

“They say there’s no need to worry,” said my mother.

"I'm still worried," said Terra.

“If you listen to the report—”

“Enough.” My father waved his hands around his head.

I think he forgot about my mother sometimes—like a headache that faded and returned. There she was, by the window, in his home, with his new wife. She'd thrown up at the wedding—his and Terra's—after vows. We'd been given seats at the back.

"Terra." My father had read from a lined sheet of paper. "You're holding my whole world."

My mother had retched into my plastic purse—all liquid from wine. I'd held her hair with two fists and an usher had screamed.

We watched the Dead Boy on the news—his school pictures, a home video. He was only ten years old. The family was offering a reward for any information. Terra moaned at the television. She slammed her knitting needles together. She didn't have a day job—or a night job—but she knit like someone had threated her. Her scarf was now a blanket, six feet long.

"I can't believe they aren't closing the school," she said. "Anyone with sense would stay home."

"The police will patrol the school," said my mother.

"They *say* they will," said Terra.

"You'll drive yourselves crazy watching this," said my father. He stood and added, "I'll lock the backdoor."

"Hey," said my mother. "We need some hand soap in my bathroom. We're all out."

"We have a pack of bars under the sink," said Terra.

"The bars dry out my skin," said my mother. "Honestly, it's a small thing. It's one bottle."

"If you don't like it, you should live somewhere with bottles," said my father.

I watched the windows. We lived behind the highway. When the screens were open, we could hear the cars. I'd always thought a killer would find our house first—easy entry, easy exit. I counted headlights. I wrapped a quilt around my shoulders and waited for someone to walk through the trees.

I continued my investigation the next morning on the way to the hospital. My mother didn't want to talk about it. She had weekends off because she wanted us to spend time together. Usually, we just drove around until gas got low. She liked to listen to the local college radio because they played her song requests. When I visited Gillian, she waited in the car.

"What do you think is the best way to kill someone?" I asked my mother.

"How should I know?"

"What's your best guess," I said. "I'm not asking from experience."

"I'm sure a gun," she said. "If I have to choose."

"I was thinking poison. It seems easy."

"Poison takes a long time," she said. "It isn't very predictable. You shouldn't talk like this in front of Gillian."

"Gillian's practically a poison expert. She just has a horrible gag reflex."

"She's very lucky."

"I think if you didn't have a gag reflex, poison would still be an option," I said. "Stabbing the Dead Boy in the face takes guts."

"Don't call him the Dead Boy. Why don't you talk to Gillian about the Spring Ball?"

"I don't want to talk about the Spring Ball," I said. "No one is talking about the Spring Ball."

I was allowed to visit Gillian on Saturdays before noon. Usually, we spent some of the time talking and some of the time painting our nails. We liked black French manicures because they seemed like something vampires would wear. Gillian wasn't allowed to go online, so I kept her updated on whatever people had been saying that week: Patrick brought a whole KFC Party Pack for lunch, Georgie still hadn't gotten her period—that sort of thing. I always left out the whispers about her—how she wasn't even cool enough to kill herself, that she might as well hire someone to help her. I figured it was better to keep some things to myself.

Of course, Gillian wanted to talk about the Dead Boy. We sat at a small cafeteria table and traded theories. Her hair was coiled into tight braids that swung around her shoulders like tentacles. I'd never seen her without them. Ever since I'd known her, I'd wanted to unravel them.

"Show me a picture," she said. She had her hands crossed a breakfast tray. Gillian was head of a floor-wide hunger strike, because the food was bad and because she needed something to do. A dozen girls had joined. They didn't eat lunch or dinner. They poured

peas down the sink, stuffed potatoes into mattresses. Gillian had already flicked her roll onto the floor.

"The police haven't released pictures," I said. "But I bet they're disgusting."

"I can't believe I'm stuck in here," she said. "The one year a murderer comes to town."

"He was probably always in town," I said. "Statistically."

"Sure."

"Still, it's disappointing."

"It's shitty."

"You say shitty now?"

"Everyone says shit here."

"Shit," I said. "Wow.

"We're practically fourteen, Libby."

"Sure," I said.

"You grow up fast in here," she said. "You have to be very mature."

"Of course."

"You have to be lonely a lot of the time," Gillian continued. "You have to think about life a lot. Sometimes, you have to think about it so much you stop feeling like yourself –like your fingers are someone else's fingers. You have to think about other stuff too—like toiletries. They monitor us in the bathroom so we don't choke ourselves with toothbrushes. That's what they think we'll do. That's what we have to think about."

"Wow," I said. "I've never thought about any of that."

"Then you couldn't understand."

"Huh," I said. "That's really shitty."

"Anyway, my toothbrush is tiny. Even with my gag reflex, I could probably swallow it."

"I think the murderer is still in town," I said. "I think he's a sociopath."

"Do you even know what a sociopath is?"

I could tell that she knew, and that she was going to tell me.

"Of course," I said.

"I think you meant psychopath. A psychopath has violent tendencies. Sociopaths are just weird."

One of the worst things about Gillian going to the hospital was that she'd become a total know-it-all. Sometimes, I started to get angry with her, and then I remembered how sad she must be—alive when all she wanted was sleep. She must have been numb as bricks.

"You're right," I said. "I meant psychopath."

Monday was Terra and my father's anniversary—a whole year of marriage. It had not flown by. I wondered whether I should make a card. Terra cooked pancakes into misshapen hearts. My mother sat at the kitchen table, searching condos online. My father had promised to pay the realtor fee if she could find a place by spring. But she was too disorganized for favors, impulsive without the net of youth to save her. She had high expectations.

"Do you want your own bathtub?" she asked me. "Or just a shower."

"Why don't you focus on the price?" said my father. He chewed a bite of pancake. "What did you put in these?

"They're sugar free," said Terra. "Heart healthy, for the baby. And for *my* baby." She kissed my father's ear for a while.

"They're awful," said my father.

"This one's in Wellesley," my mother said. "What do you think about this house?"

"That's probably the fanciest house I've ever seen," I said. "Look at the shrubbery."

"Why don't you put in a bid?" said Terra.

"I've never been to Wellesley," said my mother. "It's on the list."

My mother had a list of things she hadn't done—like a bucket list, except she wasn't planning on doing any of them. Reading it only depressed her.

"I don't care where you go," my father said.

"We can go to Wellesley," I said. "We can walk around and get *scones*."

"That's not what I mean," my mother said. She grabbed a pancake with two fingers.

"Those aren't yours," said Terra, swatting.

At school, we had an assembly to talk about the murder. The police had released details of a possible suspect—tall, white, male. I looked around the auditorium suspiciously.

The victim was a sibling of one of the seniors, a girl named Mauve who I'd heard smoked e-cigarettes in the handicap bathroom. Our principal brought Mauve on stage and rested a hand on her shoulder. Her face was puffed up like a sausage. She looked lonely and small. I couldn't imagine her smoking anything. Everyone paused for a moment of silence. I didn't think there was anyone I wanted to be less at that moment than Mauve. I guessed, maybe, the Dead Boy.

In Discrete Math, a guidance counselor spoke to us very slowly. "If you feel like you need to talk to someone at any point, please come down to our office. I urge you to seek out any help available."

I wondered where the body was, if the Dead Boy was an organ donor. I wondered if his heart and lungs had been plucked out by tweezers and squished into another dying boy.

"What about the killer?" Nick said. "We shouldn't even be in school."

"Experts believe the victim was a target attack," said the guidance counselor. "We should be cautious, but not concerned."

"Who are experts?" I asked.

"Very intelligent people," she said.

Ms. Charles abstained from the usual lesson plan and allowed us to console each other. She passed out paper so we could write nice notes to classmates.

"Show your friends how much you care."

Everyone began to whisper about the murder or the Spring Ball—or both, because each somehow made the other more exciting. Rumors that the janitor—Mr.

Morse—was the killer had started to circle. He was tall enough, plus he had access to the boys' locker room—which seemed somehow important. A few of the girls in the front row were crying.

I wrote a note to my dog, who'd died last fall.

Dear Sully, I wish you were here so I could pat your head. We've canceled class because a kid is dead.

Then I tore the sheet in half. Nick folded his paper and shoved it into my hand. It spelled *I'm a Pervert for You* in block letters.

"I'm not going to the Spring Ball," he said.

"I don't care."

"If I was the killer, I would go," he said. "I'd kill again."

"I don't think the killer would do that," I said. "My mom said the murder was targeted."

"Your mom doesn't know anything," he said. "My parents say she doesn't even understand divorce."

"Your parents are the dumbest cookies in the jar," I said.

I stuffed his note into my mouth and spit it out onto the ground.

After school, I found four stuffed garbage bags lined up at our front door. I heard my mother in the kitchen. The drawers were open and she was grabbing silverware. She had a smaller trash bag in her hand.

"I thought we were getting burgled," I said.

"What?"

My mother continued to shove spoons into the bag. I'd forgotten about the deadline. I'd almost assumed he was joking, my father. He knew she had no where to go. My mother grabbed a steak knife and slid it carefully into the bag.

"Your father and I had a conversation," she said.

"What does that mean?"

"I'm going to stay with Rhonda, for a while."

Rhonda was my mother's friend from high school who lived across town. She owned a salon and was always covered in trimmed hair. She called me *babe*.

"Why are you doing with all those knives?" I asked.

"Separating property."

"Where's Dad?"

"On the boat."

"Oh."

My father and Terra had made anniversary reservations on a harbor cruise. They were probably eating breadsticks and frog legs. I imagined them sinking into the dark water, deep down under the waves.

"What am I supposed to do?" I said.

"You'll stay with me. You're my daughter."

She rested the bag on the table and pressed her palms together in Prayer Pose. Sometimes, she watched yoga clips online. Her skills were extremely limited.

"I'm not welcome here," she said. "And I shouldn't be. This isn't what I'm supposed to be doing."

"What are you supposed to be doing?"

"I have no idea."

"What about the ball?"

"The ball? I'll help you get ready and then we'll head out. I want to be gone before he's back."

"I don't want to stay with Rhonda," I said. "I don't like Rhonda."

"You can live wherever you want after you graduate."

I thought about living with Rhonda for four years. I imagined waking up covered in hair, day after day—a bone-chilling dream-sequence. Four years was a long time.

"It's going to be great," my mother said. "It's going to be fine. Think about the ball. We can take a picture for Gillian. I'd bet she'd like that."

"I don't think she would," I said.

My mother had sewn my dress from a pair of satin pants—navy blue and wrinkled. Gold buttons were glued to the pockets and along the back. It looked like a bargain sailor costume. My mother curled my hair in the bathroom and let me wear her lipstick. I stood in front of the mirror with hands over the buttons.

"It still looks like a pair of pants," I said.

"Don't be silly. You just have to stand up straighter. You should also stop biting your lips, or I'll have to apply another coat."

"What if the killer is at the ball?"

"Sweetheart," she said. "You don't have to go. You can come with me to Rhonda's. We can watch a movie."

"I was thinking," I said. "We don't have to bother Rhonda at all if we just move to California."

I'd recently come to this conclusion, through minimal geographical research.

"Sunnyvale, California is the safest city in the country," I said. "They have palm trees."

"It's really called Sunnyvale?"

"They've got a whole park dedicated to palms," I said. "I'm sure Rhonda would be just fine on her own."

At the Spring Ball, I lingered by the doors with a girl named Sarah, a backup friend whose mother had made her wear long-sleeves. She'd pushed them up to her elbows and was crossing her arms. There was a small memorial banner for the Dead Boy hanging from the basketball net.

"I don't think I'm going to dance," she said. "Do you think you're going to dance?"

"I don't know. Probably not."

The dance floor was mostly empty. Students had collected around the perimeter in small groups. I wondered if my father and Terra were dancing, holding each other under big pink lights. I wondered if her baby was breathing. Parental chaperones circulated the room. Security had multiplied due to the circumstances, which meant dates stayed arms lengths away.

"I can't believe Mauve showed up," said Sarah.

"She did?"

"I would've thought she'd be at the jail."

"Why?"

"They've got her uncle. They're charging him, supposedly."

"With what?" I said. "With the murder? That doesn't make any sense."

"How would you know?"

I thought about my own uncle. He was old and fat and rarely remembered my name, even on birthday cards. He lived in Fort Lauderdale. I wondered if he'd ever thought about killing me.

"I guess he's a total sociopath," said Sarah.

"Do you even know what a sociopath is?" I said.

During the slow song, I stepped outside into the parking lot. Kids had filtered out around the doors, sharing Red Bulls and quick kisses. It was warmer than I wanted it to be. I liked when the cold pricked my shoulders, when my feet grew numb. I missed winter as much as my mother hated it. I could see the crime scene across the street, the soccer fields glowing under the lights. I crossed over and walked through the grass in my nice shoes. The goal was small, recreational size. It was round and orange and I wanted it to be different. I wanted it to be the biggest goal I'd ever seen, a netted mausoleum. I crawled inside and laid on my back. I stuck my legs through the holes and wondered how much torn flesh would burn.

I called Gillian's old cell phone. I knew she didn't have it—all modes of communication had been taped into a box in her bedroom—but I waited, thinking maybe she'd somehow pick up. Her voicemail was the same—she hadn't changed it once—a girl three years younger explaining how to leave a message.

"Hi Gill," I said. "Greetings from Earth. You're probably asleep. Tonight was the Spring Ball. But you didn't miss much—or anything. I didn't dance. Sarah was my only option and she was being a klutz, so. Anyway! I'm continuing my research. I'm making progress. I'm in the net right now. It isn't so big. I just can't imagine sitting here *knowing* what was about to happen. Like seeing the knife and feeling all alone. It is sad in the saddest way. I don't know. I really miss you. You probably won't hear ever this message. Maybe your mom will. Hi Mrs. Kenney. OK. I'll see you Saturday. This is Libby, by the way."

A Good Kind of Break

That summer, Meg sunburned—second degree—all over. It was not gradual. She woke one morning, a Monday in late July, to find red legs and red arms and a red belly hanging out of her pajama bottoms. Half her face was red—the left half—like she'd slept in the sun on her side. She stripped and stared at herself in the bathroom mirror, feeling crisp as a roast pig, wondering what had happened in her sleep to send her skin ablaze. She had little idea how to proceed, and she would have laughed at the reflection if she hadn't hurt so badly.

From the bathroom, she phoned sick to work and lathered herself in Vaseline. She drove to the hospital with icepacks taped around her thighs, wearing sunglasses and thick winter gloves. There was not much the doctor could do. "Stay out of the sun, away from windows. You can burn indoors; people don't know this." Meg was turning twenty-three that August, turning twenty-three alone in a studio without a dishwasher or proper carpeting. She was close to creating a profile on a dating site Nell had recommended. She was closer to buying a pillow shaped like a person and suffocating herself in its arms. At the hospital, the doctor removed Meg's clothes and ran water over her skin.

"You should be wearing sunscreen." He handed her a prescription for antibiotics. "Do you have anyone to call?"

It was a complicated question, and the answer was always Nell. There was no one else. Her mother had died and her father was in Charlotte, with a wife and three children. She had met Nell in college, and in the wake of the death—two months without her mother—Meg had clung to her. Now there was only Nell—Nell who called her Kiddo or

Margaret, depending on her mood. Nell, whom she blamed for the burn.

"It's fine," said Meg. "My car is here."

Meg was a technical assistant at the library and was mostly surprised the sun had found her. She had not spent much time outdoors. Her job consisted primarily of setting up projectors in dimly lit rooms. Daylight was limited; perhaps she had grown sensitive. She had spent the previous weekend on Nell's rooftop, gluing strips of newspaper around wire to make animal masks. Nell was back into paper-mâché. She was going to hang the masks above her bed, like mobiles. Nell's roof had been hot and the glue had been messy, so Meg had worn a swimsuit. She'd slept, that night, with socks on her hands, to keep them smooth. It was something her mother had done, something silly but tangible, a memory that didn't blur.

In the morning, her body was red and peeling. There were flakes in her sheets and, for once, she felt thankful there was no one beside her, no boyfriend to choke on the dead skin.

Nell stayed over for a week, promising to aid with bandages and groceries and the general housekeeping. Meg knew the agreement was only semi-philanthropic: Nell's AC had crashed and Meg had central air. The pledge of charity was slowly forgotten. By Wednesday, the fridge had emptied and the sheets were gritty. Nell slept on the couch in the hallway and sometimes in Meg's bed. She watched *Lord of the Rings* for nine and a half hours while Meg slept beside her. The television lit the room like an arcade, electric and green. They did not leave the house. They ate under the covers, microwave taquitos and popcorn. Meg laid supine, body stiff and crimson. Nell called her Lizard because her

skin shed like scales.

Meg had never burned before. Her mother had always been thorough with sunscreen, with visors and swim shirts and rainbow umbrellas. In Denver, beach outings were limited, but when they flew east, to the seashore, her mother was prepared. Meg would wear two layers of sunscreen: one cream, one spray. She would sulk, with sticky hands, in a sandy beach chair. Everything clung to her, like she'd rolled in butter.

Sometimes they would stop by Charlotte to see her father, for an afternoon or an hour. Meg's parents had divorced when she was an infant. Her father had moved to North Carolina and had remarried a woman with short hair and large ears. A woman called Carol. When Meg and her mother visited, Carol would make lemonade and Meg's parents would stare at each other without speaking. It was all for their daughter, this strange, silent reunion. This was before her father's children, the three of them, all blonde and big eared. This was before she left for college, before her mother got sick—fast—and the doctors could only apologize. Before her father had sent letters, because he hadn't known her phone number.

She had only recently renewed communication with him. It was strange, not knowing someone she shared blood with. Sometimes he sent money, for rent and groceries, but Meg didn't need it. Her apartment was cheap and her pay was steady and it wasn't like she ever went anywhere. Meg kept the cash in a shoe box under her bed. Sometimes, she would take it out and throw money in the air, like rich girls in the movies.

For two weeks, Meg stayed indoors, rotating from the library to her bed and back again. She had started using a crock pot, timing her meals so they were hot and ready when she returned home in the evenings. She had bought expensive sheets and a lamp that turned off when she clapped. Her legs were covered, twelve hours each day, in bandages. She felt like a before-ad for skin cream.

Nell was done with favors—her AC had revived and she'd adopted a cat. Meg knew the sympathy had expired. She spent most evenings alone with her laptop, watching pirated films on the cracked screen. Nell called only to scold her. She explained, as often as she could, her frustration with Meg's lack of social initiative. Meg had sworn off outings. The skin was too much, the boiled mess of it. She was even refusing the birthday party Nell had scheduled. Nell had chosen the restaurant, the date, her shoes. She had sent out invitations and had retracted them once Meg had found out and complained.

"I don't want a party," Meg said.

"You're wallowing," Nell said, over the phone. "It's unattractive."

It was Saturday, before noon. Meg was turning twenty-three in an hour. She had the weekends off in the summer, and she spent the time playing solitaire or emailing the local paper. She liked to send potentially controversial letters to the editors. They had yet to publish any.

"We're celebrating tonight," said Nell. "Lucas is coming. I've got big plans."

"What about Tyler?"

Tyler was Nell's sort-of boyfriend, a twenty-two-year-old barista from Liverpool. He was in the states on an expired student visa and he slept in Nell's bed three nights a week. He called Meg *Marge*.

"He's busy," said Nell. "You're never nice to him."

"He's a difficult person to be nice to."

"You're being rude. I was nice enough to plan everything."

"Let's postpone," said Meg. "Everything's peeling. Like glue. And it hurts. You have no idea how much it hurts."

"I know what a sunburn is. I'll bring some Aloe Vera."

"I still look awful."

"Wear a big shirt."

In the background, someone screamed and Nell swore quietly.

"Are you at work?" Meg asked. She stuck a hand into an open bag of tortilla chips. She was now an expert at eating in bed, hoisting big bunches to her mouth with little spillage.

"Yes. It's a zoo."

Nell manned the dressing room at a children's clothing store in town. She'd scored the job last month, through an aunt. It paid alright, but Meg knew how uncomfortable it made her. Something about the curtains, how they never fully closed. The children were oblivious, parading half-dressed down the mirrored hall. Meg had visited Nell at work one afternoon and found her passing shirts to the children with her eyes closed.

"I can't talk to you anymore," Nell said. "I'll see you at five."

Meg hung up and tossed the phone across the room. She liked to break things. It was strangely calming, an object fracturing on the floor. Earlier that week, she'd sent a bowl and one of the remotes flying at the wall. Her mother used to do it, plates or picture

frames. Pick it up and throw it, watch it shatter into bits. Sometimes at work, Meg would stare at the line of projectors, the stacks of books, and think about shoving. She pictured launching boxes, two-handed, at the info desk or her supervisor. Meg pulled the covers over her head and listened to the television with her eyes closed. It was a Christian program, a woman planting flowers. Meg's garden was dying, all weeds. Some dogs had started using it as a bathroom and she almost didn't mind. At least it was serving a purpose.

Meg turned twenty-three in her sleep and when she woke her father still had not called. She hadn't expected him to, but she was disappointed. Instead, she found Nell on her bed, cross-legged, eating cheese sticks. She had a pile of them in her lap, all wrapped in plastic. Her hair was blue, a deep cobalt that darkened at the roots. It had been pink yesterday. The shade changed often, crayon colors, reds and greens that she painted herself with bleach and drugstore dyes. Nell ripped a cheese stick into strands and smiled.

"Happy birthday." Nell crawled toward Meg and shook her shoulders with both hands.

"Watch out," said Meg.

"Enough," said Nell. "They look fine." She patted Meg's arm. The burns had puffed and crystalized, like piles of sandpaper.

Meg sat up slowly and rubbed her eyes. It was unnerving, waking when the sun was so bright. She felt like her face was on backwards. She lifted her legs carefully off of the bed and stood, balancing with a hand on the lampshade. Her phone laid, unharmed, between piles of jeans.

"Your room smells like tacos," said Nell. "And hair."

"Where are we going?" Meg unwrapped the bandages around her knees. The skin was still red, but the scabs had hardened and the puss had drained. She was able to sit and bend and press her legs together without screaming. She was now only visually repulsive.

"Don't be so gloomy," said Nell. She pulled the window shade with two fingers and it sprung up, revealing blue sky.

Meg pulled a wafer of skin from her shoulder. The skin beneath it was red and glossy, stinging in the AC.

"Are we picking up Lucas?"

"Yes," said Nell. "We're eating early. Now that you're old and gray." Nell swatted Meg's hand away from the skin. "You should wear something nice. Have you left the bed at all?"

"No, but I've been productive."

"Sure."

"I've been online. Do you remember the guy you brought to our sophomore formal?"

"I think I was barely conscious."

"There's a man who looks exactly like him in the paper," Meg said. "Arrested for public urination. He's a sex offender. It doesn't give a name though."

"That's cute."

"He met your parents. You said you could see yourself marrying him."

"You're peeling," said Nell. "You're peeling really bad."

At six, Nell drove Meg in her Subaru, bright blue, to Lucas's house. She had changed her clothes at Meg's apartment, borrowing a skirt and a necklace and a pair of yellow earrings. She drove barefoot, shoes in her lap. Lucas was a substitute teacher and Meg assumed they were friends. It was never clear in the city. She had little idea what he did most of the time, or if their limited social interactions totaled to friendship. Meg had met Lucas through Nell, because Nell knew everyone. She had friends in each neighborhood, strange friends with piercings and dietary restrictions and bicycles. She had no preference.

Nell had met Lucas three years ago. They had both audited a course at Brown, "The Male Gaze in Nude Watercolor." Lucas had taken the class to meet women, and had unfortunately met Nell. She had dragged him home days later, for cheap sushi and a conversation with Meg. Lucas's dating life was arguably worse than Meg's. The women in which he was interested rarely noticed or acknowledged him, but he refused to lower his standards. Meg didn't think he was attractive enough to be so confident, but she liked him anyway. Sometimes they sat and said nothing for hours. Meg found it refreshing.

"I made a birthday playlist," Nell said. She pressed the radio buttons without looking. "Songs that are old, but not too old. Like you."

"Thanks." Meg pulled the sleeve of her dress. It had been a feat to find garments that covered her legs, arms, and neck. Nell had attempted to style her, pair together items somewhat in fashion to produce a coherent outfit. The only part uncovered was Meg's face, pink and peeling. Her final ensemble was exclusively brown, like a monk's or a mailman's, or a tree's.

"Did you bring cash?" she asked.

Nell was notorious for forgetting her wallet. She had done so at two of Meg's birthdays, one during which she had accumulated a $220 bill. They had gone into Boston, ordering pricey drinks on an open tab. Nell had continued to order pricey drinks until she couldn't stand. She had vomited twice before realizing, in the bathroom, that her purse was empty.

"Fuck you," said Nell.

"Did you?"

"I think so."

At Lucas's house, Nell honked and rolled down her window to smoke a cigarette. She had great teeth for a smoker. It was all performance: the slow drag, the gray cloud seeping through pursed lips. Nell knew that Meg was watching, and she inhaled without coughing.

"Imagine what that's doing to your throat," said Meg. "The sun did this from a million miles away."

"Ninety-three million. You know how hot you'd be if the sun was a million miles away? You'd be on fire."

"I am on fire," said Meg.

Lucas stepped out of the house in a white blazer and wide sun hat. In June, he had moved back in with his parents, because it was cheap and only slightly irritating. His father had retired and his mother sold Dream-Catchers out of the garage. She wove the feathers herself, hawk feathers. It was illegal to sell them in the country, so she traded covertly. She had made one for Meg, a small one with green string and feathers. Meg had hung it in her shower: she liked to touch the wet tails.

Lucas approached the car slowly and Nell laughed, tossing the cigarette onto his driveway. The hat fell over his eyes and he had to hold it up with his hands.

"You look like my gardener," Nell said.

"You don't have a gardener," said Lucas. "Hi Meg."

"Did you weave it?" Nell asked. "Can you make me one?"

"Happy birthday," said Lucas. He sat down behind Nell and rested the hat in his lap.

"Thanks," said Meg. "You look like a fancy scarecrow."

"It's from Macy's," said Lucas. "It's made of Sea grass."

It had rained the night before and worms had gathered at the edges of the driveway. Nell reversed without looking. Meg watched the tires press the thin bodies into the pavement. They folded and flattened, like tiny pairs of socks.

"How nice is this place?" Lucas asked.

"You're overdressed," said Nell. She had still yet to reveal their destination, but she drove quickly, singing with the music and humming when she didn't know the words.

Meg tried on Lucas's hat and pretended that she was in Orlando. Her father and his new wife had taken their children to Disney in April. Meg had seen pictures online. Her father had worn a mouse-eared cap and a lopsided smile and she almost hadn't recognized him. She had saved the image on her desktop. She liked to look at it through the shattered screen.

Meg was expecting a restaurant, at least. A place with tablecloths and unnecessary quantities of silverware. A waiter in all white. When Nell parked in front of the Whiskey

Republic, Meg remained buckled.

"You're kidding," Meg said.

"What?" said Nell. "It's your favorite."

Meg and Nell were regulars at the bar. The owner liked that they could drink, that they spent money and they weren't entirely unattractive. They always got in, even on busy nights, which were rare. The place was windowless, humid in every season. Meg was surprised that they took reservations.

"I hate this place," said Lucas. "I thought we were branching out."

"You said you made a reservation," said Meg. "Somewhere that serves food."

"You love the pickles," said Nell. "I told them to save us the good side of the bar."

"It always smells like pee," said Lucas. "Like fresh pee."

"It does," said Meg.

"Margaret," said Nell. "You love it."

The good side of the bar was empty, marked with a small taped sign. The bartender offered a complimentary pitcher of beer and they sipped with their heads down. Meg held the glass to her forehead and Nell took out her wallet.

"I've got enough to buy you two good drinks," she said. "So choose wisely."

"We should go," said Meg. "I'm canceling my birthday."

"I'll get tequila," said Nell.

Lucas had already ordered a martini. He liked them with bowls of olives on the side. He sipped and pointed at Meg with two fingers.

"This is an interesting outfit." He stuck an olive in his mouth. "How's the skin?"

"I'm dealing with a limited supply," Meg said.

Nell returned with a tray of beverages. She rested it on the table and lifted a glass. "I got a birthday deal," she said. "Half off if we can finish these."

Lucas lifted his martini and spit an olive pit onto the counter. "Congrats on another year, Megan," he said.

"You're no spring chicken," said Nell. "You're old and I'm older and we're all alone."

"Thanks," said Meg.

They sipped. They finished their first drinks and gulped down more, until they had emptied the tray and were buying another. Meg threw money at Nell and they bought a round of frozen margaritas with colored umbrellas. It was barely nine, and they were dizzy. Meg's burns had stopped itching. She laughed and rolled up her sleeves and her friends laughed harder when they saw her skin.

"I didn't get you a present," said Lucas. "I forgot. I'm a bad friend."

"I got her one," said Nell.

"She did," said Meg. Nell had given her a raspberry Danish and a stuffed raccoon named Harriet. Harriet was missing a paw and Meg was almost sure that Nell had found it in one of the dressing rooms.

"I'll get you something right now," said Lucas. He stood and tried to finish the pitcher of beer. The liquid spilled out of his mouth and down the front of his white blazer. He was still wearing the hat.

"Is this a sex thing?" asked Nell.

"Probably" said Meg.

"Give her cash," said Nell. "Give her your wallet."

"I want a projector," said Meg. She had only just realized. She could see herself in the library, in the darkness, with her hands around the boxes. She wanted to throw them. They were smooth and glossy and glowed in the dark.

"What?" Lucas asked.

"They have them at the library," said Meg. "There's barely any security. We can grab them easily."

"You're drunk," said Nell.

"That's really what you want?" asked Lucas.

"No way," said Nell, grinning. "No way."

"How would we get in?" asked Lucas.

"Window," said Meg. "Door. Easy."

"Easy," said Lucas. "Fine."

"Fine?" said Nell.

"Why not?" Meg finished her drink and stood quickly. Her balance was off, and she held onto the stool to stay straight. She watched them stare at her, at the red in her cheeks. Everything had grown pinker with alcohol. She was serious, almost. It was something that her mother would have done, something that she hoped her mother would have done. Meg could never be sure. There were pieces of the woman she had only half-learned, pieces she would never know and never understand. She had watched her mother break glass. She had watched her break into bits, shatter into a mess of herself on a hospital bed. Meg grabbed her bag and one of Lucas's olives.

"It's my birthday," she said.

The roads were busy and Nell was too drunk to drive, so they left the car in the lot and walked the six blocks to the library. It was hot. Meg took off her sweater and tied it around her waist. Lucas trailed behind, pausing to spit into the sidewalk. He didn't handle liquor well, and soon, they knew, he would vomit. The girls grabbed him under the arms and darted down the block in crooked strides. There was barely a moon but under the city lights their faces glowed like masks.

The library was unlit and in the darkness Meg hardly recognized it. It was off the main road, nested between a playground and a neglected dog park. In summer, Meg ate lunch on the swings, sipping Cherry Coke and kicking dirt with bare feet. The park was empty now, and without traffic, the street was quiet. Meg stared at the front door and tried not to feel dizzy.

"So," said Nell. She pressed her face against the glass window. "What now?"

"I don't know," said Meg. "We go in."

Nell tapped the window with a fist. "These are thick," she said. "I don't think they'll break easily."

"Fuck," said Meg.

"You try," Nell said to Lucas. She pushed him towards the door. "It's your gift."

Lucas rubbed his palms together and raised a hand high. He whacked the glass hard, wincing.

"Get a running start," said Meg. "Try a leg."

"Hurry up," said Nell.

Lucas backed away from the door and lunged forward, bouncing on his toes. He ran with short strides and kicked hard with one foot, flying backwards. He repeated the procedure twice more without success. Nell sat on the pavement.

"This is stupid," she said. "Let's go dancing."

Lucas sat and rubbed his feet. "Is there another way in?" he asked. "We could get a rock."

"Where do you see a rock?" asked Nell. She was impatient, Meg knew. She rarely waited to see things through. "You don't need a projector Margaret. Let's find another bar."

"I can't drink anymore," said Lucas.

"It isn't your birthday," said Nell.

"Wait," said Meg. She had just remembered. "I have a key."

"What?" said Lucas.

"In my wallet. I open up on Fridays. I have a key for the front door."

"You're kidding."

"I'm sorry." Meg unzipped her purse and searched for the small key. She was only supposed to use it during the day, but she knew that there was no alarm, no cameras. The place was slow to update. The projectors were new this year: the only accessory that brought them into the century. Meg found the key and inserted it into the hole in the front door. It was an easy turn, a twist of the wrist, and they were in. Nell stood up and walked inside. No alarm, no cop car. They strolled past the front desk, staring at the empty tables, the rows of books.

"I can't believe you work here," said Nell. "It smells like my basement."

"We have flooding problems," said Meg. She was whispering. "The carpets are molding."

"You need a better security system," said Nell.

"Where are the projectors?" asked Lucas.

"They're usually in the back room," said Meg. She led them through Non-Fiction and Biography, past Romance and into Children's. There was a small corner room with glass windows and four projectors lined up inside. They sat on a table, cords wrapped around them in even coils. Meg smiled. She wanted to hold one. She wanted to hold one over her staircase and watch it fall. "There," she said, pointing.

"Alright," said Lucas. He walked to the door and looked inside. "You don't think this is a bad idea?"

"Just take one," said Nell. "I'm starving."

Lucas stared into the room and slowly grabbed the knob. He twisted his hand but the door remained closed. He tried again, shoving with his body. "Give me the key."

Meg handed it to him and watched nervously as he stuck it into the hole. Lucas jammed it hard but the lock refused and the door stuck. "It's not working."

"Do you have another key?" Nell asked.

"I just have that one."

"Jesus," said Nell.

"It's too thick to break," said Lucas. "I'm not gonna try."

"Let's go," said Nell.

Meg stared at the windows. She punched one with her fists and it remained unmarked. She kicked at the door and lost her balance, falling backwards onto the floor.

"Come on," said Nell. "It's not worth it."

Meg walked slowly back to the front door, trailing behind Nell and Lucas. She ran her fingers along the bookshelves, sending paperbacks spilling onto the ground. It was quiet, the sound of books on carpet. There was no satisfaction, no shock in the landing. From the front desk, she grabbed a glass paperweight, star-shaped and gleaming.

Outside, Lucas leaned against the brick wall and closed his eyes. The streetlights seemed brighter. A car passed as Meg closed the door and she jumped behind a bush.

"Let's go," said Nell. "This was a waste of time."

"I have to piss," said Lucas.

"You can piss later," said Nell.

"I have to piss now." Lucas stood and coughed into his hand. His eyes were crossing and he looked like he could fall asleep.

Meg leaned against the door and watched Lucas unzip his pants. He pulled them down to his ankles and shuddered. Meg stared at his butt. It was taut, like a doll's. In the lights, it gleamed like rubber.

"Fucker," Nell said. "There's probably a bathroom inside."

Lucas closed his eyes. The girls waited, silently. They watched him spray water in loops on the grass. Nell groaned and squatted over the sidewalk.

"What are you doing?" asked Meg.

"It's contagious," said Nell. "Like sneezing. I gotta go."

Meg too felt her bladder filling. There was no one around, no cars passing. She sighed and lifted her skirt. "We're never talking about this."

They coated the pavement, careful to avoid toes, spraying like three sinks left

running. Nell laughed and tried to keep her balance. Meg held her hand and almost smiled. She didn't notice when the headlights turned on, but she heard the car door open—heavy footsteps, sturdy boots. Meg watched the policeman approach. She could see him now, his uniform. He was wearing a hat and carrying a flashlight. When she felt herself illuminated, she covered her stomach and stood. Lucas tried to walk but his pants pulled his feet together. Nell continued to urinate. The policeman stopped a yard or so in front of them.

"It's hot out, huh?" he said.

Nell spit into the pavement and wiped her mouth. "We're celebrating," she said. "It's my best friend's birthday."

The police station was surprisingly cheerful. The lobby walls were covered in drawings from the local elementary school. There were two people in the holding room, drunk and half asleep. It was barely ten. The policeman sat them down and told them that they could make phone calls within the hour. They weren't cuffed. They sat on a wooden bench in a room with a vending machine. Meg had never been inside the station before, and she was sort of disappointed. In the brightness, she was aware of her skin. The way it shriveled at corners, glowing like fresh wounds. Lucas rested his head on Nell's shoulder and closed his eyes.

"Who are you gonna call?" Nell asked. "Also, do you think they'll give us quarters for the machine? They have Snickers."

"I don't know," said Meg.

The policeman brought them out individually, Meg first. The phone was in a

small room locked from the outside. She was allowed five minutes. She stared at the phone, still drunk. She picked up the receiver and thought about which numbers to dial, if she should dial any. If it would matter if she did or didn't. The policeman knocked and told her that she had three minutes remaining. Meg dialed the only number she had memorized and waited as the line rang. She knew he was probably asleep.

A boy answered, and it caught Meg by surprise when she heard the young voice say hello. It was Daniel. He was only eleven. Meg hadn't expected an answer, but Daniel was awake and Daniel had picked up and Meg wasn't sure what to say.

"Hi," she said. "It's Meg."

"Who?"

"Meg. Is my dad there?"

There was a pause, a sound of small footsteps. She wondered if he would hang up. "Hi Meg," he said eventually. "One second."

There was one minute left in her phone call. The officer gestured through the window, shaking a finger. She heard the phone change hands and she waited.

"Meg?" Her father's voice was quiet, like he'd been sleeping. She realized she had not heard him speak in over a year. He was almost sixty.

"Hi Dad."

"What's going on?"

"I got arrested. I indecently exposed myself."

"You're in jail?"

"I peed on the sidewalk. I guess it's illegal. Actually, I knew it was illegal, but it's not like I was doing it maliciously. And it was dark. We were at the library."

The officer tapped the window.

"Really, I just wanted to steal a projector," Meg said.

"What?"

"It's my birthday today. I wanted to steal it for my birthday."

"Do you have someone to help you out? Do you need anything?"

"You didn't call." Meg picked at her shoulder and held the skin flake between her fingers. "It's my birthday and you didn't call."

There was a short pause and a shuffle. Meg thought she could hear Carol waking.

"You know I miss you," he said.

"That's an easy thing to say."

The officer took the phone and rested it on the hook. He led Meg back into the waiting area, staring at her arms.

"Are you receiving medical attention?" he asked. "For that."

"For what?" Meg asked. She lifted an arm and waved it at the officer's face. "I'm part lizard. Gecko."

In the waiting room, Meg took off her shoes and walked barefoot. The officer waited at the door. Lucas was supine, snoring. Nell's makeup was smudged under her eyes and she looked haunted.

"Who did you call?" Nell asked.

"My dad."

"Jesus," said Nell. "I'm our only chance."

"Don't call Tyler," said Meg. "Call someone else."

"Why?"

"You have a lot of friends," said Meg. "Just pick one."

"Don't do this," said Nell.

"What?"

"This pity thing. We're supposed to be having fun." Nell dusted a skin flake from Meg's shoulder. "And you know how much I love you."

The station was cold. Meg tucked her knees to her chest and wrapped her fingers around her toes. Lucas snored quietly, drooling onto the bench. Nell grinned and rested her head on Meg's shoulder.

"I'm sorry," Nell said. "This was a shitty birthday."

"I've never been to jail before," said Meg. She picked skin from her ankles. "It's nice."

"It is," said Nell. She combed her fingers through her hair. In the lights, it shone like stained-glass. "Next year let's stay home. We can make lemon soufflés."

"Please," said Meg.

Nell burped and stretched her arms in the air. "How was your dad?"

"I don't know," said Meg.

"He's missing out on a spectacular day."

"Truly." Meg's nail beds were full of skin dust; the remnants of the pieces she had picked. "I stole a paperweight."

"You're *bad*."

Meg brushed her fingers across her knees. She was hungry and drunk and sort of happy. She hoped her father was up, nervous, sweating all over his wife. The officer was no longer in the doorway.

She pulled the paperweight from her bag and held it above her head. It was thin, light enough for Meg to question its functionality. There was a small inscription she could not read, a series of initials along the edges. Meg gripped the weight tightly and thrust it onto the floor.

There was a sharp clang, an echo as the glass splintered. She watched the weight shatter, cracking like a tiny windshield. Nell pulled her close, pressing a cheek against Meg's red shoulder. The burns burned, burned bone-deep, and Meg laughed, kicking the glass with bare feet until they too were red and scorching.

Shangri-La

Bobby changed all the rules. He was the third man that year—at least the third man her mother had brought home and paraded. Helen was sure there had been others, her mother was always out somewhere.

Bobby had an accent from someplace she'd never been and a mole on the tip of his nose. He was the shortest man her mother had ever dated, maybe 5'5". He waddled around their house like he'd slept in a swimsuit, a wet one with sand and salt water. He hadn't tried to lecture her. He hadn't said much of anything to her besides "Good morning" at the breakfast table and "Can't sleep?" in the pantry. They both liked cereal at night. They both had dreams that woke them—around three—usually for hours. Helen tried not to notice these things—the less personal, the better. It was like owning chickens. You couldn't name them if you were going to break their necks.

Helen was going to graduate, to everyone's surprise. Bobby hadn't known her long enough to understand the amazement, the way her mother hung the invitation on their fridge with two magnets. Bobby had graduated straight to a big university in South Florida. He was a legacy, an institution, a straight-A student. Or so he said. Most of the things her mother's boyfriends told her, she ignored. They seemed to have a need to magnify their accomplishments when Helen was in the room, as if she cared, as if she'd know them in a month.

Bobby was different. Bobby slept at the house. Bobby bought groceries. Bobby rubbed her mother's feet in front of the TV and didn't complain about the smell.

Bobby didn't understand why Helen wasn't going to college. She guessed, in his family, it was unheard of, it was the neighbors' kids, not theirs, who screwed up—not even the neighbor's kids, because why would they live on *that* kind of street? They'd probably lived on a cul-de-sac, surrounded by cash, cash, cash.

He was still a low-life. He still wore polo shirts to bed, like he was going golfing, and for all Helen knew he didn't have a job. He never left the house. He probably had an older brother who'd scooped up the inheritance, left him with nothing but hair gel. It didn't matter. He still had a degree. He might as well have taped it to his forehead.

There were six kids in Helen's class who weren't going to college. It was a high number for the district. Helen's town had received the top SAT scores in the county three years in a row. Most parents hired the same tutor, an old woman from the city. Helen hadn't taken the SATs—her mother hadn't wanted to pay.

The six kids who weren't going to college had special activities the week after graduation. Principal Weiss organized lectures and luncheons in the faculty lounge. They sat in the auditorium for four and a half hours and learned how to organize finances. It was a strangely specific array of information. They practiced writing checks and taking out loans and administering Epi-pens—anything that seemed even slightly useful for survival. Principal Weiss was thorough.

"You are important," he explained. "You are necessary."

Not everyone could go to college—hadn't they heard of capitalism? Some had. But they'd all been lied to, one time or another. Someone had promised—from the front of a classroom—they were going places. They would graduate and enroll in a university and

maybe find something to live for.

Principal Weiss had a son who'd failed college, so he felt a certain responsibility to show them what they could do. He aimed to strike a balance between optimism and practicality, which only evoked confusion. "Possibilities are endless—almost!" He explained this Day One of activities week. He smiled on stage behind the podium and waved his hands. He spoke with half his mouth like he was playing a flute. He'd probably been in marching band—he had that sort of body.

It was obvious no one was listening. Principal Weiss had started crossing and re-crossing his arms. Helen had seen his wife the day before, for the first time. The woman had picked him up after the lecture in a small Volvo. She'd kissed his forehead.

Helen could picture them fucking—it was easy and awful. She couldn't help it, her mind liked to torture. She kept herself up at night with visions of kidnappings, of women drenched in swamp water rising from under her bed, grabbing an ankle or a dangling hand. Principal Weiss was a loud fuck, she bet—like a weed-whacker. He probably spooked the wife, probably sent her flinching and gagging and almost-crying, wondering how she'd fallen for such an ogre—if she'd ever fallen at all—knowing she deserved something better, sort of, knowing she at least deserved something else.

"What do you think?" Principal Weiss asked. His arms were too thick to fully cross. They hung over each other in a wide pretzel. Helen gathered her hair into a fist and curled it around a finger. She watched his forehead crease into thin ripples. No one said anything.

"A job," he said, "is not an *option*. It's not even a *recommendation*. At this point, it's a requirement. Do you understand?" He clapped his hands. "You are beautiful,

wonderful people, and you have a choice. Don't think that you don't have a choice. But you need to be practical. You need to be obstinate. You need to know what obstinate means. Someone? Someone tell me what obstinate means."

He had low expectations but high hopes. The future was bright, he assured them. The future was the well-lit end of a subway tunnel, the stairs up to the street. He had it all in the presentation, cartoon metaphors pasted between paragraphs.

"You've got to look forward," he said. He sat down on the edge of the stage, his knees level with Helen's face. "You've got to get off the train."

The six kids barely took up the front row. They stared up at the man who into the mic and shuffled through his presentation. *What can YOU do? How can YOU succeed?* Helen didn't know. She barely knew what she was going to do tomorrow. There was a crime show about lifeguards she'd recorded—and maybe if Bobby fell asleep, she could use the TV.

Bobby picked her up from the high school after three. Helen waited in the lobby, holding pamphlets—a print out of the presentation, a list of Weiss' resources. She'd never learned how to drive—she'd enrolled in the school but her mother had forgotten to pay the tuition. They only had one car and sharing it between the three of them would be unnecessarily complicated. Bobby used it during the day. He'd drop Helen off at school, then her mother at work. She ran checkout at the Macy's two towns over. She wore a large name tag and thick perfume. Helen had spent several summer vacations behind the counter, sitting on a stool, reading magazines while her mother scanned items. Macy's provided an endless supply of monotony, but it offered 30% off and two-weeks vacation.

Plus, her mother wasn't qualified to do anything else.

Bobby's car was loud. Something was breaking, or had already broken, a tire, a pipe—Helen didn't know. She could hear it down the block, recognize it even if she closed her eyes. When Bobby pulled into the lot, she walked to the curb and stuffed the pamphlets in her pocket. The engine grated, metal on metal. A few kids lingering by the school looked up and covered their ears.

They drove home the long way. Bobby liked the farmland, the acres of fields at the edge of town. He rolled down all the windows and kept the AC blasting. Helen had her feet on the seat, chin on her knees.

If she was smart, she'd never have to see the school again. She'd received the diploma; she'd emptied her locker. She'd said goodbye to Weiss and the guidance counselor Weiss had set her up with sophomore year—she'd stopped speaking in class and he'd worried she was having trouble connecting. The counselor's name was Julie. She'd sent monthly evaluations to Helen's mother on postcards, quick notes like, *Helen has trouble expressing opinions other than "Sure,"* which was true, but didn't seem—to Helen—problematic.

Bobby didn't say anything. He rested his hand on the top of Helen's seat and hummed. She had no idea what he did during the day. He'd never mentioned a career, or even a former career. He'd told her once, over cereal, that he'd thought about joining the army. He'd printed an application, pinned it to his wall. He'd just graduated college, he'd said, living with his parents in Fort Lauderdale.

"Did you apply?" she'd asked. She'd spoken through her Cheerios. It had been late, past three. She'd been barefoot and he'd been shirtless.

"I thought about it," he'd said.

"Then what?"

"I kept going back and forth, for years. I thought about it for so long, by the time I'd decided I was thirty-six. Too old to enlist."

He'd sort of smiled, in the darkness. Helen had barely been able to see his face, but the light from the hallway had fallen over his lips and she'd watched them curl.

To celebrate the graduation, Helen's mother ordered Italian. There were two competing Italian places in Abalone—Little Italy and Mr. Italian. Mr. Italian was known for reusing table leftovers—bread baskets, uneaten vegetables. There'd been a whole article about it in the local bulletin.

Helen and her mother shared a pizza. Bobby got a whole appetizer platter. Bobby was an appetizer guy. He liked little plates and tiny forks. He said it was healthier—smaller portions—but he ate until the platter was empty.

The dinner table was the coffee table, in front of the plasma. Bobby was on edge since the Celtics had made it to the finals, or the semi-finals—maybe they'd already won, Helen never knew. He leaned towards the TV, a mozzarella stick squeezed in each fist. Helen's mother sat with her feet on Bobby's lap, holding a bottle of nail polish. Her nails were wet, lime green and gleaming. She practically pissed nail polish. Helen never saw her without a bottle.

Bobby pushed the feet off his lap and stood up. Apparently, someone important had the ball. He screamed and threw the mozzarella sticks to the ground.

"Bobby." Helen's mother waved her fingers. "Quit it."

"You see that?" He pointed at the screen. "They just let him blow past. They're like fucking cardboard out there."

"We're eating."

"Christ," he said. He sat and ran a hand through his thinning hair. He was vibrating, fingers twitching. "I could do better."

"Of course you could," Helen's mother said. "But we have to talk about the weekend." She pressed her hands to her hips and leaned backward, her collar bone bulging under her skin like a rope. "Bobby? We have to talk about the weekend."

"On the commercials."

"I have two rooms at a place on the water." She lifted a skewer and studied it. "Friday night. It comes with breakfast, if we want it. You'll want it, huh?" She tapped Bobby on the shoulder. "Hello? You'll want breakfast."

"Sure."

"They have a teen club, too. Helen? They've got a teen club with activities. Movie night. I think they have a jet ski. Go look at the pamphlet."

Helen didn't say anything. Her mother had been saving for the graduation vacation since Helen was a baby. There was a secret fund, which may or may not have lived under her mattress.

She'd been planning the trip since Principal Weiss had given the OK. The grades were sufficient to pass. It had been almost a miracle. Helen hadn't turned in homework for weeks, hadn't done much of anything besides sit at a desk and stare out the window. Not because she was dumb, or slow. She wasn't even dyslexic, which would have been better—almost. She had no excuse. She was just bored. She was useless. She felt like her

whole life was one sad song written by a songwriter who was too sad to even finish it. The songwriter had green eyes and pierced lips and no hair and two moms and a dog who'd died of Lyme disease and a boyfriend who hit her.

Helen was bursting.

The graduation vacation would be a nice change. A new bedroom, a fresh towel. A body of water that wasn't a pond, that wasn't next to the dog park. Who could hate the ocean? Maybe Helen could, if she tried. She was good at hating things. It was an art, perhaps the only one she'd mastered.

Her mother had booked rooms at a place near Willow Cove. Shangri-La, a hotel that called itself a resort, because it could, because the definition of resort was so wide and unspecific. Helen had never been past Boston, there were few reasons to keep going. She'd seen Canada from a plane, Bar Harbor in a photograph. It was enough. Willow Cove was supposed to be nice. Her mother had visited as a child, only once, though she mentioned it enough to have lived there.

"They have a baseball team," her mother said. "Bobby? They have a baseball team. We can see a couple of games. They've got an orchestra."

Bobby was standing again, hands on his face. Helen watched as a man in blue dribbled to the basket and slung in the ball with one hand. Bobby collapsed onto the couch. He stared at the TV without speaking.

"They've got baseball, Bobby." Helen's mother rubbed his shoulder. "Huh? It'll be nice."

They left before dawn. They packed the car as the sun rose. Helen wore pajamas

covered in cartoon bears. She walked through the grass in her socks, dew soaking the cotton. Her mother was wearing lipstick; a thick coat of mascara. Bobby had his hands on her waist. His shirt clung to his stomach, lifting to show skin. He had hair around his bellybutton, a whole forest.

In the car, Helen set her pillow against the window and laid down under the seatbelt. She had her headphones in. She loved crime podcasts. She listened to them to fall asleep, as if they were sweet songs. She enjoyed imagining how others would die, not out of malevolence but rather precaution. There were so many unfortunate possibilities. Life was miraculous and fragile. Helen would select a person and plan out the scenario—a visualized blueprint of a crime scene. It was all in the details. Bobby was a particularly popular subject, though he seemed like the sort of person who would never die.

Shangri-La had a block to itself, three buildings connected by a series of pools and courtyards. It was across from one of the main piers, by the public beach. Helen's mother circled the property twice, pointing out features she recognized. She pulled into a parking spot by the main pool. The area was fenced in with black barbed wire. The water was slightly green. There were two girls practicing dives from the deep end, next to the diving board.

"You can smell the sea," said Helen's mother. "It's exactly how I remember it."

There was a line at reception. The building had high ceilings and large windows. It smelled like the water, the salt of the tide. Helen sat on her suitcase and Bobby took out his phone.

Beside them, a young couple played iSpy with their daughter. The girl chose the red

ceiling, over and over. She spied red six times until her father told her the game was over.

"She is so cute," Helen's mother said.

Helen thought the girl was as cute as an artichoke. She had cropped hair that stuck up in all different directions, cheeks that squished her eyes up to her brows. Her lips were puckered and red, like she'd been sucking poison ivy.

"Thank you," the man said. He lifted his daughters hand into a wave. "Say thank you, Lila."

They spent the rest of the morning by the pool. They'd dragged their suitcases up two flights to their room and changed into their suits. Bobby had turned on the TV, switched it right to ESPN. He suffered a specific type of eczema that worsened in the sun, unlike most cases that improved after exposure. They'd left without him—Helen's mother frowning, saying it was fine.

Helen had forgotten to wear sandals. She followed her mother on her toes, darting along the gravel path. The sun was high, the sky cloudless. They found chairs by the shallow end and stretched out, towels over their faces. Vacations were strange—Helen only sort of understood them. Traveling to a warm place to sit in one spot with closed eyes. She might as well vacation in her bedroom. Their apartment had no AC. Tropical, almost.

Her mother's swimsuit was blue with gold straps. Two piece. When she lifted her arms over her head, the skin stretched thin over her hip bones. She had the towel over her eyes, but she was smiling.

"My mother never let me in the hot tub," she said. "All the other parents were

allowing it. I was almost eight years old. You'd think she'd give me five minutes."

Helen turned onto her stomach. She hung her arms over the chair and picked at the concrete.

"Where'd you get that suit?" her mother asked. "It's nice."

"You bought it for me."

"I did? It's a cute one."

A big man with hairy arms dived into the pool. Helen wondered if anyone had ever drowned in the deep end, if facilities had found a kid—face down some morning—puffy and blue. She saw the girl from reception dipping a small hand into the water, her father hovering behind her. She wore water wings and a whole gallon of sunscreen.

"Is anyone else going anywhere? To celebrate?"

"Most people have parties," Helen said.

"Huh? I'd rather a vacation. You could have a party any day."

"They're supposed to be lame, I guess," said Helen. "Everyone drinks and start kissing each other."

"I'd rather be on vacation."

Helen had limited experience with parties. She'd watched one from her window once, a fortieth birthday for some neighbors across the street. They'd sipped punch from plastic cups and fallen all over the floor. Helen's friend Kate had told her all about college parties. She'd already visited, stayed with a cousin who was a sophomore, who lived a sorority—a good one—with enough alcohol to set the whole pledge class on fire. "Everyone drinks," Kate had said. "I drank so much, I stopped seeing color."

Helen's mother sat up and rubbed her temples. She was already turning pink, her

cheeks and her thighs. She looked better in the swimsuit than Helen ever would.

"I'm talking to Maureen about a spot for you," she said. "In the fall. We've got an open counter. I'd help you get the hang of it. But you could start soon, unless you want a fitting room."

"I don't want a fitting room."

"Then I'll talk to Maureen." Her mother grinned. She'd chipped her tooth on a fork, years back at a P.F. Chang's. Front, bottom. She'd never had it fixed and it stuck out in her smile. She rubbed Helen's head. "You'd be so sweet at checkout."

Shangri-La had a restaurant on the property, a burger shack with torches and plastic martini glasses. Bobby and Helen's mother ordered a whole pitcher of grapefruit margaritas, two tequila shots, and an onion blossom. Helen wasn't hungry. She ate tortilla chips without the salsa and sipped ginger ale.

Bobby had his phone on the table. He kept his eyes on it, sipping through a long straw. His knee brushed Helen's and he coughed. They'd held hands once, half by accident—though everything she did seemed half by accident. In the restaurant, he didn't look up. Helen excused herself. She walked to the bathroom and stood in one of the stalls. The paint was chipped, the floor wet and uneven. Back home, everyone was celebrating. A whole week of parties and booze, of forgetting and letting go. Kate had been accepted to a university in North Carolina and was leaving in early July.

"You can visit, of course," she'd told Helen. "If you get weekends off."

After dinner, they walked to the pier. Helen's mother hummed. She walked in lazy loops, grabbing Bobby's hands. He was squinting in the darkness, staring straight ahead.

Helen followed behind them without speaking. She pictured the three of them driving to work each morning, Bobby at the wheel. A life of Bobby at the wheel. A life of large name tags and thick perfume and two-weeks vacation. They would grow old together, or—at least—unhappy. From the dock, she stared out at the ocean.

"Take our picture," Bobby said. "Your mother and me. In front of the water."

"It's too dark," said Helen.

"Use the flash, sweetie," said her mother.

She had her own room. A small bed and a television set that played three local channels. Helen unpacked her pajamas and laid them out on the floor into a skeleton. She washed her face in the bathroom with a thin bar of soap. Her cheeks felt like rubber, stubborn and gummy. She rinsed them again with hot water. For graduation, Bobby had given her a pack of assorted lotions—vanilla, rose, and lemonade—all of which she'd used on her feet. At the motel, she opened the miniature shampoos and scrubbed them into her dry hair.

The shower was cool but the bed was warm, too warm for a summer night. Helen slept in a t-shirt over the covers. Around midnight, the bedroom door opened. She recognized him, even before he whispered. She'd already half-imagined it. She'd left the door unlocked, and maybe it was her fault—she'd summoned him, like a spirit through the walls. Bobby didn't say anything. He closed the door behind him and sat on the bed. His face was backlit and flickering. Helen opened her eyes but didn't sit up. She could smell his breath, sour and warm. She wondered if her mother was asleep, if she knew he smoked cigarettes—if she cared.

"I can't sleep," he said. "Your mother likes to keep the windows open."

Helen wrapped her arms around her stomach. Bobby swung his feet onto the bed and laid down beside her. His shoes were on. He took the pack of cigarettes from his pocket and pulled out a stick.

"You mind?"

She watched him flick the lighter with a finger. The flame quivered. Bobby inhaled and breathed smoke over her face. It was bitter in a way she didn't mind.

"I'm sure this isn't a great experience for you," he said. "I'm sure you'd rather be somewhere else. I get it, I had parents. I never wanted to see them." He twisted the cigarette in his fingers. "Who knows? Maybe it's better this way."

Helen stared at the ceiling and counted the tiles. She wondered what Bobby had looked like in college. She wondered what college looked like. She imagined white columns and white women in glasses. A scholastic oasis. Now, there was only Shangri-La.

The cigarette was down to the ashes. Bobby rubbed it into the bedside table and faced her. He kissed her, and his lips were soft. His hands were cold on her face, his skin rough. He left the cigarette on the table. He stood and walked out the door without saying anything.

The next day they had lunch on the pier. Bobby carried half a hot dog and a small packet of ketchup. He was wearing a long-sleeved water shirt and a pair of square sunglasses. Helen's mother held her camera in front of her face and told them to pose. She shoved them together with a thin hand. Bobby wrapped an arm around her waist. He

smelled like sunscreen and cigarettes.

They walked along the water, past a set of shops—booths selling popcorn and cotton candy. Helen's mother photographed it all—knelt on the dock, stood on a garbage can. She grinned the whole time, aiming her camera in every direction. Helen tried not to say anything. Bobby bought a soda from one of the carts and drank half in one gulp.

"It's sure nice of your mother," he said. "Planning this vacation just for you."

He was refusing to meet her eyes, staring at the ground or his hands.

"Yes," said Helen.

"All graduated," he said. "Do you know what you want to do next?"

"I might take classes."

"I'll give you some advice," said Bobby. "No one will ever pay you to take classes. Classes isn't a profession. What do you want to do?"

"I don't know," she said.

"What do you like?"

"I don't know," she said. "Animals, maybe."

"So you be a vet. You like animals, you be a vet."

"You need to take classes for that."

"So you start your own vet. You walk dogs, you breed horses. You sell kitty cats online. You see what I mean?"

"Baby, leave her alone." Helen's mother lowered the camera. "I'm already talking to my boss. We have an empty counter."

Bobby tossed the bottle at a garbage can. It hit the rim and fell to the ground. He rubbed his hands together. "If that's what you want," he said. "I mean, sure. If that's what

you want."

"I don't know what I want," Helen said.

"It isn't about what you want," said her mother. "It's about what you can get. You think I'd keep him if I didn't have to?" Her mother stuck a thumb into Bobby's side. She laughed and it sounded like a seal choking. Bobby rubbed her shoulders with both hands and asked Helen to take their picture.

At the beach, the tide was low. Helen waded but the water stayed shallow. Her mother sat on the sand, toes in the water. Helen dangled her hands under the waves. She closed her eyes and fell to her knees, submerging. It was quiet underwater, a distant hum and nothing more. She held her breath for as long as she could and stood when she started to choke. Bobby dived a few feet behind her. He emerged and spit into the water.

The water was up to Helen's waist. She floated on her back, feet flexed. Particles drifted around her, patches of seaweed pulled from the ground. Above, the sky was all clouds. With her ears underwater, everything fell silent again. She wondered how far she could drift if she kept her eyes closed. She swept her arms through the water and felt a pair of hands around her ankles. She tried to sit up, but sunk under, mouth open. When she stopped coughing and opened her eyes, she saw Bobby smiling. Flecks of dirt stuck to his chin, to his hair. He was kneeling. He didn't say anything, just shifted his hand under the water until it met her knee.

"You see the shrimp?" he asked. He lifted his hand into the air. It was full of tiny crescents, pink and dime sized. "Look at your hair," he said.

Helen pulled her ponytail in front of her face. The shrimp clung to the ends, buried

in her curls. She picked them out and tossed them back into the ocean.

Bobby's hand drifted back to Helen's knee. She dove into the waves and swam until the water was too shallow. Her mother had taken out the camera again. She waved and told Helen to smile. Half her face cooperated—her mouth—but the eyes wouldn't budge.

"Why do you have to keep him?" Helen asked.

"Huh?"

"You said you wouldn't keep him if you didn't have to. Why do you have to?"

"Oh, honey. That was just talk."

"But you have a choice?" said Helen. "If you wanted to, you could do something."

"Of course I could. But what would I do?"

Her mother was lying on a hip, cheek resting on her chin. She blew a kiss to Bobby and rolled onto her stomach. Helen sat beside her and scooped sand onto her stomach, until her torso was buried—until she was only a face, a pile of hair, two eyes.

Real Camping

That summer, I was fat and studying for the SATs. It was as good as it sounded, made worse by the weather and my sister's acceptance to a ballet workshop in the city. It was so hot. My mother had stopped paying for AC—she claimed we didn't appreciate it enough, or her enough, or anything enough. All June, my sister didn't shut up about the workshop. It was very expensive. My mother had raised money online, a few thousand dollars. Everyone loved my sister. She was nineteen and normal sized and her face grew a pimple a month, that's it. When she left in July, she cried and kissed my cheeks. My mother had baked her a cake and I'd eaten the leftovers in my bedroom.

My dad was having it worse. He'd just been fired from the AT&T after ten years. My mom was freaking, saying that he was lazy and that he should've fought back and that we had no source of income, etc. She loved to worry. She made jewelry sometimes and sold it at craft fairs but that wasn't enough for the groceries.

Dad said he was done with retail. He wasn't made for it. He told me on Sunday over breakfast—three days without work—that his body was built to move. He tried flexing his neck.

"I've always been this way," he said. He had Wheaties in his teeth. "I've always been physical."

Dad had grown pale in the AT&T. He was balder and rounder. His stomach was hard to look at, and it was always there.

"This is the best possible outcome, probably," he said. "Fuck those guys. Sorry, Cat, but fuck them. This is exactly what I needed."

Mom didn't seem to think so. She followed him around all day, poking him with the broom, shoving classifieds in his face. My mom was probably the only person in the world who turned to classifieds for guidance. I didn't have a job that summer, so I watched them chase each other around the house. The heat was unbearable. I was going through three shirts an hour, lying naked on my floor with a textbook over my face. I was hoping to sweat myself thin, or even just curvy. I wasn't asking for much. Instead, my mom stopped buying produce. She brought home Cheetos and Cup a Soup and cheap crackers.

"We can't pay for fresh things," she said. "Now that your father is unemployed."

Usually, my dad would mutter something under his breath that made my mom scream, "Screw you, too."

My sister sent letters home from the workshop. Her stationary was pink and her handwriting was large like a ten-year-old's. It made her look stupid, the curly "Ss," the massive "Ls." The workshop was simply fantastic—a once in a lifetime adventure. I had no idea how we were affording it. Mom read the letters aloud during dinner and grinned the whole time. Dad had started wearing headphones to the table. He didn't even pretend to listen.

"There's a pool," Mom read. "But there isn't a filter, so we have to shower as soon as we get out to avoid getting sick. Please send hand sanitizer. Or maybe I will just stop swimming."

The ballet camp sounded stupid. My sister was supposed to be going to college, like a normal person. I'd seen her dance and I didn't think it was a talent worth pursuing.

I didn't know any other nineteen-year-olds who went to summer camp. I was sixteen and hadn't been in years. But my sister was special. My sister had long legs and straight teeth and a lump in her brain that had tried to kill her, and after that she could do anything she wanted.

My dad was home for two weeks before he started to get antsy. He'd taken up jogging, which meant he'd get all dressed up and hobble around our cul-de-sac three times. I hated watching, but I did anyway from my window. His torso was always off balance, like his left arm was too heavy. Usually, he'd end up on our lawn with his legs in the air. Some days he would sing. Those days were the worst.

He mentioned the trip that Friday at dinner. Mom had cooked steak, a rarity. She'd found tips on sale at the store and had grilled them in a ton of canola oil. Dad had the headphones around his neck but he was smiling. I'd spent the day in the basement, watching HGTV with both hands in a Lays bag. I hadn't looked at the prep book all week, nor had I seen the sun, so I felt generally useless. At dinner, I cut the steak into tiny pieces and chewed each bite as many times as I could.

"I have an idea," Dad said, "that I think will be good for all of us."

I watched Mom's face. She had her own ideas about his ideas. One winter, he and my sister had tried for World Records, any of them. Most Bananas, Biggest Bowl of Noodles. All food related, none successful. My sister had wanted her picture in a book.

"I'd love to hear your idea," Mom said. She crammed like four pieces of steak into her mouth. She sounded like someone at the dentist.

"I've been thinking," said Dad. "I know I've been a little lost recently."

"Sure," said Mom.

"But I've decided to go camping."

Mom stopped chewing and set down her fork carefully. If we had a dog, she would've kicked it, I knew. She had a reflex for violence, like a knee-jerk at the doctor's. I could picture her wrecking my dad, tossing him out the window with one arm. She did a kettle bell routine in our backyard that terrified me.

"That's interesting," she said, instead.

Dad was still smiling. He chewed steak so fast I swore he would choke. "I've planned it all out, you see. All the logistics. We own most of the gear already, except the tent and the backpack and the water filter. And the mini grill, which is almost unnecessary, sort of cheating. And I have to buy new socks. But the important stuff, we have. The sleeping bags."

I began to imagine my dad in the forest, my dad *dead* in the forest—face down, foaming at the mouth. It wouldn't take long. He'd drink swamp water or eat a poison berry, and wham. Of all the skills he possessed, the few about which I knew, none overlapped with camping.

Mom had a hand on her forehead. Soon, she would scream. Then, she would down Tylenol and hide in the den. Her rage was regimented, organized into careful steps—like mourning. Anger, sorrow, regret. She reacted in advance of tragedy. She'd grieved for my sister who'd lived.

"I wish you would just stay home," she said.

"Cat will come, too," Dad said. "We can get in a good walk together."

My parents rarely referred to my weight. My size had presented them with ample

opportunities for mocking—or at least quiet laughter—but they avoided ridicule. They'd never suggested I go for a jog, nor that my stomach was shaped like an M&M, as some of my classmates insisted. I'd refused to walk to school with my sister, side by side. Before and after. A lean bean and her friend the tomato.

"I can't go," I said. "I have to study."

"You've studied all month," said Dad. "You'll study all year."

"She's working with a tutor," said Mom. "We've made appointments."

This part was half true. We'd already paid an old woman named Cheryl to teach me trigonometry, but she'd kept getting sick. I'd only spoken with her on the phone.

"I don't want to go," I said.

"It's sad," said Dad. "Kids used to love the outdoors."

"Martin," Mom said, "you're making her feel bad."

"I would've loved to go hiking with my father," he said. "But I couldn't, never."

"Your father was in a wheelchair."

"I still had dreams, Claire."

We had all finished our steak. There was a puddle of grease on my plate. Mom had another letter from my sister on the table, still in its pink envelope. I prayed she wouldn't read it. The campers were practicing for Swan Lake. My sister was playing a swan. She'd sent us a picture of the cast list and there were like thirty other swans. Mom had hung it on the fridge.

"I have a say in this family," said Dad. "And I'd like a chance to experience."

"Experience?"

"The world. The ocean. I never see the ocean."

"It's thirty minutes that way," said Mom, pointing. "Get in the car."

I didn't want to be at the table anymore. I stood up to clear my plate and Dad stood with me.

"Catherine," he said. "I'm going to ask you again. I would very much like to go camping with you."

"That doesn't seem like a question."

"It's a spirited recommendation."

I brought my plate to the sink and grabbed a carton of ice cream from the freezer.

"I don't think camping would be the best use of our time," I said.

"Martin," said my mother. "Be reasonable."

We drove to New Hampshire with a trunk full of gear. Dad had spent too much money at an REI on things we didn't need—a folding saw, a hammock.

"Your mother doesn't need to know," he said.

This seemed to be his mantra for the weekend.

At the New Hampshire border, we pulled into a Park and Ride. Dad outlined our trail on a map. He refused to use his phone. He'd left it on the counter in our house as we were leaving and my mom had just said, "Fine."

We were going three days, which seemed like more than enough time to disappear. The trail was well marked, supposedly, but I could still see us panicking. I'd lost Dad at a grocery store, a soccer field. He had an inconvenient habit of forgetting I existed. I'd stayed with an aunt while my sister was in the hospital and he'd never called. Like he didn't have space in his brain for both of us. He'd sent emails with just subject lines.

"Hearing loss is minimal. We are all smiles! Tell Aunt Sarah thank you."

"For what?" I'd wondered.

Aunt Sarah had said I was lucky. A biopsy, she'd explained, was the surgical removal of tumor tissue. A pain I couldn't comprehend. My sister was only ten years old. Half her head had been shaved, like she'd grown a mane. When I saw her for the first time, I'd screamed. I'd only seen the staples, the bruised and bloodied scalp. My mother had purchased her an assortment of headwear. She'd signed medical bills without reading them. I remember crying on my birthday—no presents—and she'd slapped me right across the face.

We left our car in a dirt lot. I read the visitor's board as he lifted our gear out of the trunk. In the past month, there had been one rescue and two black bear sightings. There had also been a naked guy dancing on one of the peaks. Dad kept pulling stuff out of the car. There was no way we could carry it all. The backpacks were narrow and our sleeping bags took up most of the space. He was trying to stuff the granola bars—he'd packed thirty—into the side pockets.

"Are those going to fit?" I asked.

"Of course."

An hour of maneuvering had resulted in about half our gear strapped to the packs under a web of bungee cords. Our section of the trail was generally flat, Dad promised—nothing the bungees couldn't handle. We'd be going slow. His smile was so big I thought his face would break in half.

For a few hours, we walked. It was even less exciting than I had anticipated. We went single file and I stared at the ground. There was hardly a view, just trees and some stretches of gray clouds.

Midday, I felt the rain building. I knew it was coming because the sky had a heartbeat and the wind had picked up. Dad didn't seem to notice. He kept on trekking, humming without turning around. If I stopped and walked back to the car, I doubt he would have noticed.

We weren't very high up, but the trees were thinning and it was suddenly cold. Dad kept throwing his hands in the air, shouting "God, it's fresh!" The straps of my backpack dug into my shoulders and I counted the ways I could get us to turn around.

It beat us to camp, the rain. It came in buckets, in boatloads.

"Enough rain to kill a horse," said Dad.

I kept my head down, but my hood kept blowing off. The whole world was as soggy as a tampon. Dad looked so sad. His head was soaked but he refused to put on his raincoat.

"Keep moving," he said. "It'll pass."

For a while, the path was covered in wooden beams, slick low bridges that the rain made lethal. I tripped like six times. Dad smiled and told me how much character I was building.

When we reached the site it was almost dark. The rain hadn't let up. I was afraid to open my backpack. The sky was raging and I thought I heard branches cracking. I could see us sliced in half by morning. Drowned in our tent. Dad kept trying to smile.

"This is real camping," he said. "None of that fancy crap. What's a little rain? This

is what we came for. Real camping."

Dad had a penchant for clichéd positivity. He couldn't improvise optimism. After the surgery, he'd repeated the same mantras to keep spirits high. "We'll beat this!" he'd said. Like a tired get-well card. Our living room had morphed into a hospice, my sister the center of our universe. She'd worn scarves around her head so I wouldn't cry.

It took over an hour to set up the tent. We hadn't practiced. Dad hadn't taken it out of the box, he'd just strapped the whole thing to his pack. The cardboard was soaked and breaking. We lay the pieces on the ground and stared at them until he said, "OK," and grabbed a rod. We spent like thirty minutes just shoving them at each other, trying to stretch the tarp over the poles and stick the poles into the ground.

When we finished, the tent was the size of a dog house and it rested on uneven ground. Water had pooled inside. Dad scooped it out with his fingers, spraying his face. For dinner, we ate peanut butter with spoons and a slices of wet bread.

The sleeping bags, at least, were dry. There was enough space in the tent for maybe one person, or two people in love, but we squished and zipped the door shut. Dad laid on his back and hummed. There was a small hole above my head where the tarp couldn't stretch, where rain drops fell through to my nose.

"We're lucky," Dad said. He had an elbow in my side.

"Yah, right," I said.

"Dammit, Catherine." His voice was so quiet; like he was floating away. "Be grateful for something."

The next morning, there was an inch or so of water in the tent. Dad was sleeping face down. I had to shake him like crazy to make sure he hadn't drowned himself. He rolled over, whacked me in the face, and fell back asleep. The tent door was tiny and I slithered out sideways, one leg at a time.

The sun was obnoxious, round and blinding. No clouds, all blue. The ground was wet but the trees glistened, like a shampoo ad. I was so hungry. It took like ten yanks to pull my bag out of the tent. The only dry food was the bars. I ate two, squinting into the sun. I heard Dad cough and sit up. I couldn't remember if I'd brought another pair of socks.

For breakfast, Dad unwrapped three bars and smashed them together. He didn't say a word. He just chewed with his mouth open and scratched the bare slit of his stomach.

We were on the trail again—slower, wetter. Smelling bad. We walked without speaking, for an hour or so. Dad kept humming the same song whose name I didn't know. I chewed the bars and grabbed leaves from low branches. My legs chaffed under the linen shorts.

At lunchtime, we stopped at a lean-to and ate more bars in the shade. The place had it all—roof, floor, outhouse.

"We should stay here," I told Dad. "We wouldn't even need the tent."

We were only a mile from the day's destination. Dad looked around. When he thought hard his lips pinched into a pout, like a bee had stung him right in the mouth.

"You don't want to keep going?"

"Not really," I said.

He stared at the ground for a very long time.

"OK," he said. "We'll just have to be faster tomorrow."

I spent the afternoon on my pack, sitting and plucking grass from the ground. Dad kept pacing, like he was wearing a pedometer. He was still humming, louder now. He had his shirt off.

I wondered what my mom was doing. She hadn't tried to call me. My bet, she was raving, drinking wine and breaking dishes and dancing around the house. Once, I'd come home early from school and found her singing ballads to the Swiffer.

Around sunset, a couple showed up at the lean-to. Dad was on his knees, trying to start a fire. We had matches and everything but he couldn't get the thing to light. The couple dropped their bags next to ours. They had walking sticks, thick ones carved to look like snakes.

The woman said, "Hello."

Her hair was shaved on one side and her eyes kept twitching. My sister had had a tick like that when she was little. My mom had taken her to a psychologist to practice keeping her eyes open.

The man nodded and lifted a hand. His face was unshaven and the hair around his mouth was bright orange.

Dad waved. "We're happy to have guests," he joked. He was still on his knees. "I'm Martin," he said. "This is Cat."

"I'm Primitive," said the woman. "This is Threshold."

Dad had lectured me about trail names in the car. Only old-timers got them, hikers with experience and body hair. He'd kept coming up with ones for himself, anyway. My favorite was *The Emperor*.

"How long have you been hiking?" Dad asked. His smile was too wide.

"We started in Georgia," said Primitive. "That was about three months ago. How about yourselves?"

I figured Threshold was mute or something. He hadn't even opened his mouth.

"One night," Dad said. "Just getting started. Nothing too long, just stretching our legs. Cat and I love this sort of thing."

I wanted to put my hands over his mouth. He was spouting, like a kettle. Primitive nodded and looked behind her, like she wished she owned a phone so it could ring and excuse her. Threshold started to make his own fire. Dad stared at him as the flames rose, but he didn't ask for help.

Dinner, and more bars. Peanut Butter Crunches that were no longer crunchy. We watched Primitive and Threshold eat rice and curried chickpeas over their fire. The stars were out and I couldn't keep my eyes off them. That was one thing I enjoyed, I guess. The stars. I'd never seen so many at once. A whole web of bulbs, sparking through the black. My sister had stickers on her ceiling that glowed in constellations. We'd brought some to the hospital but hadn't been allowed to hang them.

Before bed, Dad and I took our tooth brushes and walked towards the sound of the stream. Primitive and Threshold had taken out headlamps and were reading. I followed

the beam of Dad's flashlight down the dirt path. Every few feet, something would scurry in the trees or the bushes.

"What are you going to do when we get home?" I asked.

"You can take the first shower," he said.

"Are you going to get a job?"

"It isn't that easy."

"It seems that easy."

At the stream, we filled the purifier and dipped our brushes into clean water. We didn't have toothpaste. Dad wasn't humming. I couldn't remember the last time we'd spent so much time together, the two of us alone.

"What do you think I should do?" he asked. "Your sister thinks I would make a good real estate agent." He laughed. "My picture on a billboard. What do you think? She's just being sweet. She wants me to be happy, but I want her to be happy."

"I think it's stupid you sent her to camp," I said. "She's too old. It's a waste of your money."

"I want you girls to have anything you want."

"You've already given her everything." I gargled and spit into the stream. Dad stared straight into the water, like he was waiting for something to leap out.

"I wish I had more to offer," he said.

"I think it's starting to rain."

Primitive and Threshold were gone when we woke up. Their fire was out but smoke lingered. It was our last day on the trail. We walked without speaking. The trail sloped

out of the forest, into marches and mud. The earth sucked my boots into the ground. I was ready to be back on cement. We were going to call a cab from the highway and hitch a ride back to our car.

Dad frowned when he saw the main road, the Shell station and the whizz of cars. The end of the trail meant the end of an adventure, an adventure that had hardly been an adventure at all. He was footsteps closer to a dreaded homecoming. I pictured my mother at the front door, holding the Classifieds. "Was that enough experience for you!"

I called a cab. I waited on my pack but Dad refused to sit down. He avoided the cement, weaving through the trees at the trail's end. He would have to send out resumes, I assumed. I didn't know how adults acquired jobs. Apparently, neither did my mother. I half hoped the AT&T would call up and apologize, like boyfriends in high school. I want you back, I didn't mean what I said. Until then, our house would remain an arena of war.

I had over month left of summer vacation. I imagined myself in the basement with icepacks on my face. The heat would drive my parents to aggression.

I would need to open the prep book, eventually. My sister could avoid it for as long as she lived.

The cab ride took twenty minutes. I watched, disappointed, as our weekend flew by. The ground we'd covered was nominal, less than a gallon's worth of gas. In the lot, we hoisted the bags out of the car and Dad searched for his wallet.

"It should be with my keys," he said. "Where are my keys?"

The keys were attached to his belt, but they were not with the wallet. Dad opened his pack and emptied it one item at a time. The contents spread around him like a roadside memorial. The cabdriver hovered behind.

"I'm already late for a pickup," he said. "My luck."

"One minute," said Dad. "These bags have too many pockets."

We searched for a very long time. Everything had been taken from our bags and spread around the lot for inspection. The cab driver called his boss to ask for protocol.

"If I was a wallet," said Dad, "where would I be?"

"I don't think that's going to help," I said.

"Listen," said the cab driver, "I don't have all day."

"I assure you," said Dad, "this isn't for my own entertainment."

We'd unpacked and repacked the bags five times before sunset. The wallet was in neither, nor was it in our car. Eventually, Dad exchanged his information with the cab driver and promised to send a large check. It was dark by the time the cab left the lot. We sat in our car for a while and finished the bars.

"I think our friends may have borrowed some cash," Dad said. "Your mother doesn't have to know."

"You should probably cancel your credit cards."

The radio spit static, a frustrated hum. Dad had his seatbelt on. I thought about sending my sister a letter. I never knew what to say to her. I could tell her about real camping. Maybe she would laugh. I could tell her about the wallet and ask her what it was like to dance in feathers. If she had made friends. If she showed them her scar.

"I'm sorry," I told him.

"I'm sorry," Dad said.

"I wonder what they're going to buy."

"They won't be very happy," he said. "When they check our balance."

Privacy

Liza had rented the apartment because it was the only one she could afford. Her salary—lack of—had restricted her to a limited radius. A limited radius that had unfortunately included her mother's home. Ruth's home. She lived a whole town away, and yet somehow a town meant two streets. Dedham and West Roxbury, the border a thin sidewalk. She was neighbors with her adolescent bedroom and maybe also a woman who'd seen her naked in a plastic pool. It was a cruel type of kismet.

"You're pulled back to me," Ruth said. "It's my invisible umbilical cord."

Liza had decided to leave L.A. after a five-year fiasco of poverty. At twenty-one, the city had seemed golden and thriving. Now, it felt sticky and beige. Liza had painted a bunch of stale landscapes and had sold only one. Tastes were changing, apparently. No one bought oil paintings from a fine arts minor—or one person did. Unfortunately, this person was no patron. Liza had spent the proceeds on a ticket back to Boston.

Her mother was delighted. She'd taken the departure of her only child as a targeted spite, a judgment on her parenting. Liza's return marked maternal victory. The child missed her mother. Liza was comparatively unenthusiastic.

"You're going to have to treat me as an adult," she said. "As a neighbor."

"I'm not planning to put you on a leash," Ruth said, coughing. Ruth was always coughing.

"I just don't want this to get complicated."

In L.A., Liza had spoken to her mother from coffee shops. She'd liked sipping cappuccinos and acting like she was on a business call. Now, she could shout from her

house and her mother could hear.

"I'm just happy to have you back," said Ruth. "As a friend."

Liza had found a job at a gallery in an old church in Somerville. Exhibition assistant. She was allowed to wear jeans. The gallery specialized in art from Japan, art she didn't understand nor particularly like, but art that paid a livable salary and required little work. Most days, she could get away with sneaking in late, at lunch or after. Liza's duties primarily kept her in the back—sorting, dusting, choosing. No one really noticed if she was missing.

Ruth herself was a painter. She was bad, awful if you looked close, and she knew it but didn't mind. She sent pictures of her finished works to Liza in hope of critique. Ruth preached transparency, candor to the point of annoyance. As a child, Liza had suffered through horribly vivid sex talks, real time demonstrations of tampon insertion and condom placement. She knew her own birth story shot for shot. Weekends, Ruth had plodded around in her underwear—even if they had company. She'd stuffed pads in Liza's lunchbox with sticky-notes— "Just in case!"—daily reminders of their bond as women. Privacy, Ruth claimed, was overrated.

They didn't mention Ruth was dying, not anymore. Everyone knew: the neighbors, the mailman. She'd told them casually at first, after the x-rays that summer. She peppered it into conversations when they lulled.

"You haven't lived until you've had lung cancer!" she would crow to horrified baristas. Often, they gave her drinks for free.

Now, the diagnosis was no longer a distant quirk, an oddity shareable at parties. It was palpable. Liza could see it. In just months, her mother's figure had dwindled. Her smiles were carefully constructed. Her skin hung thin like rubber, her hands empty latex gloves. Liza had flown home, for good. She'd promised Ruth it wasn't because of her.

She'd left L.A. in winter. Boston's cold was sharp and surprising. Liza woke each morning afraid. She was half convinced she suffered from anxiety. The internet was certain. There were some days she didn't feel like leaving the house because of how the snow looked from her window. The view was decent in the mornings. Seven AM was supreme—a glowing, orange sky. Liza would watch the robins and the wrens dart along the tree branches. She could follow them for hours before realizing she was late for work, still sprawled in her underwear.

At the gallery, she felt busy but rarely satisfied. She also felt poor. Ideally, she'd sell a painting of her own and make enough to last a whole decade. A girl could dream. A girl could want a life full of cafes and discos and Paris. Her canvases looked muted and eerie in her bedroom. She felt like she was staring in a mirror.

The week before Christmas was particularly tedious because of the exhibition opening. All of the pieces were by an artist she'd never heard of, an old man from Tokyo who used tooth brushes to paint portraits. Liza was needed from eight to five all week, in the front with the receptionist. She handed out pamphlets and talked about the pictures and thought about stabbing the visitors with her gel pen. By, Friday she was pulling the skin off her cuticles and dropping it around the gallery for fun.

When Ruth entered the gallery, Liza was draped over the counter painting her nails

with markers. Her boss had already left for vacation in Puerto Rico. He'd turned down the gallery's heat to save money. Ruth pinched Liza in the thigh.

"I'm so proud of you," she said. She dropped her purse and leaned on the counter. "My daughter, the face of worship."

"It's not a church anymore," said Liza. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see the exhibit."

"It's awful."

"It's nothing special," Ruth agreed. "Sort of like those portraits you used to do with your fingers. Personally, I found yours more captivating."

"Mom."

"I was also going to invite you to dinner tomorrow. Marie is coming over."

"Another party?"

"You love Marie," said Liza. "She's an absolute hoot."

Dinner parties were Ruth's specialty. She hosted frequently, her guest lists varied and unpredictable. Ruth rarely invited the same person twice, except Liza—who was now summoned, obliged really—to each. Marie was one of Ruth's new friends, the latest member of the mahjong circle. She had furious red hair and too many opinions. Ruth adored her. She'd repeated to Liza all of Marie's "mottos," her theories on guns and malaria.

"Her son will be there," said Ruth. "Thomas. You remember him? He's lost weight."

"Mom, no."

"He's really much better looking now."

It was an awful coincidence that Liza had met Marie's son, Thomas, years earlier in

college. They'd lived on the same freshmen floor, but had not kept in contact. Thomas had liked puns and bowties and being called Thomas. He'd spent the year trying to convince girls and fraternities that he'd been cool in high school. Liza had quickly avoided him. She'd reached the peak of her social anxiety, joining fervid student organizations and protesting virtually anything with a group of anorexics from Westchester. She'd not anticipated seeing Thomas again. But she had, as always, underestimated her mother.

"I'm not interested," she said.

"I already told them you were coming. I'm making hot ham dip and no one will eat it but you."

"That's not fair."

"À demain."

Ruth grabbed a packet from the counter and joined an elderly couple at the first painting. She examined the canvas thoroughly, then turned to Liza and winked. She was wearing dark blush that smudged up to her ears. She coughed into her hands and stuck them back in her pockets.

Liza took the T from the gallery to her mother's house. She didn't change clothes. There was barely any light left in the day. The station was cold and smelled like the tide, the filthy mucus of the Charles. She waited on a wooden bench. She liked to watch people, especially when they made her feel better about herself. Girls in short dresses flopped horizontally on subway seats. She would stare and bite her nails and remember things were always worse for someone else.

She was first to her mother's. Ruth always gave her a time of arrival considerably earlier than those of other guests. Liza wiped her shoes on the steps and groped her purse for her copy of the key. Ruth opened the door just as Liza had fished it out.

"You're late."

"Are you kidding?"

"Come in. I have a question about my jam."

Ruth was playing jazz, some early stuff Liza hated but Ruth found sexy. Ruth liked to dance. She was wearing a long green dress with blue flowers down the sleeves and tassels on the skirt.

"You have to taste this." Ruth was in the kitchen. "I think I did something wrong. Why are you wearing that sweater?"

"I like this sweater."

"Sweetie, *you* don't have to look at it."

Liza dipped her thumb into a bowl of melted cheese.

"Keep out," said Ruth. She brought Liza a bowl. "Try this."

"Did you make it?"

"That depends."

Liza dipped a second finger into the jam.

"How is it?"

"You can really taste the onions."

"Crap." Ruth walked slowly back to the counter. "I think I'm nixing this one."

"What theme are you going for? Is this jazz?"

"Yes, I was thinking 1920s. A bit of Prohibition. If you want to drink, you've got to

take off an article of clothing."

"Wow."

Ruth grabbed a stack of plates and carried them into the living room.

"Let me do that," said Liza.

"That jam was supposed to be the centerpiece. But they don't have to know. They are so excited to see you. Marie says Thomas is a consultant."

"OK."

"He is also a bodybuilder. Can you imagine?"

"I don't care either way."

"I think you'll be pleasantly surprised."

Liza dipped her thumb back into the cheese. She wished she'd worn looser pants. The doorbell rang and Ruth shooed her to the side.

"Please don't run," said Liza.

Ruth returned with three guests. Marie had brought a friend, Dawn. Both Marie and Dawn were members of Brookline's Adult Chamber Singers. They'd met as altos. Dawn had a large forehead and hair dyed red. Ruth gushed.

"Welcome, welcome!" She threw up her arms and engulfed them in a snug embrace.

Thomas hovered behind, his stance unnecessarily wide. He was larger than Liza remembered. He tried to stick his hands into his small front pockets. His movements seemed strained, like he'd looked them up online. *How to stand in a doorway; How to appear masculine in a sweater vest*. His hair was slicked back with something thick and

scented. Like he'd melted a whole candle on his head.

"Come in, come in," said Ruth.

"You have a lovely home," said Dawn. "Doesn't this look like David's house?"

"It does," said Marie. "It really does."

"My friend David has a house in Wellesley," Dawn continued.

"He has great taste," said Ruth.

"Ha!" said Dawn.

"Are you cooking ham?" said Marie. "It smells like ham."

"Chatelaine," said Ruth. "It's the twenties."

"Amazing." Marie turned to Dawn. "Ruth does all themed parties. She's a real host."

"So clever," said Dawn.

"Cooks everything."

"It's nothing special," said Ruth.

"Amazing," Marie said, again. "Do you need help with anything?"

"I'm all set," said Ruth. "Just a few more minutes. The drinks are downstairs."

"I thought it was Prohibition," said Marie.

"If you want a drink, you've got to take off an article of clothing," said Liza.

"Gosh," said Marie. "How hilarious."

Marie grabbed Dawn and Ruth by the arms and pulled them downstairs. Liza stared at Thomas. He had a small stain on his pants, above his thigh. The room smelled like onions and boiled eggs.

"It's nice to see you again." he said.

"Yes," said Liza.

She tried to decide whether Thomas was attractive. In college, he'd slept on the other side of her wall. He'd worn short shorts. She remembered his skin, the lace of red welts. Eczema. He'd shed in the shower, the coed shower she'd worn shoes in. He'd had bumps up his arms and thighs. Liza had never seen the rest of his body. She wanted to unbutton the cuffs and roll the sleeves to his elbows, find the flaw beneath the cotton. She decided he wasn't that good looking.

"Do you live around here?" he asked.

"In West Roxbury," said Liza. "It's not as bad as you think. Two streets that way."

"That's nice."

"You don't have to lie," she said. "Where do you live?"

"Charlestown. Near the monument."

"That's a fancy neighborhood," said Liza. "I've been sledding on Bunker Hill. Our dog liked to crap on the lawn."

Thomas didn't say anything. He scratched furiously at his wrist, like a critter with flees.

"OK," Liza said. "Let's get a drink."

In the basement, the three older women danced ponderously to quick jazz. They spun and snuck sips of champagne. Liza grabbed a cup and spooned julep into it with a large ladle. Her mother swatted at her arm.

"One article of clothing, miss!"

Liza frowned and kicked off a shoe.

"You're no fun," said Ruth.

It was hard to watch. Liza and Thomas stood by the stairs as their mothers shimmied. Marie dashed across the room and onto the couch. She stood on the cushions and swayed. Thomas choked on his drink.

"Here is our future," said Liza. "Clearly, there is much to look forward to."

"I can't believe this."

"Your mother doesn't normally dance on couches?"

"Never. Yours?"

"Relatively often."

Thomas spooned more julep into his cup and drained it quickly. Liza stared at him. From the back, he was tolerable. His hair looked well conditioned.

"It's strange we never spoke at school," he said.

"It was a big school," said Liza.

"I guess," said Thomas. "But we were neighbors."

"You were roommates with the guy who sold Adderall," Liza said. "Weren't you?"

"Yeah."

"He was cool."

Liza couldn't think of anything else to say. She drank more julep. She tried to coax herself into verbosity. She wanted to roll up Thomas' sleeves.

They watched their mothers dance. They watched the future leap before them in clumsy circles. Ruth twirled and hid her coughs behind the music.

The group had disrobed an unnecessary amount. Liza and Thomas were drunk—

hanging over the staircase, laughing at memories they'd made up. He traced her palm with a finger. In college, she would have drunk herself to sickness. She would have puked on his bare chest. Now, she wrapped her fingers around his. His hand was soft against her own, a surprise.

Thomas led her upstairs. He had his shirt tied around his waist, the way her mother carried sweaters. The house smelled of ham.

"Do you spend a lot of time here?" he asked.

"I just moved back a few weeks ago."

"From where?"

"California," said Liza. "The Sunshine State."

"The Golden State," said Thomas.

"That's what I meant."

He had his hands on her waist now. They swayed in the hallway. She kissed him lightly without thinking. He led her into her mother's bedroom.

He turned the lights on and kissed her again. She kept her eyes open. She stared at her mother's bed. The sheets were wrinkled, clustered in a pile at the foot. She imagined their bodies twisting into the fabric. Thomas in her dying mother's bed. Maybe his skin would flake off and mix with hers. He had his hand up her shirt.

"Something is burning," Liza said.

"Are you sure?"

"I should get my mother," said Liza. "The food is ready."

The dinner table was set to capacity—a wreath of yellow candles, lilies floating in

water glasses. The theme had muddled into a medley of centerpieces. Ruth held the crisped ham over the table.

"You should plan professionally," said Dawn. "I'm going to give you Joseph's number. He does weddings."

They inhaled dinner with the desperate speed of drunken hunger. The women stuffed themselves and mourned their waistlines.

"This is the age of indulgence," Ruth said, raising her glass. "Let us eat cake."

"So Liza, you must have a boyfriend," Dawn said.

"No," said Ruth. "She takes after her mother."

"She's lucky," said Marie.

Liza shoved ham into her mouth. She was entering that phase of drunken melancholy, when the alcohol inside her settled and revealed a darkened reality. She chewed and stared at her plate, remembering who she was and who she wasn't. She could feel Thomas's thighs beside hers, the stiff khaki. If she slept with him, would he tell his mother? Would she tell hers? Secrets from Ruth seemed cruel now, but she kept them anyway.

Conversation quelled into the habitual civility of dinner parties. They traded questions and smiled like they were listening to the answers. They sobered up enough to re-clothe themselves. Liza flattened a deviled egg with her spoon, spreading the yellow mess around her plate.

"Liza," Ruth said.

"Everything tastes amazing," said Marie.

"Liza, stop it."

"What's for dessert?" asked Dawn.

Liza dropped her fork on the plate. The metallic clink echoed loudly. Ruth closed her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Liza said.

"I'll help clear," Thomas said.

"No, you sit," said Ruth. "I've got it."

Thomas grabbed Liza's plate as Ruth grabbed Marie's. The two circled the table with quick hands, snatching utensils with their fingers.

"Leave the spoons," said Ruth. "Liza, can you check the peach puffs?"

"I can do it," said Marie.

"No, I've got it," Liza said.

She walked very quickly towards the kitchen, staring at the floor. She felt the collision before she could look up. Her shoulders smacked into her mother's and sent Ruth's thin arms flying. A plate shattered. Ruth fell backwards onto the kitchen floor.

"Oh my god." Liza said.

"Ruth." Marie stood. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," said Ruth.

"I'm so sorry," said Liza. "I didn't see you. I'm so sorry."

"Everyone calm down," said Ruth. "It was barely a fall."

"You need to sit down," said Dawn.

"I'll get you some water," said Marie.

"I'm sorry," said Liza.

Ruth coughed loudly. "These lungs," she said. "They're killing me."

No one smiled. Marie handed Ruth the water.

"Oh, come on," Ruth said. "Take a joke."

"Maybe you should lie down," said Marie.

"Don't be silly."

"You sound awful," said Liza.

"I feel fine," Ruth said, heaving.

"Go lie down," said Marie. "We can clean up. Really, Ruth."

Thomas picked plate shards from the carpet. He'd rolled up his sleeves and his wrists were lined with red.

Marie and Dawn washed the dishes. Liza watched from the table. She sat beside Thomas without speaking to him. The women scrubbed the table while Liza chewed peaches. She felt useless, ten again, a child too small to reach the counter. The music no longer felt cheerful but cheesy, like Christmas lights in July. Thomas tried to distract her with anecdotes from his office.

"And so ten of them fell for this timeshare," he said. "In Myrtle Beach. And they're stuck flying there every weekend to get their money's worth. But they all hate each other. It's great. They're from sales, so they don't know any better."

"That's awful," Liza said, without looking up.

When the women finished cleaning, they kissed Liza on the forehead. Thomas gave her a light hug. She felt his scabs against her neck when their skin touched. His body was warm, almost moist. She hoped she would never see him again.

"Maybe, I'll convince my mother to bring me along," he said. "Next time."

"Of course," said Liza.

"It was nice."

"It was."

"Give my best to your mother."

Liza held open the door and watched them walk to their car. Next time. Of course, next time. Did he have any idea when that would be? Next time, with cards and flowers. With her mother in the ground. She pictured his face at the funeral, his eyes that would avoid hers. What would he say? Mourning for a stranger seemed complicated, a careful balance of distance and grief. She hoped next time was a long way away.

Liza paused the music and put the julep in the fridge. She turned off the lights and double checked the oven. The kitchen was cold and she turned up the heat.

In the bedroom, she stared at her sleeping mother. Ruth's face looked damp, the sweat of sleep. Liza had always been jealous of her hair. It was long and thick and it obeyed brushes. A smooth auburn. You couldn't bottle that color. It was falling out now. A small clump clung to the pillow. Liza kissed her forehead and closed the bedroom door.

She didn't feel like going home. She walked to the T and waited for an inbound train. The station was busy, swimming with Saturday traffic. When the train arrived, Liza found a seat and closed her eyes. She felt like throwing up. Cold seeped through the slits in the doors and the car rattled forward. Liza started to cry. Within seconds, she'd become one of those strange women who sobbed on the train. She coughed and wheezed

and blew snot into her hands, her body shaking.

The subway braked and the car refilled with bodies who pretended not to notice her. There was a politeness in the feigned privacy of public transportation. Liza pressed her sweater to her mouth. A girl sat across from her, barely six years old. She clutched her mother with one hand and a stuffed pig with the other. Her face was painted like a kitten's. She stared at Liza.

A small hand reached across the car. The girl presented her pig to Liza with a smile. It hung between them like a bridge. Liza took it carefully in two hands and pressed it to her chest.

Carolina

She had decided to paint the house, again. Jane was always changing her mind, stealing swatches from Home Depot and taping them to the shutters—colors with brilliant names: Aquamarine, Café au Lait. She loved them all. She'd stand outside staring at the swatches until her eyes hurt and she had to call Al. Al, who was color blind and didn't care much if their house was Mustard or Periwinkle. He would close his eyes, grab a swatch, and hand it to her.

That summer, he'd chosen Mauve.

"Here."

He laid the paper in her hand like a butterfly.

"Please," Jane said. "Care about something I care about."

"I care about Mauve."

Jane stared at the swatch, held it up to the sun.

"It's too dark," she said. "I'm doing Olive."

A new summer, a new coat of paint. Walls were easy to change, to cover and make new. Jane always insisted on painting the house herself. Her father was a carpenter and she felt a certain responsibility to fix things with her own hands. She had full authority over the pipes, the light bulbs, the TV. She never let Al call the plumber. She'd set up the cable herself.

Jane had bought the paint before she knew. Before she'd read the texts and the emails, seen his credit card bill. At the time, she'd never pegged him as a cheater. He was too lazy, her husband. He rarely brushed his teeth or filled the Brita. Affairs took an

elegance; a cautious organization she was unaware he possessed.

When she saw the texts, she tore out his dresser. She slammed wooden drawers against the floor and screamed like a fox—mouth wide, eyes twitching. She'd given up loving him years ago, that part was easy. The chemistry had quieted when the babies hadn't come. There was a mutual indifference, a comforting camaraderie—the trust had remained. That part was hard to give up. But Al had left his email open.

She read the messages with her glasses on. She didn't cry. She tore out the drawers and left them on the floor. Then she grabbed her paintbrush and started on the porch.

When Al came home, she was still painting, spreading thin layers over the front door. She didn't turn around.

Al waited at the bottom of the ladder, and to her back he shouted, "Hello."

Jane lifted her brush and slammed it against the house. Her face was speckled with paint.

"Is something wrong?" Al put down the groceries. "The color's nice."

"I'm sure you like it."

"I do."

"Don't start."

"What's wrong?"

"I wonder, Al—I really wonder—if you can even *comprehend* how to love someone."

"Where is this coming from?"

"I've put in my share. More than my share." Jane threw the brush to the ground and stepped off of the ladder. "I'm leaving."

"For how long?"

"Does it matter?"

"Kind of," he said. "Yes."

Jane picked up the paint brush and tossed it at his face. It smacked his cheek and fell back to the ground.

"Don't call," she said.

"What's happening?" he said.

August was steaming. The Northeast was full of black flies and a humid, cloudless sky. On particularly unbearable afternoons, Jane had walked around the house in her underwear, fanning herself with computer paper. That morning, it was low nineties. Her face was on fire.

She was an anxious driver, hands tight at 10 and 2. She pulled onto 95 and her breath quickened. She couldn't beat them, the nervous spells. The meds were helping, sort of. Al didn't get it. He groaned when she grabbed him, when she felt the world spin into nausea. She had to toughen up, he warned. She was lucky he put up with that sort of crap at all.

On the highway, Jane phoned sick to work. She'd saved her vacation days—twenty-two, she'd been prudent. Al never took her anywhere, and she liked her job enough to show up. Project manager for a sign company. Big ones, for stadiums. School signs and restaurant signs and street signs. She did it all. Sometimes she'd see a sign she'd supervised and point it out to Al. He would squint until his eyes were barely open and say, "Congratulations."

The roads were empty. She blasted talk radio and let her arm drift out the window. She liked the angry voices shouting through the speakers, the old men spitting about healthcare.

"I feel bad for you," the host screamed. His name was Chuck and he loved to alarm. "I feel bad for your children. You own nothing!"

Jane knew things were bad. The election was nearing and sides had grown hostile. A new president to fix all our problems. Chuck scoffed. On the radio it grated like static.

Jane was having problems too, a whole year of problems. Her hair was thinning, shedding like seaweed in the shower. She was spending too much time in refrigerated sections of the grocery store, gorging on Lean Cuisines, even if they were made from bird feathers—like wheat bread or McNuggets, which she still ate just fine. She'd grown soft. She kept buying the same size—Medium—but everything felt snug. Al called her a *porker*. He'd whack her under the arms and watch the skin jiggle like a flipper. Like a bag of warm dough, he said.

Massachusetts turned into New Hampshire in less than an hour. She crossed the border regularly, for duty free sales and fireworks and trips to her grandmother's grave. She loved New Hampshire—the size of the highway liquor stores, two red boozy barns. Jane pulled over and bought a handle of Wild Turkey. Cheap stuff, quick stuff. She also grabbed a mini gin and two bottles of pink wine.

At the gift shop, she bought a Choco Taco and ate it outside, flies chasing her hair. There was a dog tied to the building and it licked her bare toes. She closed her eyes and imagined Al's face, sliced in half and shrieking. He was probably on their couch, with a

soda and that whore on his lap. Jane sucked chocolate off her fingers and tossed the wrapper to the crowd.

In the suburbs, everyone was very polite. They said “Good morning” and “Good evening.” They owned the same candles. The sprinklers in Jane’s neighborhood sprayed day and night. Once, she’d found a Febreeze tag on the collar of her neighbor’s Dachshund.

Al kept a dumpster in their driveway, just to piss people off. He’d filled a foot or so with plastic crap, packaging and water jugs and macaroni boxes. They’d received calls. The neighbors were less than pleased.

“It’s an eyesore,” said the woman across the street. She lived alone. She was a painter and ran an Essential Oils class on her lawn each Sunday. “Artistically, it’s limiting.”

Jane had no say. The dumpster was Al’s. And she’d grown to like the smell of the sludge—

the crusted corners, the soggy bottom. There was subtle sweetness, if she closed her eyes.

“Why can’t you pretend it isn’t there?” Jane asked. “Use your imagination.”

Art confused her. The neighbor flung paint onto cardboard and hung it proudly from a tree. Was that talent? Was that real? Did someone, somewhere, feel something from gazing at haphazard smudges? The Dachshund had wandered into the painter’s lawn that summer and shat all over the sketches. She’d still hung them, pinned them to her windows. Shit pieces fluttered when the wind stirred.

Around noon, Jane left the highway in search of lunch. She had to eat every three hours—blood sugar, or something. Her body got weak. She'd already opened her wine, sipped a quarter of the bottle. It helped with the nerves. At the exit, there were signs for Dunkin Donuts and Burger King and a place called Mario's. She pulled into a plaza that hosted all three and went door to door. She bought a Coolata and stared at a shelf of pamphlets, ads for hotels and water parks and a Canadian whale watch. She grabbed one of each and stuffed them in her purse. At the Burger King, she ordered fries and carried them into Mario's.

The restaurant smelled of oil and tomatoes. There were only two customers, older men chewing pizza and frowning. One of them had taken off his shoes. Jane found a booth and spread the pamphlets across the table. She sucked on a fry.

Next steps were unclear. She had Al's American Express and maybe fifty in cash and an Olive Card gift card with $7.80 left over. There was potential. He wouldn't call. He was probably still staring at the house with his mouth open, like she'd poured paint on his head. He was slow.

Jane looked at the pamphlets one by one and kept the ones she liked. A B&B by the beach, a nail salon with fish pedicures. Her answer was the thickest one of all, a white pamphlet with cursive lettering spelling *You Deserve This*. A spa, on the shore. What could be better? She could see herself swimming, lazing by a hot tub, one without crumbs at the bottom. Strong hands on her back, the smell of the massage oil. Maybe she would meet someone. Maybe a masseuse with dark hair would touch her under the sheet. Al had films like that. She'd seen some and hadn't hated them.

"Ma'am."

It was a quiet voice. Jane looked up to find a boy, around thirteen, in a waiter's uniform. He wasn't wearing a name tag, but there was pin on his pocket where it was supposed to hang. His shirt was tucked into corduroys.

"You aren't supposed to bring outside food in here."

Jane looked at her fry box and back at her pamphlet.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's a health thing. Our manager doesn't want people bringing in other stuff. Plus, you really should be buying something if you want to sit down."

"Which is it?" said Jane.

"What?"

"Is it a health problem or a buying problem?"

"Uh." He had his hands in his pockets. His eyes were low on his face, like they'd slipped. "I'm just a waiter," he said.

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

"You look younger," said Jane. "You have a young face. I bet it's hard to grow a beard."

"Sort of."

"What's your name?"

"Fred."

"Fred, I'd like to eat my French fries inside. It's very hot out there. I've been sitting in that car for hours and I'd prefer to avoid heat stroke."

Fred stuffed his hands deeper into his pockets, like he was searching for dust. Jane wondered who'd given him the job—an uncle or something.

"I'm sorry," he said, eventually.

Jane sighed, loudly. She collected her pamphlets into a pile and left the fries on the table. "It's alright, Fred. You're just doing your job."

"Yeah," said Fred.

"You're a good kid," said Jane. "Don't become an asshole."

The Sandgarden Spa seemed like the ideal place to relax or rejuvenate or drown herself in sweet smelling water. The hot tubs were sprinkled with lilac petals; the towels were heated. The staff passed out ginger candies and cleansing juices made from aloe and cayenne. It was all in the pamphlet. A small house on the water. Free Wi-Fi. Free Spa Water. Of course, the rooms and treatments would blow the bank, but Al was paying and, besides, she deserved it. He'd given her worry lines, carved them deep between her brows. It was time she was pampered, soaked in hot oils and lathered in sea mud.

Jane sipped the wine and drove with newfound ease. The AC roared and her hair hovered in clumps around her shoulders. There was peace in leaving, in not having to worry just yet. She tried to picture the woman's face from the name she'd found. Carolina. The word itself seemed more fiction than fact and made her sound all the more alluring. Carolina worked at the Chili's on Route 2. She was a hostess. She loved to say *Thank You*. She sent Al grocery lists and compliments. She made a lot of spelling errors. She lived in Dorchester—State Street. She had a son named Ben whose father had died in Iraq. She was funny. She told biology jokes and sent Al voicemails of Ben singing. Once, she'd said *I love you*.

At the spa exit, Jane tossed her drink out the window and followed signs for the town center. The roads were one-lane and lined with white fences. She saw two women on horses and briefly feared she'd entered cult grounds. The breeze was salty and thick, an army of gulls swarming.

The spa was right on the main road, a wide driveway lined with daisies. There was a large white sign with a glowing VACANCY hanging beneath it. Maybe four cars in the driveway. Jane parked horizontal behind a Honda and grabbed her bag. She'd barely packed. After the whole dresser destruction there hadn't been ample time to gather possessions. She'd left her toothbrush and her sneakers and that small orange medicine bottle. But this was a spa, and if she couldn't relax at a spa, there was really no hope for her anyway.

Everything in the lobby was white, even the receptionist, whose hair curled like cauliflower. She had straight white teeth that crowded her mouth and she waved a thin hand as Jane walked inside. Her name tag said, "Pat."

"Welcome to Sandgarden," Pat said. Her mouth barely moved. The teeth were so large, like they could chew rocks. "Will you be needing help with your luggage?"

Jane looked down at her duffle. It was maybe ten pounds. It had a tassel with a tag that said, "Al" and their address.

"No," she said. "Thank you."

"Excellent," said Pat. "How long will you be staying with us?"

Jane wiped her nose. It was a good question. Maybe a week, maybe a lifetime? Maybe until they found her dead in the hot tub, lilacs on her tongue.

"One night for now," she said, instead.

Pat tapped the keyboard with two fingers. One the desk was a glass pitcher of water, fruits floating inside. Lemons and limes and a slice of blood orange. There were no paper cups. Jane watched the wedges rise and fall, the seeds sinking to the bottom.

"OK," said Pat. "Have you had a chance to look at the packages."

"I haven't," said Jane.

"Excellent." Pat ducked behind the counter and reemerged with a thick white binder.

SPA PACKAGES. A sun sticker was placed over the "C."

"For starters," said Pat, "we have your basic Spa Package, which includes pool, sauna, meals, steam room, gym, and room. The next step up is the Luxe Package, which has all of those, plus massage. The Resort Package is just the room and the Massage Package is just the massage, no room. The Sport Package includes exercise classes, but no meals. Meals can be purchased one at a time, if you'd like. There are variations on the Massage Package and the Treatment Packages, some of which include nails, some of which do not. The prices are listed here. There's also the DeLuxe package, which is a daily 90-minute massage, or three thirty minute massages on the same day. Swedish or hot stone, or some of both. The Beach Package includes access to the waterfront property and a mud bath, as well as unlimited cocktails. And then there is the Full Package, which includes everything, plus a free robe. Monogramed, if you pay our seamstress."

Pat was still smiling. There was one tooth that was slightly yellow, bottom left. Jane stared at it and forgot almost everything about the packages. There were papers spilling out of the SPA binder.

"I guess, I'll have it all," Jane said.

Room 301. Jane dropped her bags and touched all of the dressers. She ran her fingers along the bedspread and the smooth counters around the sink. There were two shower heads and a button that said STEAM. On the bureau there was a box of ginger candies and a card signed by Pat that said *Enjoy*.

So far, Jane hadn't seen anyone besides Pat. She wondered if Pat was the owner, if Pat was the only employee: the masseuse, the manicurist, the chef. Maybe Jane was the only customer, doomed for slaughter as Pat cut her hair.

She ate three ginger candies and pulled on a swimsuit. She opened the Wild Turkey and took a long swig. From her window, she could see the ocean. A whole pile of brown seaweed.

In the pool, two women waded, holding foam blocks above their heads. There was an older man with his shirt off, sprawled facedown on a lawn chair. Music played softly from the rocks. Jane had heard of speakers like that—fake nature. Maybe if Al had disguised the dumpster as a boulder no one would have complained. A big pet rock, a child's climbing gym.

Jane took off her towel and jumped into the water. The pool was barely four feet deep and her toes scraped the bottom. The women dropped their blocks and hurried to the stairs, holding their hands over their hair. The pool was as warm as dishwater. She imagined plates floating, bits of pasta clogging the drains. She walked out of the pool and back into the building.

Inside, she strolled in her towel through the first floor. The colonial was large, a

whole wing for the treatments, a hallway with heated rooms for the massages. In the gym, she walked on the treadmill for two minutes. She peaked into a spin class—one instructor, one student.

In the main wing, she took candies from the trays and tried to find the hot tub. It was hidden at the back, down a narrow dark hall. There was sign plastered on the door that said *Shh! Relaxation in Process*.

The hot tub was empty. Jane hung her towel on a hook and dipped a toe in the water. There were lilacs, fresh ones, floating on the surface. The room smelled like her neighbor's garden. She stripped and hung her swimsuit on a separate hook. Steam rose from the water. Her skin burned as she sunk, a few inches at a time. The water was so clear, she could see her toes. The hair on her toes. The blisters between her toes.

Her sister, Dawn, had a hot tub, in Sudbury, but it was nothing like this. That water was murky and only sort of warm. Jane had only been in once, at Dawn's thirtieth. Al had spent the whole night hailing insults at her husband, Jim. Jim wore spandex and rode his bike to work and was probably six inches too short for Dawn.

Al had gone overboard, plus he'd brought a plate into the tub and spilled chicken bits everywhere. Dawn had watched them leave without saying goodbye. She was older and bigger than Jane, cheeks sinking like they'd been filled with coins. Jane hadn't waved. In the car, she'd thrown her feet on the dash and closed her eyes.

"Sorry," Al had said. "But that guy is a joke."

"The water wasn't even that warm," Jane had said, eventually. "Our bath is hotter."

"Our bath is ten times hotter."

"The food wasn't so great, either."

"The food was shit."

They had smiled at each other. Al had rested a hand on her knee. They had gone home and filled the bath, heated microwave popcorn. They had chewed it in the tub, tossing kernels at each other over the bubbles.

She felt herself missing him, midday, in the sauna. She lay down next to the coals and though about how green his eyes were. They were only sort of green, brown on most days. But sometimes, when it rained, they glowed a bright jade. The heat sucked the water off her skin.

Carolina, Carolina. The more she said it, the less beautiful it sounded.

At least it was only one woman. Jane had heard worse. At least this Carolina was human, with mood swings and a single vagina. At least she wasn't sixteen. At least she wasn't a musician or a contortionist or her sister.

Dorchester. Jane almost felt bad for her. And the whole dead husband thing, and the fatherless child thing, and the fact that her boyfriend was married thing. She wondered if she should send a card. Some condolences. A basket of chocolate dipped fruits or a one-way to Montreal.

Maybe they could be friends. Jane was running low on those, mostly because even her own sister couldn't stand Al. Maybe they could meet up for lattes and Jane could grab her hands and pretend to like lattes and they could both cry and swear off men and buy matching sun hats and teach seminars about cheating and make enough cash to buy homes in Bermuda.

But she was still fucking her husband. That wasn't the best way to build a

friendship.

Jane had a massage booked for five, an evening deep tissue—30 minutes—followed by a Swedish, whatever that was. She went to the appointment in her swim suit, the towel wrapped around her shoulders. There were too many amenities. In the salon, a woman had painted her nails bright green, scrubbed the dead skin from her toes. A hairstylist had curled her hair and pinned it into a loose bun. She had suffocated in the steam room and eaten a tiny sandwich from the cafe by the pool.

The masseuse's name was Charlotte, and she wasn't a man. She didn't have dark hair or a thin mustache or arms that made Jane quiver. She looked about eighteen, too thin, with huge hands and long fingers. She touched Jane's shoulder lightly and led her into a dark room. Inside, there was a bed covered in a white sheet. No pillow. It looked like the cots at the doctor's office, the ones with wax paper and step stools.

"I'll give you a minute to undress," said Charlotte. "Is there anywhere you would like me to focus on?"

Sounds of the ocean rolled through the speakers, waves and wind and sweet birds.

"Everywhere" said Jane.

Charlotte closed the door and Jane stripped. She laid the suit over a chair and sat on the table. She had never been massaged before, not officially. Sometimes Al scratched her back with a finger. The room was cold. She slipped both legs under the sheet and hoped Charlotte would give further instruction. It was strange, if she thought about it too much. Paying to be groped, naked, in a room so dark. And on the other side of the wall, more naked people lying and groaning, as more women with huge hands coated them in

oil.

When Charlotte returned, Jane was fully under the sheet, face down. It seemed most appropriate, and Charlotte said nothing. She placed a heated towel on Jane's back and pressed down. The waves cracked and rolled, like a whisper in her ear. She could feel herself falling asleep. Charlotte's hands were strong and covered in lotion. They began to dig deep. Why did the stretching of skin feel so good? And why had she never experienced it before? Jane closed her eyes, and for the first time all day, she thought of nothing.

At dinner, the seats were assigned. There were only six guests who had purchased the meal plan—all women. They sat around a large wooden table at the center of the dining room. A silver chandelier hung from the ceiling, a foot or so above their plates.

Jane was placed at the end of the table, next to a woman named Pamela. Pamela was older, about five feet tall, with long gray hair and large glasses. There were deep creases around her mouth, the skin loose and brown. She had worn her robe to dinner. She smelled like she had been left out in the rain.

The meals had already been decided, weeks in advance, months in advance. Maybe they used the same meal plan every year, Jane didn't know. She'd just seen the schedule in the lobby, the same thing every Monday, week after week. Tuesday was sole, a whole one, laid gently on each of their plates. A lemon slice, a clear sauce. Pamela leaned forward until her nose touched her plate. No one at the table had said anything, except a woman named Chandler, who kept announcing that no one was saying anything.

Jane lifted her lemon and sucked the sauce from it. Pamela's face was still in her

dish. Her robe was tied loosely and Jane could see her skin beneath it.

"Do you think there's dairy in this?" Pamela asked, eventually. She was speaking to the plate.

"I'm not sure," said Jane.

"What does it taste like?"

"Fish. Buttery fish."

"Butter is dairy," said Pamela.

"Oh," said Jane. "Right."

Pamela sat up and lifted her fork. She hoisted a large chunk of fish into her mouth. The sauce dripped from her lips.

"Are you lactose intolerant?" Jane asked.

"No."

A few of the women had started whispering. Someone had taken out her cellphone. Jane rested her hands on the table.

"Have you been here long?" Jane asked.

Rice spilled from Pamela's mouth onto the table. She spoke before swallowing. "I've been here for a very long time," she said. "I don't think I'll ever be going home."

After dinner, the women scattered to their separate rooms. Jane walked to the third floor staring at her green nails. She didn't notice the footsteps behind her until she had reached her door.

Pamela had small, careful feet. When Jane turned, she saw her at the end of the hallway, robe open. Her stomach was bare, the curve of her breasts visible. Pamela

smiled. She slipped off the robe, let it fall to the ground. She didn't move. Her skin was loose, dripping like batter over the thin bones. The corridor was bright and smelled like chalk. Jane kept staring. Maybe this was how Carolina had done it, flashed Al in a hallway so he couldn't refuse. Maybe her body was soft as wet pancakes and maybe she was just insane.

Jane opened the door and double locked it behind her.

The next morning, Jane packed her bag, grabbed the mini shampoos and the rest of the candy, and checked out. It was time to go. Pat was back at the desk, still smiling. Pamela was no where.

"Leaving already?" Pat asked. "Was everything as you would have liked?"

"Yes," said Jane. "But I have to go home."

Her car was still blocking the Honda. She looked at the ocean. It was high tide, barely any sand. The gulls were quiet. Maybe their nests had flooded. Maybe they had drowned and washed away.

Jane got in her car and backed out slowly. She watched the water in her rearview as she drove away. Chuck was on the radio. Chuck was screaming. She listened to him shout all the way down to Boston, as she drove into Dorchester and searched for State Street.

The apartment was even smaller than Jane had imagined. It was light blue, paint peeling. She double parked her car and walked slowly to the front door. She felt stupid. Her breath was heavy, catching in her throat. She imagined Charlotte's large hands on her

back, in her hair. She rang the doorbell, stepped back, and tried not to pass out.

A young woman answered the door. She had soft looking hair, waves that fell over her shoulders. Her cheek bones were raised, smooth as clay. Her legs were thin and shapeless. She was sitting, stiff, in a small electric wheelchair.

"Oh," Jane said. "I'm sorry. I think I have the wrong house."

"Are you sure?" The woman wheeled backward and opened the door fully. "Who are you looking for?"

"Just a friend. I'm sure I mixed up the address. Her name is Carolina."

"You're in the right place." The woman rested her hands on her thin legs. "What can I do for you?"

Jane tried not to look surprised. She stared at the woman's face without blinking.

"You're Carolina?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Oh," said Jane. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I've made a mistake."

"What's this about?"

"I'm from the census bureau," Jane said. "You're all set. With the census. Have a good day."

One winter, Jane had found a stray cat in the driveway. It was lying by their gutter, chewing its own paws off. She'd carried it inside and given it some milk, wiped its fur down with a dish towel. When Al had come home, he'd seen the thing and screamed. He'd thought it was a raccoon, a critter who'd snuck in though the garage. He'd almost whacked it with a pan before Jane had found him and screamed.

This was sort of like that, she thought. Except she'd swung the pan, hard. Al hadn't sprinted to stop her.

The front door was unlocked. She could hear Al in the living room, the TV. It was early afternoon. He'd come home for his lunch break—which he did on slow days. He treated cars at the Jiffy Lube on the Auto Mile. His hands were always covered in grease. Jane walked inside and dropped her bag by the stairs. She went into the living room and sat beside him. He was eating a ham sandwich. He hadn't shaved.

"You're back," Al said. "I was starting to worry."

"I know," Jane said. "I'm sorry. I thought you'd done something." She combed her hair with a finger. She could still smell the saltwater. The curls had clumped together with oil, knotted at the tips. "I thought you were seeing someone. I looked through your phone. I saw you'd been talking to someone. I jumped to conclusions."

"You looked through my phone?"

"And your email. Carolina."

"What?"

"I thought you'd been seeing her. But, I mean *I* saw her. I feel like an awful person."

"Shit," Al said. "I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry."

"I was going to tell you," Al said. "I really was. I didn't know what to say. You read everything?"

"Wait," Jane said. "What?" She stared at his forehead. It was creased and glossy,

like he'd been standing over a stove.

"I didn't want it to happen like this," said Al. "I was going to say something."

"You're kidding. She's in a wheelchair."

"So?"

"How did you even meet her?"

"Don't be cruel."

"I'm not being cruel. I'm not the one being cruel."

"I think we've grown apart," Al said, quietly.

"That's very vague," said Jane. "That's a very vague replacement for what you *want* to say."

Al picked up his sandwich and stared at it. The bite mark in the bread was big and wet. Jane wondered if she would vomit. She imagined them puking together until there was nothing left but bones. When they'd met, he'd said he'd love her till his skin turned gray, and she'd told him that only happened to people with kidney disease.

"Carolina is nice to me," Al said. "She doesn't look at me like I'm the stupidest guy in the world. You're doing it right now. That face. It makes you ugly."

"Oh my god."

"Are you really surprised?"

"It's surprising."

"It wouldn't be," Al said. "If you saw it like I saw it."

Grown Ups

After the shooting, Ramona and I go to the pub and interview the owner. He's over sixty, no hair except under his chin. A big man, too big for his chair—like a hen on eggs. We sit heads above him, on stools.

The room has low ceilings and green carpets—the whole floor choked in bright emerald. Ramona and I sit with notepads and ask the man questions he doesn't want to answer. I hold a tape recorder to his mouth. I'm patient but firm. It's our job. We're not supposed to show bias.

"What do you want me to say?" he asks.

"Did you notice any unusual activity?" Ramona says. "Prior to the incident?"

"I already gave my story to the police. Three times."

"I know," I say. "We can't imagine what you must feel."

Trauma victims are often distracted, angry, and reluctant. We are supposed to recognize their hardship—our lack of it. We've passed courses for approaching crime witnesses. We build rapport to appear nonthreatening; we do not expect them to immediately divulge. I ask the owner to describe the neighborhood. I talk about the weather. He doesn't smile. We've yet to establish a connection. I am twenty-five; he is a grandfather. I slept through the night; he watched masked men fire guns into foreheads. My innocence embarrasses me.

"I have nothing else to add," he says.

"We just have a few more questions," I say.

"If you'd like a full report, go to the police."

The owner presses his palms into the table. His face is one large rectangle, no neck—like a pound cake all glazed on his shoulders.

Ramona looks at me. We aren't the cops, so we can't do much of anything. We can publish this man's words in the paper. We can apologize. I watch him rub his temples. The floor is still covered in bottles, a garden of glass. The pub is marked permanently with death, he already knows. I wonder if he will sell it and escape—move away to some dry county.

I nod. I tell him thanks. I tell him sorry.

We're stuck talking to witnesses all morning. We send the notes to our editor and move to the next person on our list. We talk to a cashier at the neighboring convenience store and a woman who lives above the pub.

We don't bother going back to the office. We walk two blocks and find an open coffee shop. It's only 6 AM. Sunday, and the city is quiet.

At a booth, we order egg sandwiches and bottomless coffee. Ramona and I work well together—mostly because of our age, but also because of our appetite. Ramona carries pretzels in her laptop bag. I caught her sneaking cheese sticks from the fridge during orientation.

Today, she's fidgeting, cracking fingers and knuckles under the table. She hasn't slept well. Her eyes are webbed with red, her face unwashed. Ramona's skin is tough and scabbed. It's full of white patches that bubble like foam. She's been on all kinds of medications. She's seen dermatologists and facialists and two witchdoctors—one of whom soaked her face in vinegar. Her forehead is rough as the seashore.

"Did Jared come back?" I ask.

Ramona nods. A waitress sets down our mugs without looking. Coffee spills onto the paper placements.

"What happened?" I ask.

"What do you think?"

Ramona picks a scab beneath her eyebrow. Her eyes rarely have any expression. If they are windows to her soul, they are covered in black curtains. I think they have helped her in interviews.

I sip and rest my feet on her side of the booth. I am partial to Ramona's boyfriend because I have a vague set of morals. Usually, I am reluctant to trust anyone who's killed a cat, even if it was an "accident." Ramona likes Jared because he writes poetry. She doesn't seem to care if it's any good.

"You have to do something," I say.

"Shh," she says. "You're shouting."

"You can't keep letting him in. If he leaves, he's gone. It's not fair."

"He pays half the rent."

"Hardly," I say. "Come on."

"He does. I think you're overreacting. I talked to him for a while last night."

"It's always the same thing."

"He said he would cut it out."

"He always says that."

"He looked terrible. I think he almost cried. You should've seen him."

"Was he drunk?"

Ramona sips her coffee. “He heard the shots,” she says. “He was at the bar by the waterfront.”

“So he was drunk.”

I set my mug on the table and wrap my arms around my shoulders. The heat isn’t on. I can see Ramona’s breath.

“You need to change your locks,” I say.

Ramona looks out the window. She pours three sugars into her coffee.

“I’m serious,” I say.

“Let’s talk about something else,” she says. “Tell me a happy story.”

Ramona is a gifted storyteller. She can string words into worlds. She’s had plenty of practice—six younger siblings. Five now. The youngest passed away last spring, and since then Ramona’s been quiet. She doesn’t have any words left inside her. She told me this one night at a theater in Saco. An actress had fallen from a balcony and we’d had to report it. Ramona explained the whole story without moving her eyes, like she was speaking under a mask.

At the diner, I shove my coffee across the table and lace my hands behind my head.

“I’m planning to take a nap this afternoon,” I tell her. “A long one.”

“Oh,” she says. “That is a very happy story.”

Ramona and I eat our sandwiches quickly. She pours half a bottle of ketchup on hers. When she bites, a sunset mess squirts onto her plate. Her egg makes me gag. I like the yolks hard and chalky. I get sick thinking of the liquid babies, dangling like snot from a bagel. Ramona doesn’t care. She licks the yolk right from the plate.

After breakfast, we wander down Maine Street and don't say anything. I like Ramona because she likes to be quiet. I get nervous, always having to think of something to say. With Ramona I don't have to worry. We walk for a while until it starts to rain and Ramona says she has somewhere to be. I never ask her where she's going, because she's always going somewhere. We just nod and walk our separate ways in the gray.

It's Sunday, my day off. The shooting has interrupted what would have been a generally relaxing weekend. My sister Cam and her kids are supposed to go bowling. My mother spends Sundays at Church. Which means the house is empty—a rarity because five people live in it. Four people too many.

I can't complain. Houses are expensive. And journalists of my skill don't make the big bucks. We hardly make the little bucks. Cam is a nurse practitioner, which is somehow different from a nurse in ways she has trouble explaining. She's got a steady paycheck from the hospital, and no loans to pay because she was smart enough to work-study. I have a whole sack of loans, a whole closet. Plus, a degree that thus far hasn't repaid itself. But you have to be patient, Ramona says. You have to be patient, because people our age don't deserve anything. We expect too much and work too little. Ramona is unpleasantly realistic. My mother loves her.

I walk home because I don't have a car. Some days, Cam drops me at the office but most times I bike. The pub is three blocks from the house. I didn't hear any of the gunshots, somehow. I'm a heavy sleeper. Cam says heavy sleepers are more likely to slip into comas. She says this whenever I sleep past ten. I think she's the stupidest nurse practitioner I've ever met.

The rain has turned torrential by the time I reach our lawn. Meaty is there, the cat. We have to call it Sammy's cat, even though Sammy is three and doesn't own anything. I said "Our cat" once to a neighbor and Sammy bit me in the ankle. She's a violent kid, but she's Cam's so I can't say anything. My own children will be kind and docile. I'll teach them wash linens and play the harp. If I'm renting out my womb, I'd like some reliable reimbursement.

Meaty is soaked skinny. His hair drips in uneven patches, his tail hangs like seaweed. He's the ugliest cat I've ever seen. One of his eyes is missing. He came that way. Cam got him from a shelter when he was twelve, so I'd assumed his existence wouldn't be a long term thing. But he's still here. He's too curious for an indoor cat. I always find him outside. I keep hoping a coyote will eat him but he's managed to avoid capture. He doesn't follow me into the garage. I take my shoes off and close the door behind me.

There are few things in the house that are actually clean. Sammy is usually sick and Pete is generally disgusting. He's five and a half and likes to stick his hands into everything. I have a sign on my door that says *Keep Out*, like I'm ten years old. But the kids listen. I've yelled before, and they're afraid of me.

There's a trail of mud leading into the kitchen. Someone is screaming. Someone is always screaming. Screaming is one of the unfortunate ramifications of children. Today, it's Sammy. I hear her upstairs, shrieking gibberish. My mother is at the kitchen table reading comics. She's almost seventy and still loves comics. Cam hasn't read a comic in her life. She's grumpy enough to be twice our mother's age.

I join my mother at the table and wait for her to say something. Her hearing is so

bad she's stopped noticing the smoke alarm, which blares whenever we cook. It's very sensitive, but Cam insists on keeping the wood stove. My mother doesn't speak until I place my hands over the newspaper. She's wearing her reading glasses. Her hair is bundled on top of her head like a nest.

"You're home," she says. "I thought you were out."

"I was," I say. "I had to interview witnesses."

"Oh, that," she says. "How was that?"

"They were upset."

"I'm sure."

"What's wrong with Sammy?"

"Is she crying?" my mother asks. "I haven't heard a thing."

I finish two cups of tea by the time Cam comes downstairs. She's in a tracksuit, holding Sammy by the arm. Sammy is fully dressed and crying. My mother is back to the comics. Cam lifts Sammy onto a chair and walks to the fridge. Sammy rests her face on the table.

"Good morning, Sammy," I say.

"Don't talk to her," says Cam. "She's in Time Out."

"She's at the table."

"She has to eat," says Cam. "But she's in Time Out."

Sammy starts to cry louder, kicking her feet. Cam sets down a bowl of dry Cheerios in front of her.

"Eat," she says. "We have to get going."

“Where’s Pete?” I ask.

“He’s sick,” she says. “He has a temperature.”

“How high?”

“99.”

“That’s barely a temperature.”

Cam picks cereal from Sammy’s bowl and stuffs a handful in her own mouth. “I’m hoping you can take care of him while we’re out,” she says. Her teeth are coated in Cheerio paste.

“He’s not going bowling?”

“He’s sick.”

“He has a cold.”

“I don’t want the other children to catch something,” says Cam. “Someone has to stay home with you. Mother’s going out, and I’ve already promised Sammy.”

Sammy looks dead on the table, like a washed up penguin. Her black curls hang in the cereal bowl.

“I have plans today,” I said. “I have things I need to do. It’s my day off.”

“You just have to make sure he’s breathing,” Cam says. “Bring him soup or something. I’ve already set up a movie.”

“Fine,” I say.

“Thank you.”

“The cat is outside,” I say.

“My cat,” says Sammy.

“Sammy’s cat is outside,” I say. “It’s raining now. He might drown.”

"Don't say things like that," says Cam. "He won't drown, Sammy."

"He can swim," said Sammy. "He told me."

"Are you going to church?" I ask my mother. I wrap my tea bag's thread around my thumb until the tip turns white. "It's raining."

She folds the newspaper into quarters. "I was planning to," she says. She takes off her glasses and rests them on the table. "I didn't know it was raining."

Cam walks to the wood stove and throws in a log. She makes a big deal of it, lugging the thing over her shoulder with a groan. She frowns at me. Like she's doing us a favor. The room grows smoky and hot.

"We have to go," Cam says.

Sammy screams and shoves the cereal bowl onto the floor. There's a loud hacking upstairs, a series of phlegmy coughs. Cam looks at me and points to the ceiling.

"Make sure he's OK," she says. She lifts Sammy from the chair and stuffs her into a small raincoat. Sammy's arms bend backwards, plump and boneless. She is all skin, like a shaved teddy bear.

My mother and I watch them struggle to the garage. Pete's coughing continues. I lift Sammy's bowl from the floor and eat the remaining Cheerios. The fire in the wood stove is suffocating. Cam keeps it burning all night if she can. She stuffs cardboard and newspaper and journals inside it. She rips pages from the novels she's finished and cuts them into strips. She makes the same joke every time, with the cover in her hands. "We burn books in this house!" Then she laughs to herself as we watch her toss them in.

My mother puts her glasses back on. And then the smoke alarm wails.

"I'm going to nap," I say.

I spend as much of the day as I can in bed. Once, I walk into Pete's room to make sure he's alive. The coughing has quieted. I'm just being careful. Cam would throw me out the window if I killed one of her kids. I find Pete under a quilt, his eyes peaking out. His eyelids are red puffy, like he's rubbed them dry.

The room smells like a used Tupperware. I sit on the edge of Pete's bed and wait for him to say something. Then he coughs, straight into my face, without covering his mouth. The kid coughs into anything, bowls and cups and lips. He looks at the television with blank eyes and I walk back to my room.

Later, Ramona calls when I'm half asleep. She's crying. She says someone has broken into her house, or at least she thinks someone has. The door was open; her chairs were knocked over. Ramona can't find the bag of cash she keeps under her bed in a suitcase. I tell her not to worry. She's a fifteen-minute bike ride from my house. I look into Pete's room and he's sleeping. I close his door, grab a raincoat, and leave the wood stove burning.

Ramona is standing in the doorway, barefoot. Her face is even pinker than usual, cheeks wet and chafed. I give her a quick hug and then step back. Our friendship is not usually affectionate. Ramona steps into the apartment and sets one of the chairs up straight. She sits down. I grab another and sit facing her.

"What happened?" I ask.

"It had to be him," she says. "I always lock the door."

"Of course it was him. Did you call?"

"No, I was waiting for you."

I look around the apartment. Everything else is in place, the dishes, the picture frames. Ramona rubs her face with her palms.

"Fuck," she says. "You were right."

"Maybe I'm not. Maybe it was someone else."

We sit for a while without saying anything. I want to tell her that yes, it was him. That yes, he is a bad person. That I've never liked him, not for a day, not when I met him in June at her birthday. Not when he threw her into the closet last week. But I just sit there and stare at the two chairs still lying horizontal.

"You should come stay with me," I say. "You can't stay here."

Ramona runs her fingers through her hair. She leaves them at the back of her neck, her elbows raised like wings.

"OK," she says. She drops her hands to her sides. "I'm sorry."

I never anticipated living with my mother and my sister after I graduated. I found a university three states away and I'd intended to stay there. When I visited during holidays, the house no longer felt mine. It still didn't, but I was still here. It's easier to think about leaving than it is to follow through.

I wanted it to be nice—spending time with my sister—but I don't think it ever was. She was wound up so tight, like I could break her by breathing. My mother moved in after her first stroke, because the doctors didn't like her living by herself. So the house grew. And Cam said *fine*. But I always heard her crying in the kitchen, around midnight, when she thought we had all gone to sleep. At the time, I didn't feel bad for her. I didn't

feel bad for anyone but myself.

Ramona knows about the house, but she's never seen it. I don't think I've ever invited anyone over, intentionally at least. Once, a guy I dated dropped me off after dinner and asked to use the bathroom. Pete was potty-training, and all the toilets were covered in blue child seats. I remember waiting at the door, knowing I would never see this guy again, knowing I would end up some horror story he'd tell his friends. "She wasn't potty trained!" When he came out of the bathroom he didn't look at me. And then my mother, still dazed from recovery, starting calling him by my father's name. Guests, after that, were carefully avoided.

Ramona doesn't seem to mind. I think she must miss her family, sometimes. She rarely talks about any of them, even her parents. I know they're both alive because they send letters to the office. I've found them on her desk, unopened.

My mother is back from church and deep in the comics. When she sees Ramona, she grins wide and lifts her hands. The kitchen is smoky, the fire still glowing. Ramona sits next to my mother and starts reading. They sit for a very long time. I make more tea and join them across the table.

"Ramona's staying the night," I say.

"Really?" My mother smiles.

Ramona nods.

"That's wonderful," my mother says. "You should stay over more often." She folds the comics into careful squares, five or six times. "What would you prefer for dinner? We

have chops and a rotisserie chicken. Rotisserie isn't so nice though, you'd want something special. We'll have something special. I don't know what I could make without going to the store. Maybe the chops."

"Anything," says Ramona. "Thank you."

"I'm so happy you're staying," says my mother.

My mother makes the chops. She stays in the kitchen for a couple of hours and doesn't speak. I almost forget there's anything wrong with her. Cooking has become a sort of therapy. She's taught her hands to move again, her fingers to bend. She's taught her mind to empty and fill back up in the right order. She's patient. Ramona watches with her chin on her fists, eyes wide.

The garage door hums and Cam is already yelling. Little footsteps follow, a whimper and a scream.

"Ignore them," I tell Ramona. "Don't make eye contact."

Ramona laughs and the lines around her mouth cut deep. She could be beautiful. She has a smile that brightens her whole face. Cam should take lessons. I don't think she's smiled in three years. Sometimes, I see her mouth twitch in front of the TV, like she's going to grin. Like she's thinking about how it would feel to smile. Like she's realizing it would hurt too much.

Cam doesn't even look at Ramona. She sits down at the table and pulls off her sneakers. We have a mudroom, but she always forgets about it. She had it installed last spring after weeks of designing. She worked with a contractor. Still, she takes her shoes off in the kitchen, leaves her coat over a chair. The mudroom holds my winter coat and a

huge sack of cat food.

Sammy waddles in, all teary. Her legs are stiff and heavy, like building blocks. She is so dumb looking, her face wide and featureless. A pie crust with eye holes. I wonder if Cam can see the kid without a mother's bias. Maybe Sammy looks even dumber to her. Maybe every night she tucks her into bed and thinks of strangling her—of peeling that face off with a blade.

"How was bowling?" I ask. "This is Ramona."

"Everyone in town decided to go bowling today," says Cam. She rubs a foot with both hands. Lately, she's been aching all over. She'll sit in a chair and dig into her skin and moan like a pregnant person. The kids are little but I know they'll remember—the image of their mother, glum and puffy, hunched over her feet. It will haunt them for decades, I decide.

"I saw Sarah," says Sammy, loudly.

"Yes," says Cam. "We saw Sarah. And Jill, and Alexandra, and Hunter. We probably saw every person she knows. There weren't enough lanes. We had to sit at the snack bar for a whole half hour."

"That's too bad," I say. "This is Ramona."

"It was *bad*," says Cam. "I don't think I'm ever going back there. You know how much it costs for three rounds? Forty-five bucks. *Forty- five*. I could get two manicures for that. I could probably buy a whole fucking cow."

"Moo," Sammy says.

"Ramona is staying the night," I say.

"What?" Cam stops rubbing her feet. She looks like she's walked through a

tornado. Her hair is pinned all over her head in large bobby pins, the ends spraying out like feathers.

"Ramona," I say. "This woman sitting next to me."

Ramona gives a little wave.

"Oh," says Cam. "I'm sorry. Hi."

"She works at the paper," I say. "She's staying over tonight."

"Huh," Cam says. She's turned back to her feet, staring at the toes as she kneads them. "How is Pete?" she says. She doesn't look up. "Have you been checking on him?"

"Who's Pete?" I say.

Cam doesn't laugh.

"Peter," my mother says. She turns to Ramona. "After his father, you know."

"Excuse me?" Cam says.

"Cut it out," I tell her.

"What did you say?" Cam says.

My mother mumbles something to herself and pours oil into a pan. "Pete," she says, "is actually Peter Jr. I'm telling Ramona where his name comes from. It was his father's name. Cam's ex-husband."

"He wasn't my husband," Cam says. "You know that." She grabs her coat and her sneakers and carries them to the door.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"We're about to eat," my mother says.

"I'm not hungry," says Cam. "I'm going out."

Ramona picks at her fingernails. I almost want to choke her so she'll pass out and

forget all this. Sammy grabs onto her mother's leg and bites.

"I don't want to start this again," Cam says. "I know what's going to happen."

"Don't be upset," says my mother.

"OK, OK," says Cam. "What's your point?"

"There's no need to be upset," my mother says. "It's just a name."

I smell burning chops. Smoke pours from the pan.

"I'll check the oven," I say.

"Let her do it," Cam tells me. "She's a grown person."

"I'll help," I say.

"Sit down." My mother says. She yanks the pan towards her and the chops spill onto the ground.

Sammy screams and runs into the mud room. The four of us stare at the chops. They're raw and oil slicked. Meaty comes out of nowhere and starts licking. My mother puts her hands over her eyes and cries.

"Give me a break," says Cam. "Jesus fuck." She pulls her sneakers back on, picks up her coat. "I'm leaving," she says.

We don't even look at her. We just stare at the floor until the smoke clears and Meaty has gnawed to the bones.

My bed is queen-sized and covered in a thick purple quilt. Ramona sets her bag on the bed and pulls out a silk nightgown. I've never seen anyone our age wear a nightgown. I pull on a t-shirt and climb into bed. The house smells like the Chinese we ordered, the dumplings and the crab Rangoon. I pull the cover up to my chin and close my eyes.

"I'm sorry about that," I say.

"I've seen worse," Ramona says.

"That's what you're supposed to say."

She pulls out a plastic bag full of face scrubs.

"Where's the bathroom?" she asks.

"Down the hall."

She takes ten minutes, maybe more. I picture her rubbing the salves into her cheeks, around her nose and her eyebrows. I keep my eyes closed even though the lights are on. Cam is still out. I don't know where. She's around, somewhere. She hasn't left the city. She's probably at an Applebee's. I imagine the bar filled with mothers—lonely mothers—draped over the counter, sleeves snotty and bitten and crusty. A room of mothers wondering who they are when they're finally alone. Wondering if they are someone, or just someone else's.

The kids are in bed. My mother is in the kitchen. The house is silent.

Ramona walks quietly into the room and turns off the light. It's barely ten. She climbs into bed and we are almost touching. We lie on our backs. I wonder if she is uncomfortable, sleeping so close to me. My arm twitches and I stroke her by accident. Maybe, she thinks I'm interested. Maybe, I am. Sometimes, I can't tell.

"If I touch you in my sleep, it's not on purpose," I say.

Which sounds weirder than saying nothing.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I wish I had a cot or something."

"Don't worry. This is nice."

"You can stay as long as you need to," I tell her. "As long as we take your car to

work."

"That sounds reasonable," she says. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry," I tell her.

I reach for her hand and squeeze lightly. We have a day of interviews to look forward to, victims from whom we must coaxed answers. It is our job.

In the darkness, Ramona's phone rings over and over. It's him, every time. We put the phone between us and watch it glow. Ramona's eyes water. Her hair is pulled back tight. Once, she grabs the phone like she'll answer and I rest my hand over hers. We stay touching for a while. Her fingers are cold and thin. I lie there restless, thinking about all of the terrible people in the world, wondering how many of them we know.

This is What You Want

On nights when her father was traveling, Hilary wondered who would save her if the house caught fire. If the halls were smoky and the door knobs were hot. The house felt hollow, particularly in winter, and she imagined it easily igniting, flames from the burner or her mother's cigarettes sparking and spreading across the wallpaper. The baby would scream or laugh and Hilary would watch the deep orange consume the pale walls and wood and skin. It was all very morbid. Hilary hoped if she stopped drinking coffee or if her father came home she would relax.

It was February and the first storm of the season. Snow up to the windows. Winter was when Hilary saw the least of her father, particularly now, with his travel schedule and his general distaste for the house. He stayed in intervals, like a tenant, and Hilary never knew if she'd return home to see him, or his apology taped to the fridge. He had a friend, Dave, whom he stayed with when he needed to work, or when Hilary's mother got particular about the dishes. Dave and her father had matching jaguar tattoos on their forearms from college. Dave was alright. Hilary almost liked him if she forgot how he smelled, jerky and ginger ale, and the strange way he talked about her father: "He's a real *fun* guy." Dave had driven Hilary to one of her hockey practices, when her mother was sick and her father was working. "A real, real *fun* guy."

But they were a family, so they acted like one. They sent Christmas cards and made birthday cakes with number candles and homemade frosting. They had a garden with hydrangeas and pussy willows and a dead pear tree that Hilary's mother refused to cut down. They kissed and said *I love you* and they almost meant it. And Hilary had believed

it all, until her brother was born. Until last December, when her mother had cried and screamed “I’m not done talking to you!” as her father had grabbed his keys. On the way out, his head had hit the garage door, the door that hung half open because he had forgotten, in August, to fix it. And that was that. Hilary had cried on Christmas, standing barefoot by the window, watching her father’s car as it drove down the block. The rope from the Christmas tree still hung off its roof, and it dangled behind the car as he sped away.

The baby liked pickles, sour ones, and on occasions when Hilary was feeling unusually reckless, she fed them to him in slices. Hilary knew that actions such as these were unacceptable, specifically in the company of her mother. The baby could choke, her mother warned, on coins and grapes and salty cucumbers. There was a particular diet conducive to a baby's windpipe: slimes, goos, and liquids. Hilary liked to stick her fingers in the pickle jars and let him suck. He could almost speak and when he saw the dripping hand, he always cooed.

Hilary stared into the baby’s crib and snuck coffee sips from her mother’s mug. It was cold in the house, cold enough for mittens, and Hilary wondered if the roof would cave in. The heaters were fussy. They hissed and stuttered and Hilary liked to kick them until they quieted and the warmth seeped through. Hilary dipped a finger into the mug and stuck it into the baby's mouth. The baby, who loved decaf, spoons soaked in Scotch, the salt from his toes. He wrapped little fingers around her wrist and stared at her cross-eyed. Sunday, and the night fell thick like curtains.

The family lived on a hill. Hilary knew the fate of the driveway, that she and her

mother would need the shovels from the shed and a whole day to throw the snow into the woods. A school day that she almost minded missing. Hilary pet the baby's stomach and stared at the thermometer. The kitchen smelled of deli meat, packets of cold pastrami. She lifted the baby, face to face, and kissed his nose. She pressed his body to her chest, the tiny furnace of him, sweating in his layers, grinning with red cheeks. The baby had an abnormally high resting temperature. Hilary's parents had visited three leading specialists in the state of New Hampshire, none of whom had expressed concern.

"He's a healthy baby," the male specialist had told them. He was balding and his hair collected around his ears like feathers.

"But he's always so hot." Her mother lifted a small pink arm and pointed with two fingers.

"He's got my metabolism," said her father.

The doctor checked the baby's heart rate again. "He's really all right."

Hilary's mother was wearing glasses, reading glasses she wore only when she was overwhelmed or had not showered. On her desk were piles of stapled packets and manila folders and a few thick notebooks labeled "*Issues*" *1, 2,* and *3*. Hilary's mother worked as a legal aid for the city's food bank, and issues, Hilary knew, were endless. When the mother saw her children in the doorway, she dropped a folder and smiled, stretching her fingers like starfish.

"Come here, baby."

Hilary walked to the desk and handed the bundle to her mother. She leaned against a drawer and picked at a stapled packet. Her mother covered the baby's face in kisses.

“Is it better downstairs?” she asked. She blew warm air onto the baby's nose.

“The heaters are making it colder,” said Hilary.

“Someone's got to look at them. I’ve put the blankets on your bed.”

Electric blankets from Hilary’s grandmother. Hilary often imagined her midnight electrocution, a water cup tipping in the wind. The thick heated cords tightening around her neck.

“I don't like those,” Hilary said.

The room went dark then light again and Hilary’s mother glanced at the window. “The plows aren't coming,” she said. “I called. And I have this proposal tomorrow afternoon. I’m going to have to call Noel.”

Calling Noel was never Hilary’s first choice. It was almost never her second choice, either. Noel was a radio personality who moonlighted as Hilary’s mother’s handy man. He worked at the local station, 93.3, where he played lost hits of the seventies and commercials about erectile dysfunction. He was not particularly dexterous. Hilary had watched him hammer his fingers into her bedroom wall on more than one occasion. Noel lived two streets down with three dogs and always smelled like the final stages of a bloody nose. Mostly, he would arrive unannounced and her mother would answer the door grinning, mouth wide like she was posing for the dentist. She would gape and sputter and Hilary would watch from between the stair’s railings.

“What about school?” Hilary asked. She had only recently remembered her failure to complete, or even begin, her geography assignment. She was twelve, and burdens such as these felt fatal.

“As of now, it's on,” said her mother. “But I bet by morning they cancel. You aren’t

walking in this."

"I don't want to stay here all day." Hilary thought of the heaters, haunting the halls while her mother was away. The cracks in the windows where the wind cried like cats in the mornings. The daytime television. "Can I call Dad?"

"He's still in meetings." Her mother shifted the baby into one arm and opened *Issue 2*. "I have a lot more to do tonight. It would be great if Gordon could go out."

Gordon, the pug, shook in the doorway. He was fat and getting fatter. Sometimes he would sleep for hours and Hilary would assume he was dead. He had a certain smell.

"Thank you, sweet," said her mother.

"It's late for a meeting," said Hilary.

The last time Hilary had seen her father was three Sundays before. The final hockey game of the season. Hilary's team had gone 2-10 and her father had bought her a condolences lemonade from the concession stand.

"Are you coming home tonight?" Hilary had asked him. From the car, they watched the crowds wander out of the rink.

"Your mother is a complicated person," he said.

"Complicated."

"She says one thing, but means another."

"OK" Hilary sipped. She loved the sour scratch of sugar and lemon. "That's not so hard. Just don't listen to her."

It was starting to rain. Her dad stared at the steering wheel. "You're a smart girl, you know."

By morning, the house was surrounded by snow. School was canceled and Hilary's mother called Noel to help with the driveway. Overnight, the electric blankets had slid up Hilary's neck. The floor was cold where the carpet ended and she thought of her father's hotel room in San Fransisco. White pillow cases, and rugs made of fur, and sunshine even in the mornings. At least she imagined. Hilary's house was dark and she hoped, when he returned, that her father would bring back a lava lamp.

The baby was loud in the mornings, babbling through breakfast. Hilary heard voices in the kitchen and smelled something like pancakes. Instead, she found Noel at the counter, with snow in his hair. He was shorter than her mother but thick, with a large, large head. Hilary had decided that Noel, in his youth, had suffered a severe allergic reaction, a swelling of his facial tissue that had left a permanent bloat. She liked to picture him choking on a cherry, hives snaking around his neck.

Noel said, "Hello Hilary," and bit into toast.

From the stove, her mother turned and smiled. The baby said something no one understood.

"Hi Noel," Hilary said. She sat beside him at the counter. He was wearing a thick canvas jacket too long for his arms. A hand rested on the baby's chair.

"Snow day, huh?" he said.

"Snow day," said Hilary.

"Noel finished the driveway in less than an hour," said her mother. "I swear, I stepped in the shower and by the time I was dressed, he was done."

The baby clapped. Hilary often wondered whose side he was on.

Noel stood, wiping his lips. “I’m going to get my tool box from the car,” he said. “For the sink.”

“Wear a hat,” said Hilary’s mother.

Noel patted his head and walked with Gordon to the door. The pug liked the thought of going outside more than the act of it. Most snow storms, Hilary had to hold him over the bushes so he would pee, leaking warm yellow into her hands. Gordon pawed the screen but trembled when Noel stepped out. Hilary hissed loudly at the baby. Sometimes he would imitate, sometimes he would cry.

“Stop it,” said her mother.

“What?” said Hilary.

Noel cleared the faucet, Noel stared at the stove. Noel patched a hole by the fridge and tried to stop the tap from leaking. Noel fixed something, or almost fixed something, and Hilary’s mother would set him on another task less vital than the last. As Noel cleaned the Brita filter, the phone rang.

“Can you get that?” Hilary’s mother asked her, shoving sneakers over the baby’s doughy feet.

“My hands are greasy,” said Hilary.

“Please.”

Hilary licked butter from her fingers. She lifted the receiver and said, “Hello.”

“Good, you’re awake. I wasn’t sure.”

It was Nora Sternweiler. Nora generally called at the least convenient times. Hilary assumed she and Nora were friends, but she found Nora strange and often irritating.

Particularly her appetite. Nora liked baked eggs and the insides of hotdogs. She smelled like boiled potatoes in a way that reminded Hilary of the elderly. She had an aunt from Russia.

"I think I'm coming over," Nora said.

"I don't think that's a good idea," said Hilary. She walked with the phone into the living room. "*Noel* is here."

"I'm in your driveway."

"You really can't keep doing this." Hilary said. She left the phone off the hook and walked to the garage.

"Who was that?" her mother asked.

The baby kicked a sneaker onto the floor and laughed.

Noel was outside again, clearing the Subaru's windows. In the driveway, Nora spoke to him with exaggerated hand gestures. Seeing Hilary, she stepped closer and dusted snow from Noel's shoulders. Hilary waited inside the garage until Nora entered, grinning.

"Hey," Nora said.

"I hate when you do that," said Hilary.

"Do what?"

"You know."

"Don't be weird," said Nora. At the door, she pulled off her boots. "He's *almost* cute."

Nora lived across the street with her mother and brother in a house with statues on

the lawn. Her father lived in Atlantic City because, according to Nora, he found it convenient.

"I ate three bags of Hershey's last night," Nora continued. In the kitchen, she nudged Gordon with a foot.

"Why?" Hilary asked.

"Tom said I couldn't."

Tom was Nora's brother. He was twenty and lived at home and always shouted obscenities in Pig Latin at Hilary when she walked to school. There was a time, before the nose ring, before his almost-graduation and the DUI, when Hilary had found Tom attractive. He said her name with exaggerated vowels and it always made her shiver.

"Did you puke?" Hilary asked.

"I wish," said Nora. "Hi folks."

"Hi Nora," said Hilary's mother. "You walked in the snow?"

"My mom was vacuuming," Nora said. "I couldn't stay."

Nora had a habit of touching things twice. Polishes, toe rings, the blow dryer. Nora ran her fingers over Hilary's bureau from right to left then back again. She double tapped a hair brush and Hilary's hockey bobbleheads.

"Thanks for having me," she said. She pressed two hands against the mirror. "Tom and his friends have been playing human tether ball."

"What?"

"They tie someone up and swing him around a pole," Nora said.

"That's horrible." Hilary shoved the electric blankets onto the floor.

"It's fine for a while."

On the bed, Hilary knelt beside her pillows and tried not to listen to her mother's laugher. The way her voice cracked when she forgot formality. Sometimes Hilary felt the same frantic shrill in her own throat and it terrified her.

"So why's Noel here?" Nora asked.

"I don't really know anymore," said Hilary. Noel's function in her home seemed vastly ambiguous. Pull bars on a push door. "Handling chores."

"Ugh," said Nora. "*Handling*."

Through the window, Hilary watched Noel shovel snow off the doorstep. He was smiling and it bothered her. Sane people did not enjoy shoveling. Sane people liked to fuss and grumble when the possibility of manual labor was imminent. Noel whipped the spade in the air and snow landed in his face.

"Well, anyway." Nora ran her hands over the carpet in circles. "I've chosen a valentine."

It was February, after all. Hilary had almost forgotten. She seemed to be one of the few girls at Mount Vernon to have given up on romance entirely. It was unrealistic, and unpleasant. Childhood had yielded various amorous interests, all of which had left Hilary with torn diary pages, ample tears, and/or leaves in her mouth. Hilary had filled an entire journal with scathing romantic commentary, circling wet spots on the pages and scribbling "THIS is because of Seth," "THIS is because of Liam."

"Do you know Jonathan Katz?" Nora asked.

"No."

"He's on the squash team," Nora said. "I want to get him something. But I don't

want it to be weird, obviously. What do you think?"

"I don't know," Hilary said. "What's squash?"

"I'm trying to think of things he likes," said Nora. "Because chocolate is weird, and flowers are weird."

"Chocolate is weird."

"He has a lizard, I think."

"One?"

"I think so," said Nora.

"It's usually never just a one lizard situation," Hilary said. She imagined a large lizard colony invading the Katz's den. Nora and Jonathan seated on thrones of reptilian carcasses, wearing scaly crowns and wriggling their tongues at each other. "Get him crickets."

"Stop," said Nora.

By two, the power was out and Noel had set up a compulsory game of Monopoly in the living room. Board games gave Nora headaches, and she threatened to leave unless given Banker. Hilary's mother's meeting had been cancelled last minute and she seemed unconcerned. She had made cookie dough and with the power out she served it raw, in small bowls with spoons.

"You girls watch out," said Noel. "Your mother plays a mean game of monopoly."

"It's mostly luck," said Nora.

"Girls, you make your own luck," said Noel.

"We should have chosen a shorter game," said Hilary.

Within the hour, Nora had snuck $500 to Hilary under the coffee table and Noel's fingers had drifted menacingly close to Hilary's mother's. Hilary's attention wavered. Her mother stole glances at Noel, grinning like she was five and silly and tasting ice cream for the first time. Hilary did not mind when Noel landed in jail. Instead, she stared carefully at his freckles and almost-beard. He was flushed and sweating, with eyes that hid under his brows. His hair curled in tight coils and reminded Hilary of the poodle down the block. Lola. According to Nora, Lola could use a human toilet. Nora claimed she'd seen it. Hilary's father hated Lola because she was rarely leashed and liked to bother Gordon in their yard. She wasn't spayed. Last summer, her father had thrown a rock at Lola's nose.

When the money had circled back to Nora, Hilary stood and tossed her piece into the box. "Let's go upstairs," she said.

"Check if the baby is still sleeping," said her mother.

"Good game, folks," said Nora.

In the baby's room, the girls painted each other's nails green and spilled polish on the carpet. Nora dabbed the stains with both hands as Hilary bit the paint from her nails. She could hear Noel's heavy tread roaming the first floor.

"Did you see them?" Hilary asked. "It's awful."

"I didn't notice," said Nora.

"You weren't paying attention."

Nora stood and cracked her back loudly. She liked to hear her spine pop, snap like the buttons on the baby's pajamas. "When's your dad coming home?"

"Next weekend."

"Where is he?"

"California."

"That's nice," said Nora. "You can't blame him."

"I guess," said Hilary.

"What's he doing?"

"I don't know," Hilary said. "Consulting people."

"He could consult people here," said Nora.

"I guess they don't need any consulting."

Twice through, Nora blew on her nails. "I wouldn't worry. He probably misses you." She shook her hands. "My mom says monogamy is impractical. And now she's got like six boyfriends. She does yoga."

The polish had seeped deeper into the carpet. Hilary stepped on it with a socked foot and rubbed. "My mom's not like that."

"I know," said Nora. "She's unhappy." Nora examined her nails. "I'm going home."

"Alright."

"You want to come over for dinner?"

"Not really."

"OK," said Nora. "If you think of a Valentine, call me."

Things were alright if Hilary tried not to think about them. She spent the early evening with the baby, dangling her socks over his face until he grabbed them and tried

to suck. She glanced at the phone and wondered if her father would call. By six, it was clear that Noel was not leaving, despite the return of electricity. Instead, he pulled out frozen patties from the freezer and demonstrated how to turn on the oven.

"You like burgers?" he said to the stove. His wide face hovered over the burners.

Hilary's mother carried a palm sized speaker from the living room and set it on the counter. She rarely attempted to operate the device, since Bluetooth both confused and frightened her. Squatting, she leveled her face with the box, pressing her tongue between her teeth. She squinted and tilted her head. She hummed. Hilary watched her mother's face contort in concentration. She was capable of making herself particularly unattractive. She snored heavily at night, oblivious. Often, Hilary could hear it from her own bedroom, the heaving and whining, louder than the lawn mower, louder than the hairdryer and the blender with the hole in the lid. An awful snore. Hilary's father had been refusing to share the room unless her mother found appropriate medication. Behind the speaker, her mother groaned and Hilary knew that her father, when he returned, would not be home for long. The speaker beeped steadily.

"You get radio on there?" Noel asked. He poked the patties with a thick finger.

"I don't think so," said Hilary's mother.

"Shame."

"When are we eating?" Hilary asked.

"How about you set the table?" her mother said.

"Why?" Hilary asked. "You haven't started cooking."

"Sweet," said her mother. "It would be very helpful to me and Noel if you would please take out plates and condiments."

Hilary, still bothered by Noel's presence and the word *condiments*, frowned, but stood. "I'm not hungry anymore," she said.

"Ketchup, mustard, pickles," said her mother. "And mayo for Noel?"

"Mayo," said Noel, nodding. He placed the burgers carefully onto the hot pan, smiling as they sizzled.

The baby grinned at Hilary as she sulked to the refrigerator. She tried to look as angry as she could, slanting her eyebrows and scrunching her lips, her small face folding inward like clay. Her mother knew to ignore it, that her daughter would soon cease pouting and surrender, hungry and bored, to geniality. Hilary grabbed the four bottles carefully in her arms and set them on the table. She reclaimed her seat beside the baby and opened the pickle jar.

"Thank you," said her mother.

"Ah," said the baby.

Hilary watched, with a slight headache, her mother and Noel by the stove. Her father still had not called and it had been over a week. She thought about Nora's mother and her tinted lipstick, smelling always like hairspray and spearmint. Anger rose inside her, quick like a fever, as she stared at Noel's square head. It was the way her mother smiled at him. That wide smile, one that did not deflate into a scream or sigh. Hilary opened the pickle jar and stuffed the end of a cucumber into her mouth. The baby clapped, jealous, and Hilary glared at him. A stupid, stupid baby, unable to realize, despite all the attempts, his inability to chew and swallow. The baby continued to clap, grabbing Hilary's wet fingers and pulling them towards him. He drooled and whined as she jerked away from him. A quiet cry, little fists curled with nothing to hold. Hilary

stared at the jar and then at her mother, who stared, still, at the speaker. Quietly, Hilary grabbed a thin pickle and handed it to the baby. *This is what you want*. The baby grinned widely, beginnings of teeth dotting his gums. He plunged the pickle into his mouth and slobbered like Gordon, desperate and hungry and dumb. Hilary watched him with her hands under her thighs.

"I just don't understand this thing," her mother said to the speaker. "Hilary, can you help?"

Hilary examined the baby, his feeble attempt to chew the pickle skin, rough like an alligator's snout. And then the wide eyes, the small hiccup morphing into a choke, a quiet retching as a loose pickle piece lodged itself in his infant throat. Hilary's mother looked up from the speaker and jumped.

"Hilary." She ran to the baby and lifted him from his chair, holding him face down and patting his round back. "He's not coughing, I can't hear anything." Her mother's palm struck more quickly and Hilary watched, silent. "What did you feed him?"

"I didn't think he would choke. He never chokes."

"You know he can choke," her mother said. "You know he can."

Noel left the patties pink on the burner and walked to the baby. "Give him to me," he said. He took the baby from her arms and held him to his chest, pulsing lightly below his rib cage.

"Can he breathe?" asked Hilary's mother. "He's not breathing."

Hilary watched from the chair, wondering, for only a moment, if this was it. The baby gagged and tears seeped from his eyes. Thirty seconds, and the pickle spewed from his mouth, onto Hilary's lap.

Hilary's mother grabbed the baby and held him under her chin. She wept softly, and Noel patted her back. He wiped his sweating forehead. Hilary stared at her knees. The heaters squealed and she felt cold enough to break in half.

"You need to be careful," said Noel. "Babies shouldn't eat pickles."