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Divinity School

A Novel

An Honors Paper for the Department of English

By Ella Schmidt

Bowdoin College, 2022

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Each woman-of-the-people
Wearing a halo
A ludicrous little halo
Of which she is sublimely unaware

I once heard in a church
—Man and woman God made them—
 Thank God.

– Mina Loy, “Parturition”

“The stars are undoubtedly superb, as Freud remarked on reading Kant’s cosmological proof of the existence of God.”

– Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit, *Three Dialogues*

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I.

Hal was not an easy lover, and for all he thought of himself, he was not his wife's first pick. In boyhood, well-groomed and stunted in height, he was known to the family as a troubled child. His exterior in those days suggested that he aspired to the appearance and stature of a person who had been sick all his life, which in a manner of speaking he had. In school he fidgeted. His parents kept his hair militantly cut, and the nape of his neck above his shirt collar gave the impression of something good and harmless to a girl who sat behind him in class. Such a girl might get close enough to take note of him; she might be able to tell, for instance, that he did not smoke tobacco but lived with someone who did. The summer before high school he left Bethel and caught a series of trains to the opposite coast to hitchhike the PCH with a group of older boys who taught him how to hold his liquor and shoot a gun. They sat around a firepit in the dark, steeping psilocibic tea in styrofoam cups. When the laughing ceased, when the pocked black sky sank and the stars gaped, and the world got as big and oppressive as the weather on a Sunday with his parents, the pews and the rafters and the people he knew but did not really know all bent at the altar, Hal fell into what he would later call a bad state. The other boys mused and lusted after better lives as he, in a visionary tantrum, pressed the mouth of a rimfire pistol to his temple and fidgeted with the trigger. The last guy left the safety on. Harold Macpherson was fourteen then, and his interests included baseball and the Coast Guard and the horror section of the video store near his house and a woman named Sue, his neighbor the lobsterman's wife. A beautiful boy wrestled him for the gun, which had no round in the chamber, and when one boy bested the other they lay entangled on the desert floor, breathing heavy and trembling like moons on water. Then a stupor overcame them, and they slept. In the morning they laughed together over the gridiron. The mornings were easy. He found in them much to enjoy, still, in this life. Play-fighting with the other boys; kicking up dust in the face of the sun and

skinny-dipping toward Alcatraz. Next time he would really let the gun go off (thought Hal), so his friend would get on his knees like a woman and work with his hands to save Hal's life. He dealt in ideas rather than plans. He dealt not in material things. He'd hoped to get some cash from his father up front, then to panhandle and leach for what he needed along the way, to beat the bill at cheap night spots when they emerged from the woods, the highwayside diners and the filling stations, cheat the waitress out of her tip and the hooker of her trick, and supplement what he had from time to time playing slot machines and committing petty theft with the betting men and the mill workers and the rustics coming up from the countryside. Although he was a funny boy, occasionally blithe, and quick enough to knock the teeth off some of the others, Hal did not have the nature of a criminal, or the sustained enthusiasm, or even the particular need. He got away with everything, because he was littler and kind-faced and fine of frame, qualities he neither liked nor chose and which nonetheless made him easy to love. He got away with everything, and the getting away ruined his fun. In the army he started a rumor that he had married a local prostitute. He took well to the army; took well to the company of like men, the abiding, taking orders and waking at the dawn of dawn. The army did not take as well to him. He was discharged at the end of his summer training after a physician, the same stoic man all the boys went to see, suspected a head injury on the basis of dilation and delayed movement of the eyes. Hal thought it had more to do with the doctor's personal feelings toward him, feelings of dislike for which Hal did not have a name, than anything wrong with the maneuvers of his fine eyes in a routine physical.

When he did get married, it was to Annie Price, the young actress who once played Desdemona at the Shubert while Uta Hagen watched from the back of the house; whose faith adhered in nothing; who blamed religion for great wars and bad sex. He met her on a hot day inside a hotel in Manhattan, where he had gone in hopes of meeting a great director who was staying on the top floor and who he hoped would read the screenplay he had written in college and make him a

big star. He had left the town of Bethel and gone to Rhode Island for school, where he studied religion and wrote plays. With a degree and no jobs lined up, Hal wrote a movie about a high school boy in Bethel, Maine who slept with his neighbor the lobsterman's wife. He gently plagiarized some dialogue from Buck Henry, but his genius was otherwise his own. It was June, midday, when he came up from the subway, pushed through wilting pedestrians and checked his face in the glass of the Chelsea Hotel where the famous director was staying with his lover. He held one copy of the screenplay in a manila envelope and carried a second folded up in his shirt pocket in case something happened to the first. He was dressed nicely, looking handsome and scrawny and smart, and the doorman let him inside without issue. Hal gave the doorman a nod and the delusion bloomed; this was who he was and how he was going to make it in this life. Then in the cold rush of the lobby, in the clarity of escaping the heat, he began to feel like an idiot, and he almost walked out there and then. The concierge would not let him up, and the bellhop refused to take Hal's yellow envelope up to the room of their illustrious guest. He went to the bar to reconfigure his plan. At that time, Annie was outside in a phone booth and her agent was threatening to drop her. She too had a plan to reconfigure, and she too was received cordially by the doorman when she stepped in to get out of the heat. She missed an audition because she was talking to Hal at the bar of the famous hotel, and because they met in a famous place under the worst of circumstances, and because they spent the afternoon telling each other lies (Hal that he was a writer-on-the-rise, Annie that she was a busy actress exhausted by the directors bidding on her), she knew they were going to be in love. Her agent dropped her the following morning, and that evening Hal came to her terrible apartment for drinks. They slept together. Her clothing was distinct, immodest and not particularly expensive. Her parents were teachers in a suburb of Pittsburgh. She dropped out of college to study acting at the Stella Adler Conservatory, where she learned her craft and never mastered it, could not master it, instead getting caught in those destructive periods when personal achievement stopped mattering to

her; those were periods in which she thought she had fallen in love, which, though often brief, were not infrequent. A securer obsession than acting or renown or a boyfriend: a securer passion is what she would have liked.

He was the product of a small and silent Protestant family; she was the youngest of four loud girls who looked just like her. So great was her modernness, so earnest her disdain for the tyrannies of modern life, she would tell the last living disciple of Christ and the rest that he was deluding himself. She did not believe in the institution of marriage, but she married Hal in a New Jersey courthouse within a year of meeting him. He was twenty-three and she was twenty-six. They had a one-night honeymoon in a different hotel in Chelsea, one they could afford—he dialed the lobby from a switchboard on the nightstand and had the porter send up a bottle of scotch. It calmed their nerves, and because they were man and wife, that night they confessed to each other all the lies they each told to secure the other's love. She was no working actress whose name meant anything to anyone who mattered. He was not some literary darling. 'That's okay, he said to her. 'That's okay, she said to him.

She had been a great actress, once. Even as the stage consumed her, even as her roles got smaller, her lines flatter and her presence dull under the spectacular turns of light, she could contort her face into something radiant with grief, with the possibility of tears, though from the house they could construe almost nothing, except the question of tears, if any came. Her gestures were small. Hal thought she might be a better subject of the screen, but as she reminded him, he did not know the industry and could not conceive of the importance of beauty and youth, which was no less than the importance of time and shelter and seasons and rain. The work ran through her. By twenty-eight, she could find work only in the roles of mothers. Young and bereft ones, spiteful if she was lucky. But a lover she was not. A darling girl, a daughter she was no longer. She had embodied all of literature's women, and their labors showed in her movements; she felt them in a new one's weeping,

the costume shop, the boxset landline, the character's reach for the phone. They were astonishing, faithless and deficient in the richer emotions, intellectually impoverished, reasonless, self-seeking in their love affairs, the callsheet of women. Perverse instability in their moods and whims, they were moral absolutists with a great capacity for spiritual failure; they showed propensities for lesbianism, exhibitionism, flagellation and other deviations of the sexual impulse and, though it did not appear on the page, each in her own way wanted to be good: Annie missed the young ones, the casting calls for the girls who didn't. The roles stopped coming, simple as that: although she was pretty to Hal, who was something so ordinary to look at, Annie knew prettiness to be a sinister thing she'd never wish on a girl, not even on a woman, not even on herself. That was the end of her stage career. She took a class in computer programming, feeding code into intricate machines in a language they were said to understand; had she kept at it a few more years, Heaven knows their family could be riding the coattails of the dot-com boom into the sunset. She tried to put all that out of her mind. She learned new ways to keep busy. Her life took pointless turns: she took up gardening for a summer, volunteered with the New Jersey Democrats while Hal finished graduate school in the city, and when all that was done, when her young husband had achieved the highest of educations, Annie told him she had no sense left of her life and would like to become a mother. He put up no resistance. It was not up to him: she had already taken herself off the pill. It was romance. It did not make Hal a better man. His dissertation became a book on the prosperity gospel and the medieval indulgence trade, which looked promising but which, upon publication, did not cause much of a stir in the field. He dedicated this book and the subsequent one to his father, who was dead then; and if he had not been dead, he would at best politely pick up a copy and never make it through Chapter I: Buying Forgiveness: Medieval Indulgences and the Remission of the Punishment of Sin, with an epigraph whose origins were historically unclear but which scholars in his field widely attributed to Johann Tetzl: "When a penny in the coffer rings, / A soul from Purgatory springs." He taught his first

course on the tides of American Protestantism at the Divinity School, a class he would teach many times under many revised titles. Through every iteration, through every administrative change and the student protests that compelled them, through the birth of his daughter, Hal made his commute to the city from Hoboken, coming home at impossible hours, putting no purpose or regularity into the workday. He kept strange hours, the hours he'd picked up from his father's trucking route, reformed in the army and honed in graduate school and made stranger by the birth of his child. Annie would recite a couplet of a poem she'd heard, rendered thickly in an Irish inflection in a proscenium in a library in Gambier, Ohio when she was visiting an old lover, once, in the year 1988. They were long-distance, a courtship carried over from a high school prom in Pennsylvania, and in fact it was during this very visit that the boy who studied literature and wrote projective verse, the boy who had Pound's "Portrait d'une Femme" tacked to his dorm wall next to a poster of Dorothy Stratten, would break up with Annie. The boy claimed it was the distance, though Annie suspected an unpoetic quality she must have had about her, a quality which she did not even have the poetic license to name. At home in Sewickley, where they had all the same friends, she took all the sympathy and he the blame. For a week or two she thought she would die of grief, but it was not long before all she remembered about the boy and that weekend in his dormroom with his books on display and his laundry in a heap on his twin bed was the poet from Ireland, who orated her works to students adoring and bored and verging on sleep. I am your wife, the couplet went. We love each other still. Annie recited those plain lines to Hal in the slow dark at the beginning of their marriage. She'd coax him back after an argument, making him laugh, making them both laugh at how awful it was to resemble a married couple, or what a married couple might be.

He taught his class on Puritans and televangelists and the Protestant American presidency, and she bore their child. He became a commuter husband, making glib excuses when he failed to return from the city at night. She wondered where he went when he went away without her; how he

spoke when he spoke among his kind; how he touched, if he lay a hand on strangers and women and friends. He might prefer to loll about the 9th Street platform, thinking of great suicides, Paul the minister's son who drove into the St. Genevieve marsh, Trakl foaming at the mouth. Suppose he ran off to mix freely with his contemporaries, going out dancing in desultory crowds and huddling against the cold to smoke beneath theatre marquees, watching men in drag sing showtune karaoke. For as much as she wondered, she did not often ask where he went or what kinds of people his shoulder brushed in passing, or what glances he stole, or what pleasure he might derive in keeping Annie up at all strange hours, consumed by his absence, medicated, in the center of hating and missing him. He made friends in the city; colleagues, sometimes students, people he could not give a reason for knowing but who took the same trains, made the same mornings or long nights he did. On exactly one occasion, he brought Annie to the city for a dinner party with people whose names she knew in connection to the university and others whom she could not place and made no earnest attempt to remember. Though these new associates were of cryptic moral standing, even his wife would describe them as depressing or boring rather than functionally depraved.

Hal had taken a break from drinking by then, and he did not seem to Annie to be driven by the kinds of sexual urges for which a man seeks fulfillment in young girls, or in other people's wives, or in his fellow men. No one caught him in the presence of drugs or reported any misgivings about his fidelity to his wife. No one saw or said anything. It might have eased her mind if they had. Sometimes he would admit, with what seemed like pained sincerity, his indiscretions of lateness and rudeness. He would fall to his knees and kiss her completely, begin with her feet, the effeminate man. She hated that he could be womanly like that, soul-torn and pleading, even in the form of a joke; the joke of making her his mannish wife. He did not ask her forgiveness, which he already had; he asked for her to love him. Her love which unlike a harder man he did not take for granted. She would tell him to get up off the floor, be serious, and then she would ask about his day and if he was

hungry or in need of quiet. And they would sit and eat together. They ate from takeout containers in the kitchen of the first apartment, listening for the baby, saying how lovely she was, and God they missed eating in the corner booths of loud restaurants at night instead of out of styrofoam in the kitchen half-light. That's how they spoke to each other on those nights he came home: the baby was so precious, wasn't she, her tiny hands and feet and soft fragile head, and gone were the days when they loved each other more than anything else, and gone were the days of going out together, and they missed seeing each other in the daylight, and they missed the kind of sex they used to have. Sometimes talking about sex led to having it, and sometimes it just led to peering over the crib at this strange baby who was theirs and theirs forever, feeling sorry for wanting any part of a life that existed before she did. They went to bed together on those nights, and in a week it would happen all again. Annie would pace the kitchen tile, abstain out of spite from phoning his colleagues, and spend a night of anxiety in the marital bed, only for Hal to emerge the next day off the last morning train with some casual explanation. Grecker than the Greeks, her father had said when she'd brought Hal home to Sewickly for the first time, speaking not of his sex life but of a certain personality, a certain immediacy, never mind the men who put it in him. Boys of her father's age were only suspicious of what they could not harbor in themselves. Who could love a man like that, a remote deistic abstraction of a man; no: it had to be Hal. She had married Harold Macpherson and suffered happily for it. When the baby was two, and they stopped counting her age in months, Hal and Annie put down a deposit on a house with three bedrooms and a two-car garage and a portion of lawn. She suffered dreams of the two of them during a night swim in the oilslick eastern basin of the Ohio River. They were nude and embarrassed of it. Hal found he was weak against the current, though of course there had been no current when they were standing over the water, looking out. His body never learned. He died in the sea and he was not washed up with the tide, though Annie waited. But

morning came, and Hal never left her for longer than a night, knowing she was too proud or too simple or too out of love with him to bother with searching.

He would be right. It was Annie, not her husband, who had a history of getting caught. She struck no one as wild or particularly impulsive, a victim of high temper or uncontrollable drives. She was alert and at ease in the company of friends, and in private she knew herself to be beautiful and artless, a woman in a woman's apartment, bitterly harmless. In her youth she was truant from classes, demoted from the gifted track, going out aimlessly to loiter about a pool room, reading the comics, tossing rocks into the river and dropping bits of bread for the pigeons who hung like children around the skirt-hems of women. She set fire to a rural privy on the outskirts of town when her first lover ended their relationship, citing her petulant moods. She was thirteen and he was a pharmacy clerk of around twenty, and Annie swore on her life and the Bible that it was he who took her father's chickens by the throat and sold them to meat-cleaving grocers in town. She would ride her bike to the drug store on school mornings to pick up the percocet for her father's bad back, the insulin for her mother's blood sugar and prophylactics for the associated migraines. At the start of their trivial attraction, the boy had behaved in such a way that Annie was sure he reciprocated her feelings not only in kind but in degree. Having become suddenly mature in her body, she consummated this crush with a kiss during the boy's morning smoke break on a cold day, her first complete and genuine experience of this kind. The impact was trenchant: Annie was certain that in the clarity of his love he was determined to marry her and resolved to be scrupulously faithful through all the years he would need to wait. She remembered her parents' bathtub with the soap scum around the rim, where she washed her breasts and underarms before seeing him, perfumed sickly with edelweiss and balsam and pear. She sat naked in the bathtub and ran the water hot. The faulty drain stop made a slow ritual of bathing in that house. She lay her back upon the cold resin as the water made its long way around her flesh to the back of the basin. She felt that the tub was set

on a slight downward slope and could never completely fill itself. Annie was not one to refuse the lonely frights struck up by an empty house. But in the dim quiet, the bath! She placed her feet flat on the checkered tiles, straddling the faucet's warm, steady surge. Fearing she would be found out by her mother or God and His angels or the vague man whose neck and lips and hands her mind conjured, she worked quickly. She stroked his blank face, the suggestive nape of his neck, felt down his long belly to the base of his pelvic bone, where a sturdy waist tapered and his two legs began; she reached between them, to the body of the absent outlaw with no face, his flesh pressing into her. She wondered if there was such a man as this one, a blind and sober lover, and if he was somewhere across the cities and the towns of the continent, doing the same to himself. He was no one; he was a man on a bus and her father. No, he could not be her father. He was a boy in church. He was the man who called out to Annie to turn back, one evening as she walked from piano lessons to Mass, and proceeded to unzip his slacks. He was violating her against the chain-link fence that girded the tennis courts at school in the bold bright morning. There were long wakes of pleasure, smiling and radiant with a sickness. After she came, Annie wished for nothing but to sink and drown and turn blue in the tub.

The boy treated her at first with unusual restraint for fear of arousing their worse impulses. Even in the weeks after her fourteenth birthday, when they went to bed together and she left the Elysian hills of virginity, he held her tensely and without reprieve. He left a white lucent trail of his semen down her back and rummaged (with some contempt, Annie thought) in her nightstand for a box of tissue. When all was over, she fell right to sleep. She did not feel changed by the encounter or the ones that followed, but the older boy did. He felt changed by doubt and disillusionment, knowing that in sleeping with a child he'd done wrong by himself, and each time he climbed the iron trellis on the backside of Annie's parents' house after she signaled to him with a flashlight that the grown-ups had drunk themselves to bed, he pitied the girl who sat by the window, watching for him

through all kinds of weather. The sexless girl disclosed as an imposter; she had been a phenomenal event. He ended things with Annie one day without warning, after he broke his collarbone at the bench press in his father's garage and realized he did not like who he was. He left her a suggestive grocery store bouquet and an anonymous sonnet in wet red ink, gently plagiarized from a poet whose death Annie remembered as a spectacle of the AIDS years, though she had forgotten his name, if she ever knew it. She wanted to kill him, but then who would put a hand up her skirt in the back of the movies? She wanted to kill herself, but then where might his hands land, groping in the dark for comfort—nothing left of her. Since the havoc of sex and harm which the boy wrought easily upon her life, Annie always needed to hate the men she loved. Even Hal, incurably Protestant Hal, a long-haul trucker's son; he made her a mother when she asked, animal conduit for his lineage, and she hated him.

There was always violence, somewhere else. The men found every war; their insular women without the spirit of revolution in them watched from slipcovered sofas overseas and called it romance rather than tyranny. Her friends dreamed of coupling up: maidenhood must end. Her schoolmates came to the age of boys banding together according to their common interests in firearms, postage stamps, bird watching, mutual masturbation or some other affairs. One club met in a shack in the backwoods of Sam Beech's uncle's property, which the uninitiated called the faggot's hot dog stand, where the literary types played together as patrons of the high arts. Like shepherds in the night the older ones tormented the youngest into obedience, a kind of love, devising codes of slang, verbal and postural, through which the other children could be teased but in which they could not fully mingle. Groping and confused, each took his protection in insults and innuendos. Annie observed herds of small, spontaneous fraternities form around each boyish impulse, and she longed, if not to belong to them as an equal mind, then to sleep with them, to feel around in the infirmary for an empty cot, their coarse hair brush her temple in the dark; instead of sex, she would have liked

to undress herself near the bedroom window while they stood on the sidewalk beneath a lamp post, looking up. Then she could put on her clothes, she thought, and walk the streets like a person again. Yet boys in school preferred to play among their own kind and defer the opposite sex to the off hours; if they thought or spoke of girls at all, it was as though reminded of a chore. That was the thing about a woman: she could not be performed originally, and every iteration she made of herself had been done and loved and pilloried ad nauseum. It was a worse fate now to be a man (thought Annie, younger then). They cannot be what they were, and they have no desire to invent what's next. That is the reason she gave herself for their neglect. When a boy saw Annie, he rarely tried to do more than look at her.

After he met Annie, after they married in the courthouse in Hoboken and spent their one-night honeymoon in that lesser Chelsea hotel, Hal watched his wife give birth in Newark. They set up at an inn near the hospital for two weeks leading up to the birth. The midwife had overseen the births of another family, friends of friends. A former Mennonite, she used to catch babies illegally at home births. She saw another midwife get arrested that way, for delivering babies without a license. So she became licensed, this ex-Mennonite, and sat for births overseen by doctors in sterile rooms, where she delivered sometimes two or four infants in a day. Nothing was unusual to her, not Hal and not Annie or the skin of her belly stretched like the face of a drum. Nothing extraordinary: that was what Annie wanted from the birth, what kept her awake in those early months, leaving voicemails and reading the birthing books and collecting the advice of a few friends who had already done it. She even consulted her mother, who confessed to having no tangible memory of any of her four daughters' births. ("Yours least of all, probably. I'd done it so many times by then. Let me see...one of your sisters had the cord around her neck, I remember that. They gave the women Dammerschlaf then. There's my advice to you: bring back the drugs, and don't try to do

it at home in the bathtub like a neanderthal. I'm telling you, take the pills and you'll wake up with a baby and no memory of the blood and guts of it. I didn't let your father in the room the first time I did it, but I *did* have *my* mother there. Dammerschlag? I have no idea, you'll have to look it up.")

The ideal midwife treated nothing as a miracle. The ideal midwife did not play the radio's Pump-Up Hits of Today while the looming heads of sybilline women instructed the mother to push. The ideal midwife was probably not even a woman. Women were the ones who groped Annie, doted on her, made her sorry she ever existed on a bus or in a restaurant without a pregnant body to entertain them. Pregnant women were the exception to the civic rule that said you don't assume that anybody's life is any of your business, not even if they are beating their kid right in front of you. (So people are happy to see new life, Hal said. They must be naive about the nature of this world, Annie said, to get so excited at the thought of someone new coming into it. *The nature of this world!* Hal thought. He hated it when she talked like that.) Amelia was born in 1999. A few months into the next millennium, Hal got tenure at the Divinity School. Annie used those landmarks interchangeably to mark time.

Amelia was a forward child and, like every little girl, her preferred parent was the father, whose face she saw in the after hours, early dawns when he was just getting home or putting on his coat to leave again, when he stopped by her room to hold the rhythms of her breathing as she slept or pretended to sleep. She was on her side, curled like a fist of protest in a woman's body, on the windowsill her retainer in a soapdish and a glass neck of stolen perfume. Annie watched the light fan out and expose the girl as Hal bent over the child's bed, and she thought of all the rooms where Amelia would sleep. She thought of campsites and girls' dormitories where a person kept a lover for night's sake; she thought of romance; the decorated soldiers she might find herself in bed with and the company she would keep. Annie thought of the woman she'd known in Rapid City who bore a man's two children, named them Lilith and Eve, and left. She and the woman had taken up writing

letters to convicted killers on death row, without any particular cause except the vague pining to uproot the world, to free and be freed. Annie recalled taking thin lines of cocaine from the rim of this woman's bathtub—no laundry in the building and a clawfoot tub in the kitchen, what a city!—but never, even dazed with affections, had she taken it from the flesh of this woman, this woman who liked to go nude in the company of strangers and who let the men grope and strike and nurse at her. They stayed up late, their loverspeak (Why don't you talk to me, I never know what you are thinking, is it of me?), their hands and lips apart, their laughter close in the dark. It was a small life Annie had made since then. Amelia was not a bad child, though she watched too much television and talked back to Hal's friends, but that was all Annie's doing, a mother who had feared her progeny would be meek. Amelia's moods were mercurial; she lied; on warm days at the swimming pool, when things got too idyllic, she faked her own death from time to time. She spent too many hours at play. Like a persistent theme in a loud work of music, her behaviors took a diverse course but came, always, to a predictable end, which for her was failure. Letters arrived from the school detailing Amelia's flagrant but ingenious cheating in her literature classes; this was a child, Annie thought, of impressive versatility and genuine novelty whose utter noncompliance was, if not moral, and if not particularly easy to love, then useful, at least, in terms of cunning. These were practical skills, and unteachable.

All Amelia's life there were mothers. The older girls on Montadale Street who watched her after school; the ministerial justice of the peace who married her to a lover in a courthouse in Pulaski, a mother. A friend's unplanned baby in his sling, his pudgy darling jowls, blinking at the savage stars overhead; a mother. A store clerk fetching her a larger size of something; the dry cleaner's seamstress adjusting the hem of a communion dress; the long stupor of a morning bus;

petty cash. Mothers. When they were not arguing about time and expenses, when Annie had not set up the ironing board in front of the television and when Amelia had not offended her soapbox affection for America, its songs and wars, they were careful and silent to each other. Annie, who was rarely fazed by a warm feeling about motherhood, belonged to the less-is-more school of parenting. Made the work look easy. When Amelia had questions about sex, Annie left an anatomy textbook at the top of the stairs. Amelia was too enthralled by the topic for her mother's taste. Her husband the Protestant should unspool this kind of knowledge, careful and prosaic as he was; but of course he was a man, and Amelia should not trust his side of the delicate narrative. If, as adolescence loomed, she acted out, Annie would not interfere. She would have the pediatrician administer a discrete urinary drug test to smooth her mind over. After fitful moods saw red between them, the woman and the girl, Annie tried her hand at giving comfort, holding Amelia with some reserve, knowing without remorse that she was unfit, the antimaternalist, the third sex, girl-wife, the mother withholding of praise and affection. Amelia did not trouble herself over it. Any mistake her mother made only reinforced a thought she had sometimes as she watched the strange woman disrobe beside the tanning bed she'd had Guatemalan workers install in the guest bedroom. She did not know how her father, her darling soldierman father, could love this proud, incidental woman. Baffled and lobotomized, she wore her blue robe outside to retrieve the paper from the end of the driveway, tracking rain into the house and filling in the crossword while Hal went to work for them. (Her mother did so little in the way of entertaining her that Amelia had memorized the answers to even the more irregular clues. "Divine Comedy poet. Dante," Annie said. "Four down, tennis nil." "Love," said Amelia. "Simply a patient wolf, according to Lana Turner." "Gentleman," she said. "Gentleman," her mother answered.)

One day Amelia would be in New York visiting a professor she'd been having an affair with, standing outside a woman's housing cooperative on 82nd street, watching through the window of a

sports bar as national news interrupted the game with footage of the Challenger fiasco—she would stand there and be wooed by the silent way it burst in space and incinerated what lives were inside it, and as she walked through streets of busy, flinching people to end things with the professor, she would finally believe in her arrival to adulthood. The professor was an artist whose labors favored those things by which the layperson's eye is repulsed. Ugliness, moral decay peopled his work. Battery plants, the steel shavings of dismembered cars on the turnpike, mystical girls confiding to payphones through the smoke of dingy bars, gambling problems. Never a moon, never a tear unless wiped from a young girl's face or roused in the memory of a grown man by a memento of something, his father beating his mother, leaving, being left. She watched him sculpt women, wetting his hands to discipline the stoneware clay and carving out wombs as crude as the drawings the bright young men made inside anatomy theatres at Padua and Leiden, and often at night like an extravagant monk he destroyed his masterpiece, erasing with one arrogant nihilistic stroke the promise of the artist. In girls he favored the good, the all too good, which often wasn't there but which he broke his heart over nonetheless. She did not know if she was God's luckiest creature or the hundredth odd protégée willing to strike his kind of deal, and the not knowing was fine, for nothing really mattered then. Not a week before she broke it off, the professor gifted her a gold-plated bracelet of cultured saltwater pearls from Indonesia, where the workers dislocated Pacific reefs to saltmarsh oyster farms so that she, Amelia Macpherson, could wrap pearls around her arm as a symbol of devotion: his, not hers. It was a stunning little piece, and subtler, more modest than what other girls were getting from their own expensive, helpless men. The professor was married but more than that he had an eye and a taste for women's accessories. She would muse about Annie, and laugh in a small way to herself: a sorry fate it is for a mother, to love the thing of your flesh so instantly and absolutely, until there is no other love, only to watch as she becomes the next person who calls you a bitch, wrecks your car

and takes showers that leave just five minutes of warm water for you. Amelia comforted herself with bad memories as she became estranged from Annie, for she had never loved her as she should.

In the dim wet mornings, when her father was sleeping or gone, Amelia waited for the bus. Stowed away with herds of her kind, cattle shepherded in the rain, mute with misery. The commute by school bus was not a normal or livable thing; children's hands were raw with the cold and the silent driver was unforgiving of lateness and loudness, and though he was there at the same time every morning forever they would never know his name or if he was the great poet from Paterson making his route, the happy genius of his household singing nakedly *I am lonely, lonely; I was born to be lonely, and I am best so!* Inside, the oldest children were gorgeous and cruel in the back rows, teasing the fat one to suicide and sticking their gum to the undersides of the seats; someone was carving his initials into the leather seatback with his father's hunting knife. One discarded boy with pinkeye remarked on his geode collection, crumbling with the loose snacks in the front pocket of his backpack, while the rest showed off their trading cards and drew a rocket-phallus on the face of their sleeping friend.

Annie watched her daughter board the bus from a sidelight in the foyer and forgot herself for the day. Her husband wanted something sharper out of life, more like a fish hook or electrocution. Annie wanted to be left out of this life and brought into his visions. Then the longing came, the mother-woman longed for pageantry and war and bankruptcy and house fires and cyanide murder-suicides, and she became stupid and womanly all again. She would leave her money to Amelia, Amelia who in her bigotry felt she was smarter than her mother, her mother whose tastes were dowdy and artless, her music unfashionable, her politics earnest. She kept plastic slipcovers on the furniture and cold Protestant butter in the fridge.

She would make arrangements for Amelia's education. She would leave a plain, economical letter on Hal's nightstand and tuck herself into bed. Or not bother with the posturing and the

pretenses, drive to a crowded place and step in front of a train. She had a funny thought—she'd been a little girl sleeping in the backseat while her father cursed the traffic as the roads and marshlands along the north Jersey railway filled with throngs of people, women in hysterics of mourning and men with still, veteran faces, while the caravan of twenty-one mismatched boxcars brought Robert Kennedy's coffin from the Irishman's Cathedral down to the burial site in D.C., and an unbelievable thing happened, more unbelievable than the political killings of that decade and the men all mired in reasonless war. A man and a woman were crushed in Elizabeth under the wheels of the junior senator's funeral brigade. It began with Lisztomania, the fervor that swelled in a man's adorers, and then it bloomed, the next fad and the next. All the lovers and disciples and the groupie-voyeurs getting too close to the show. Poor man and woman of Elizabeth, you couldn't fill twenty-one boxcars with all their sweethearts and associates, though it was a dignified spectacle—just God, what an end. Annie lacked the nerve to commit a complete and earnest suicide, though she indulged the fantasy, consoling herself, reading up on all the ways to do it. Induce an untimely end. She wanted to be on the inside of catastrophe, right in the middle of it. The neurologist who treated her for headaches insisted the pains were psychosomatic. Annie said pain was pain. The doctor suggested synthetic estrogen to ease her low menopausal spirits. Some women find it stops their hair thinning, he said. His name was going in that suicide note, all right.

In her head—and it was the dear brown head Hal kissed sometimes, wasn't it, and the head whose hair the medicine kept from thinning—it looked like this: Hal found a woman who kept him in good company but whom he could never entirely love. Interred forever, the first wife in the wet ground underfoot. At First Presbyterian, behind them the Hudson was black and puckered with wind, and the wind came on strong in movements like the movements of the high arts. Hal said a troubled, secular grace, and the congregation dispersed with eyes low, the blanched air of the parking lot receiving them.

Annie never consummated her suicide. Things happened to signify time—office holiday parties, quiet indefinite fights; small town fires and elections. Time must figure in it, yes; the sun waned. Amelia earned admission to a private day school in the city. It was a grand commute. She came home on weekday afternoons to find her mother in the garden, sifting through weeds at the base of a squash trellis, whose brittle vines produced blossoms and not fruit. Or returning a boxcutter to the annex, where spare linens and a washer-dryer unit were kept. Despite the times and despite the analysis and the novels and the after-Freuds, Annie reminded Amelia of a portrait of a woman, the portrait of some lesser-known saint on a church wall. She thought of small peripheral women in remoter corners of the globe, bringing baskets of grain, bringing buckets of untreated water on their heads. A philosophical problem her father had proposed to her once, which she now misremembered: the nature of being a person, as opposed to something else. Something else, a flea or an albatross, would live and die as a flea, or as an albatross. But a person might not live and die a person, if only because her personhood could not be reduced to a number of primitive parts. Person-ism was about dressing for the day and having a place to put down one's head at night; about cleanliness and learnedness and rest. Were speechless infants, all the millions vomiting on themselves and crying out, or Amelia's deaf senile grandfather, buried last year in the Sewickley veterans' cemetery—were they not, then, also people? She considered it. They were not.

The problem sometimes occurred to her on the train when, for example, a blonde in the garments of last night's sex hunt draped a man's coat over her lithe damp mannequinoid body, holding her shoes in one hand; she would step off the train cleanly, as though she knew exactly where the next bed would be, and Amelia would pretend to contemplate the rain. If she were a city person, she would be laughless and knowing. She would not go about the world baited and stunned. She would not cry out at the sight of another crude morning or stare at the other city people, with

their objects and lovers and scabbed faces and long, silent commutes. The consciousness of strangers was a matter of debate; Amelia toyed sometimes with believing in it, although the truth of her life was always that of the lone person, the first to wake at a middle school sleepover, hers being the only existence of which she was somewhat sure. Yet, always in her midst the lives of other people: the way they touched each other. The way they made love. How they lay together or apart after making love. The insides of things you cannot begin to guess. Other people were always going to work and sleeping together, hiding from the horrible world how their sorrows showed off for each other in the dark. All this they did, and she could not even prove they were permanent objects.

Amelia took up swimming at the Y. It was a practice of mesmerism: she swam with palaver and delight. An old man two lanes away from her paddled the length of the lighted pool, his stroke giving the impression of sport and youth. Sometimes there was a lifeguard, a beautiful teenager with a pale sebaceous chest and a sunburn on the saddle of his nose, but in the water there were only two of them, Amelia and the natant old man. They made their listless rounds, moving nakedly through the domesticated body of water. She found the starting platform, tucked her legs and chin, casting off again. Geologists knew four types of estuaries: drowned river valley, bar-built, tectonic, and fjords. Nothing of the communal swimming pool. Each reservoir in New Jersey was the trough, the feed of a greater lake. At five-thirty the fat women would emerge for water aerobics, and Amelia would wring out her hair, which for vanity reasons she never put into a cap. A cap, like genuine athleticism and a honed stroke, got in the way of the palaver and the pleasure.

It was a friend she made at the private school, Sally Edelman, who taught her about pleasure. Sally kept perfumed sachets of agarwood and rose in her underwear drawer. She washed her face with Krigler soaps and applied bovine collagen lotion to the pallor of her neck and breasts. In the tenth grade, when they were learning anatomy in its broadest strokes, Sally revised the teacher's lessons on reproduction to include orgasm, the etymology of *hysterectomy*, and her mother's

condition—a sickness of the ovaries, a symptom of the clomiphene she took to induce pregnancy. During an organized tampon drive for the homeless, Sally was sentenced to four consecutive Saturday detentions for her use of the term *HOBOPUSSY*, a punishment which she condemned as a dangerous act of censorship. She compared the school administration to the House Un-American Activities Committee. She misquoted Mina Loy and misconstrued history. The girls got older, and they went through phases of posturing homosexuality, posturing manliness, posturing as waifish and illiterate. Sally put her hands on people in an immodest, tender way that could make anyone weep, for the modern world was starved of platonic touch and (thought Sally) touch in general. Amelia was embarrassed to bring to her home: embarrassed of her parents' house in Hoboken and embarrassed of Sally. A passenger train skimmed their house on the quarter hour. The tracks were nearby but hidden beyond rows of townhouses, and the estranged call was the only proof of it bulleting in the wild, holding people with reason to be somewhere. It was cheap to live near train tracks, the industrial plumbing of commercial transit; the look and the noise degraded the property value. Annie received them at the door with stilted pleasantness, showing Sally around. She paused where the entryway became a kitchen, as though there was much she could say about the foyer, the absence of an obvious coat rack, absence and its broader ramifications, but now was not the occasion. On the sill over the kitchen sink a mandarin plant craned its cleft stem toward daylight, daylight which recoiled. A halved grapefruit and table sugar in the breakfast nook. Half and half in the coffee.

At evening the girls drove Hal's car toward the river. An insignia of birds moved south. There were sirens to the west of them. Sally turned the dial on the stereo, trying the stations. Bursts of static and news and synthpop as she settled into the feeling of the roads. She found a song she knew from nowhere, like a sea shanty or a psalm, and opened her mouth to sing: are you leaving for the country? Her voice was pretty and low. The radio singer was eaten by the static distance between the Kill van Kull and the iron cloud of the city to the north of her. Even the mass of oncoming rain

to the west of her looked, from a distance, so much like a city that it might have had a name. The roads relieved of traffic, the black wet look of the highway, the billboards pandering to the better lives that still riot in the silence inside the people. A moon lay down on the sleek roof of the state penitentiary; Amelia thought of scabbed patients howling against the barred glass of the mental ward. She knew she had no better reason for being than the eleven-foot smiles of the billboard girls, the battery plants, disembodied fenders on the turnpike, the baseball stadium and the outfield's indiscriminate look of light. The night took hold, and she wished giddy Sally Edelman and the radio star and all the bored sensualists would shut up and let the perfect quiet be, and yet it seemed to be Amelia's own hand in the dark which turned the volume higher.

Interred with other daughters. What an ugly thing she was, sentimental with lust and want. She thought of a play her mother did years ago: a play about a mother with alimony to pay and a snotty daughter enacted by a child star. Her mother had a lachrymose scene by the kitchen telephone, a landline that obscured the play's time period —“the present”— and clashed with the character's sexless wardrobe. Accepting the role had been a favor to a friend; Annie assured the family in private that she knew the writing was bad, but it was work for a stage actress of a certain age, in a certain time when only actors and sycophants and the elderly went to the theatre. If you want to work, she said, there is no job beneath you. She spoke as she was: neither mother nor mother-actress playing the role of the mother on her knees talking to God and her lawyer in the box set kitchen; not the silhouette of a mother's suicide attempt against the backcloth or the mother splitting a dead husband's life insurance among her adult children; not the name on the call sheet —“Mother”— but the backcloth, the kitchen in the box set, and the proscenium itself.

On long days in the city, Amelia walked eight blocks south to see her father at the Divinity School. His office was at the end of a fluorescent corridor, walled with cork boards where student

groups put up event flyers. She made an earnest witness to news of sex parties and fair wage protests and seminars on the genocides and diasporas of all sorts of peoples. In the stale communion of her father's office, she could sit with a book while he made tea and graded papers (carelessly, she thought, and with no particular verve). She parsed through his things: cups he filled and emptied without washing, or used as paperweights upon a matted stack of mail. A collection of logic by Wittgenstein and Frege. The walls were otherwise religious, and otherwise bereft. In the seedy distinction of his office, as people gossiped and cursed and praised the weather in the courtyard, Amelia and Hal passed the hours in near silence. Sometimes the radiator made a commotion of heat; sometimes the chapel bells signified time. It was otherwise religious, and otherwise bereft.

“How's your day?” one of them might say.

“Fine,” said the other; or, if not fine, “Weltschmerz.”

“Have you eaten?” Hal would ask, and Amelia would answer with everything she'd eaten that day: a soft-boiled egg in the morning; lemon cake on the train; hot chocolate from the teachers' break room at lunch, coffee and red hots from the bodega she passed on her way to see him. Sometimes one of his students, a Presbyterian girl named Cate, stopped by to discuss her senior thesis: an interdisciplinary performance art piece on séance and the occult as a secret language of the wives and daughters of Puritan New England. The piece was called *GHOST STORY* and would culminate in a multimedia art show in which participants would carry candles denoting the patron saints of harlotry and nymphomania and Our Lady of Perpetual Hell. At the end, Cate planned to use those saint candles to set fire to the fruits of her labors. That would symbolize the burning of the witches in Salem (said Cate), and the death of the secret language. The prospect was earnest and idolatrous, a bit offensive and absurd; Amelia was delighted that such meaningless work could be crafted with such reverence, such ballistic care—that art or scholarship which needed so much preamble to justify the making of it could still be made.

She watched her father, hoping to glean if it made sense to him: the proposal, the scope of its passion and illiteracy, his own role in sanctioning it. To glean if he was bored or riled, or if he thought the girl in his office was Kafka's allegorical ape performing English for an audience of sophisticates, or if he thought the ape and its spectators were an allegory for something else, human companionship or racism or what happens at the gates of heaven. She saw nothing, except perhaps that she had become an intruder on the meeting that commenced in her midst. Was Cate pretty? It was not essential, but of course. She dressed to hide the fact, or to tamper with it. It eluded no one.

When his reputation died, it would be at the whim or will of a girl like this one; and in the proverbial death Amelia's father lived on in offices like this office, with corridors like the terrible corridor that led her to him. Enter a girl, simpler even than a girl is thought to be. A painted meadow, or a purling stream. A painted mistress, or a curdling cream. A maligned victim and a jealous lover or anonymous liar. How should a woman be? Surreal, the sybil's white breast, the pink erect areola, lamb's ear, sin's rib, the simple prose a man speaks.

The first college newspaper to pick it up was the feminist pamphlet *The Script*, which put Hal on the front page of its Sunday print. BERNARD C. HILDEBRANDT DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR IN THE HUMANITIES HAROLD MACPHERSON ACCUSED BY STUDENT OF SEXUAL MISCONDUCT. His accuser, using a pseudonym, told her story on a radio program called *All The Rage!* hosted Wednesday nights on the college radio station. A pseudonym indeed. It was never a good thing when a woman began calling herself Jane Doe, but Hal feigned ignorance. Better not respond with an open letter to Miss Doe, a proclamation of innocence, guttural tantrum in the public forum. He'd learned from the errors of horrible men. Men so much worse than he! He was a father to a teenage girl, a professor of divinity, but God—these were the times. Men were accused of l'écriture féminine, of phallogocentrism, of manliness and effeminacy, corrupted tempers,

disgraced genius, poor somebody's son; of futurism and primitivism and the old ways and the new. Of badness, of wickedness, of oral sex.

He did not tell his wife. Then a second paper, the Democratic-Socialist pamphlet *Chickenscratch*, picked up the story. The campus Republicans published a rebuttal in their newsletter *The Line*. Then his face was on flyers tacked to lamp posts and telephone poles and the bulletin of his very department. He looked rather young and menacing in it, the headshot captured by a woman-artist in overalls in advance of the publication of his first book twenty-two years ago. Had they found a more recent photograph, his hairline wholly receded and the hardlined features sagging and fattened with age, he would not have come across as handsome. Would it hurt or help his appeal to common sympathy? He brought a flyer home to his wife, sensing something larger was underway.

"It doesn't even look like you in the picture," Annie said.

"But it *is* me, can you believe—and they think it's *true*." And he scoffed, or pleaded: "Me, darling, it's me!"

"I guess I don't understand what it's accusing you of."

"Hell on earth, *I* don't know. Misconduct. I mean—define *conduct*. Then define *mis*!"

"Have you done anything?"

"*Done*? Look at this. Bunch of nothing. *I* don't know. What might I have *done*?"

"Did you ever make a kind of advance? Even something that might be interpreted as a kind of come-on? Or for Christ's sake sleep with someone?"

He took her face in his hands. They were man and wife. She was his diminutive masculinity, she was part husband to him; he was, in the same measure, her femininity—how the shadows clung. There was no faked innocence in her. She did not mean it, she could not mean she thought he had done something resembling the actions of a bad man, even something liable to that kind of

interpretation. She did not mean—all the nights they spent together, and even those she spent alone, keeping to her side of the bed with her back to his empty space.

“Of course not. Twenty years I’ve been at the Divinity School. It’s unthinkable. You know that. My colleagues know it. It’s unthinkable. Not once have I—not once!”

“In that case,” she said, taking the flyer from his hands, gentle war nurse she was, how she had nursed their child at her breast, touching him then as only she could touch, her hands discerning a beat of life in a wounded birdling or some other petulant creature, oh her touch was just like that, like linen or snow, and still he’d often longed in their marriage for something stranger and sharper, more like a fish hook or shock therapy or heavysset prose, “this goes out with the trash.”

The body concedes: when he married her, they were all that they were and all they thought they meant. Their want-it-all politics, the Victorian sex lives, perverted youths; the body concedes. Its skins and signs and scores of harm, the small hairs on Annie’s arms then, standing blond in the kitchen light. The body, its rooms were decadent and wasted on them. Yes. Are you guilty of something? Yes, he said, my so-dear wife. Of something. Yes.

Amelia was eighteen and in Galway when a fourth paper, the official student newspaper of the college at which her father had been tenured twenty some-odd years, published its investigation into the misconduct. She did not think: define *conduct*, and define *mis*. She read the article on her phone in the Irish morning, when it was midnight at the Divinity School, midnight at her parents’ house in New Jersey. Then she put on a sweater and went down to the kitchen, where she kissed her lover and poached an egg. She had taken a summer abroad, roaming from Wales into Galway and Dublin, living and sleeping with the last gentlemen of Europe. She had met a boy who afforded her the sort of absent, conditional attention that a girl of that age had it in her to chase. His hand in the

dark and the foreign laughter in the hostel bed; he taught her a drinking song of Connemara, a ballad to psych up the old troops for war. He had the pure clear voice of a boy from the country who had never known the raucous tones of passion, the cries of battle and wild lust he was singing about. He had seemed so harmless, so beautiful to Amelia then, that she began to labor at his belt, and with a kind of spasmodic agony she took him in her mouth, the roseate tip she liked the way she might like a woman's body, or something inanimate, coaxing grateful heavy breaths out of the man attached to it. It resembled an act of loving him, though he had only evoked in her other songs, other men, other guitars and the clear, young voices accompanying them. She was trusting and arrogant with her looks, reaching the age when she could get to the hearts of matters and to the hearts of men. She grew up to be bad with men, thinking she was born free of them and could stay that way, as though her father had not stolen pleasure from her mother, pressing into her as she pleaded against his whole damp body, frightened for the safety of the pregnancy. She aroused desire as though it were useless, without discipline or obvious beauty or hunger, and had sex as though the bodies involved were incidental. Her intentions were vague: political and sexless. To gratify man was not to be free of him (she learned), but it did not matter to Amelia, who did not want to be free.

Hal slept in his office on the day the article went to print. On the second day, he gave a lecture on Thomas Paine; Kafka's ape, he took a copy of the paper home with him as the article made the rounds online. No longer indignant, he slumped like an animal taking a bullet and was numb with liquor by the time he stepped onto the platform in Hoboken. Annie was not yet home. He put himself to sleep in their bed, and when he woke it was nighttime, and his wife was stroking his hair.

"I have not read it," she said. "I won't read it. But Amelia has."

She left his bedside and put herself down on the living room carpet, where she intended not to sleep but to lie, feeling nothing, until morning. That was the day her husband's penis was on everyone's mind.

She did not demand he call their daughter in Ireland, where at that hour she should be sleeping but was in fact telling her lover the story of a religion professor with no prior record and an inelegant but respectable career, now accused of putting his hand up a Jane Doe's skirt and all the rest; a man, the image of a man dying in the arms of a people.

"Religion is obsolete," her lover complained.

"I guess no one ever told him that," said Amelia.

"How do you know him?"

"I don't remember," she said.

"So," said the lover, "supposing he is religious—"

"He's not religious."

"But supposing he were."

"Is an art professor necessarily artistic?"

"Yes," said the lover.

"But say it's art history. The history of art. You go look at the paintings hanging in the Louvre just to look. You could look at the Mona Lisa and never pick up a paintbrush. You could write a book about it, or poetry about the cell phones reflected in the safety glass, or a biography of the man who poured acid on the Mona Lisa's poor smug face, the reason the safety glass is there."

"You could," the lover said.

"Without being an artist," said Amelia.

"Yes. But supposing this professor of religion were religious, or this professor of art history were artistic. What happens to his soul when he—forgive me—drops dead?"

“His soul! Nothing, of course.”

“Nothing, of course. But to a religious person?”

“I suppose—since we are supposing—I suppose it sinks to the center of the earth.”

She was younger than religion, and smarter. The lover tried to turn Amelia's chin, to take her tacitly in his arms, but she would not be held. What did she get for loving him? (wondered Amelia); what did she have, what did she have in this girlhood but the lover's look of reproach, the seeking asylum, the dad in America for whom she felt nothing. Nothing, that was, but resigned curiosity like she once felt, as a girl, for Clinton before the House, the public castration, Clinton the eunuch, retribution for a repository of lusty brunettes, retribution for beauty in distress.

“The center of the earth is a lump of rock,” her lover said.

“Is it? I thought it was a collision of stars billions of years old.”

Hal stood once more before a nameless committee, in a room not unlike the Susan A. Muller reading room where he stood before a tenure committee twenty some-odd years earlier, and his colleagues (now younger than he, and angry and bright, not like the white-haired absolutists who had favored him the first time around) voted to take no action against him. He would live and work, and in a few months the papers and the Jane Doe would pipe down. Rumbblings of a second or third Doe sometimes made their way to his office, and he flinched at the accusations: herds of molested Does huddling and weeping, getting only louder and nearer and irrepressible? He would lose his mind harking back to this encounter and that one in private conversations with the dean of this and provost of that, rummaging in his emails for proof of what sort of man he was, or what sort he was capable of being. He would indulge in the fantasy of retirement, of resignation, of cradling the story of his disgraced name wherever he went. The dairy pastures of the Swiss Alpine region, he thought, or the vineyards in Tuscany and Bordeaux. Or north to Inishmore, to the fissured seaside cliffs, a

foreign grotto, to find his Amelia. His wife stayed with him; his daughter did not. That was what separated them as women, the old and the young (thought Hal). His cold adult daughter could get over the American idiom, the ethic; she could be dissident and faithless, while Annie could hardly move about the world. And Amelia, who did not go gently, was like her father addicted to this life.

The libeled man. He was a giddy killer, with hands tight and mad; in his life, there were tired old guys, jock-bodied boys, the men in between. There were women, and women with men. Once, near the baggage carousel in an airport in Vienna, Hal thought he saw his daughter. She was estranged, stranded, waiting for someone. When she turned her cheek and he found he was mistaken, but in the next second she turned away from him, and he thought once more that it had to be Amelia, the darling nape of her neck, the bowed posture catching itself, posturing as someone else. She was of him, made from nothing, from the old routine of need and conditional sex and Annie's body, and she defied him, completing creation. They stood among strangers and drifters, looking out past the invisible homeless toward drivers with their names on signs and keys to the taxis that took them apart.

II.

If not for him, then for herself. If not for him, then for the sake of a life of one's own, hers; if not to be famous or great, or even happy, then to be tidy; then to be estranged from human need, marking time. All around Amelia on the ferry from Halifax were children shuffling and gaping and being cruel to one another in a child's way, which, though not innocent, was another thing from which she was estranged. She resented the material fact of these children, who were, as far as it concerned her, less than orphans and for whom she felt not a single human thing. She fixed a plea on her mother, who she wished would say to her father "Go, Hal, you shit, you terrible fargone man, damnit, *go*—where, I do not care." Did she ever turn such phrases on him, or did she only think of speaking and think better of it, and move upstairs to collect herself for a bath? And when the spigot ran, guttural plumbing in the walls of the old house, did she the wife think of smothering him in his sleep, a sound sleep he did nothing to earn? Suppose then he would only live off the fat of another woman's company, as he had already done, with that roof still over his sound sleeping head, without watching for cars or calling to her in the rain. Then there was nothing to be done. They would be buried together in a shared plot, with nothing around them but the names of couples of a similar kind, who hated each other and lay each on his and her side of the proverbial bed. Or scattered as ash in the same ocean. There was not enough water in the world.

Ted had his hand on her back, she did not know for how long. His instinct always to touch her. The point of contact caused her to return to where she was: the passenger cabin of the Alderney Ferry, going home. She had been angry at Ted for days, though she could not give a reason and so all she could do was go quiet, causing him to reach out, hysterical for holding her, bringing her down to life. She was angry, though they'd just had a nice vacation to his parents' summer cottage, his parents who paid their fare and met them at the easternmost harbor in Halifax looking as though they had

been waiting there for days; looking, Amelia thought, quite like each other. Willem and Lena, two stout pale-eyed Flemish people who behaved and appeared as a brother and sister might. Perhaps it was with age that they had come to resemble each other so; perhaps it was in the movements, the beckoning nature, the lightness and the pleasantness. Was that what angered her? They embraced Amelia thoroughly upon first meeting her, as though their adult son had never brought them a girl before, which in fact he had not. They woke, together, at five-thirty and prepared, together, a pot of oats with cream and finely sliced apples and chopped walnuts, a pot of coffee and toast and turkey bacon sputtering in hot oil and, if Ted wanted, Eggo waffles from the freezer, thawed and toasted and soaked in warm syrup. That was usually what he wanted: a frozen waffle off a conveyor belt in the American Midwest, from the Kellogg's factory on a cargo train to Nova Scotia, a preserved and dry-iced waffle that would never expire. Was it the waffles causing her to recoil? He had kept his hand on her like this, profane on the low taper of her back, as his parents took them around to the hilltop Citadel and the old privateers' trading hub on the waterfront. Perhaps that was it: that he should lay a hand on her in public, in front of his parents and in their very *home*, where they were given a bed to share. She refused him sex in that bed, at least until the small hours of morning when she could be certain his parents were asleep. They looked like people who perhaps did not sleep, who perhaps did not require it. Willem was a quiet man with a great resounding laugh; Lena was sharper, with a beckoning voice that said headstrong things and a slanted smile where laughter might be. Her family was a little afraid of her, or they played at being afraid. Ted said sometimes that Amelia's humor reminded him of his mother's, which Amelia doubted upon meeting the little woman, until he she heard Lena call Winona Ryder "that little whore with the eyes your father likes so much" during a house-favorite sticky notes game as she was trying to get Ted to guess *Beetlejuice*—though Lena had not seen the movie in several decades and did not remember the names of the actors, Ted got it after "the little whore with the eyes." The old couple played cards together

after dinner each night and invited the children to join; in fact, Amelia and Ted (the children) were beckoned into every pastime, from Lena's gardening to the television Willem sometimes enjoyed in the slow afternoon on one of the two cable channels that reached the cabin. "Oh, you *people!*" Ted would say, his indignation almost as earnest as his affection, as Amelia insisted they join in the rounds of Schafkopf and gin, and the television, and even the watering and weeding that afflicted Lena's back with hunched posture and spasmodic pains. It had been, without question, a nice trip, an excursion of nice days one after another, of nice weather and nice, weathered faces, smiling at their collegiate son and the woman he brought home to intrude (quietly, she hoped, and with conviction about her lover) upon the life they made. And it was a poem of a life, an eclogue, O time and shelter and insulating wealth. Amelia knew so few people who still got cable. Willem and Lena sat in front of the television in the evenings, watching whatever came on.

Amelia moved in her seat, hoping to persuade his hand off her back—the low crest of the back, an anodyne but by no means sexless or sinless fleshscape of the body—but he appeared to be having a romance with it. His hand there, the conviction it signaled. So he took her to Canada, beyond the reaches of the law! He had her, and he was going to keep her. That hand: she thought of other hands. Kind and convincing and wishful ones, impersonal nights, exgropers and exlovers, her dad's old college friend. It was October, and Ted took his first job making bigshot wages at a company whose sector or purpose he could not explain without borrowing from stock-talk and gambling vernacular, while Amelia finished her senior year at the liberal arts college upstate. It was where they met, and it became obsolete when he moved out of the dorms and into the city to begin a second life that did not need to include her, but which for some reason did. Autumns ago, when she was a freshman and he a sophomore at the college, Ted walked Amelia to her dorm after a screening of *The Public Enemy*, and they talked all the way about Cagney smashing a grapefruit into Mae Clarke's face at the breakfast table, and he tried to make a serious comment about domestic

abuse in the marriages of women and men, and she laughed to convey that he could not impress her with sleazy feminist proclamations, and they agreed that the scene was funny first and tragic second, and that it was funnier for being tragic. He was the projectionist for the film class she was taking, the film class that seemed to have had quite a lot to do with Bogart but which she otherwise did not remember, just as she did not remember most of her life. They began to walk together on those nights, and a crush consumed her. Then all lips were his lips, all music music he had an opinion about. When they reached her dormitory, he did not ask to come inside, which she thought was interesting.

Ted was speaking to her. He was pointing out the light on the ocean, or the tail of some endangered whale, or the clarity of the day's sky, sights about which everything has already been said (thought Amelia), and so there was no point in discussing them anymore. It made it difficult to respect his intelligence. Only so many words to convey awe, and what no one would tell Ted (because he was a precious boy, and a would-be artist, and now a “strategic communications associate” at a public relations firm—Amelia supplied the airquotes when she described his work to friends) was that he would never utter an original thought with a sunset and moonlight and roadkill in it. He pointed to the gray sea and the wakes the ferry made in it as he sometimes pointed out the moon on a night's drive, whatever shape it took that time of the month, or a passing pasture of animals before the slaughter on a long drive, or a person in a movie whose face reminded him of someone else, a house whose whittled frame and hood of snow he thought looked Scandinavian, a car whose fender needed repair—as though nothing after twenty-three years of living had ceased to astonish him, nothing too small for his opinion, as though he were still a gaping child—

“Yes,” she said. “It is beautiful.”

Inside her there was an intruder who could turn to him and say, at any moment, *Ted, I'm not sure I love you, and I never was sure, and for that reason and others I do not want to be with you anymore.* It would

be that simple and that cruel. She would not even mean it, and then the intruder would retreat, making no amends, and she would regret it once she'd had something to eat.

“Are you upset?”

They looked at each other, her expression one of surprise and indignation, and she said “Of course not,” and confessed to being a bit tired, that she had slept poorly at his parents’ place as she always did in a foreign bed, though they were so accommodating and she so very grateful, and he offered his shoulder as a resting place for her head, her samaritan, she loved him all again.

Her friends at the college had taken a trip to Mexico for their senior spring break, a vacation from which Amelia was excluded on account, she hoped, of a collective assumption that she'd be off somewhere with Ted. She blamed her friends for leaving her with no choice but to fulfill the assumption. There were four of them in all who lived together in the Mackay house, a nondescript place whose reputation was not as fixed or meaningful as those of the other off-campus houses but which signified something, still, about the kinds of people who lived in it. Mackay was not known for parties that left holes punched in the basement plaster, nor was it known for Marxist affiliations (the Communist reading group held weekly in the mildewy garret of their neighbors in the Arbutus house on Sharon St. in which Amelia had once labored to belong, that commune of long-suffering starving artists, those anarcho-syndicalists from Larchmont and Scarsdale, from Darien and Old Greenwich; evangelical and dire, the reading group reminded Amelia of a Bible study or a suicide pact, and it was with righteous envy and a crisis of consciousness that Amelia discovered she would never be wise or insurgent or modern enough to belong); nor was Mackay known for being cluttered with the kinds of people who sought ego death and showered together, ostensibly to save the feeble earth but really just to get naked in front of each other. (Group nudity: that was another exploit for which Amelia had not enough courage or culture.) Mackay was not known for being avant-punk, being preppy, being prudish or waspish or patriotic, being radically politically inclined, occasioning

noise complaints or Title IX affairs. The two-story house was tucked into a residential street, tunneled through pines which eventually sloped into the town, into more houses and an elementary school, behind it the Buffalo 66 bowling alley and a Greek restaurant, slate clapboards, bevel siding and fixed window panes like all the buildings had. On Mackay Street, they kept a quiet life. They were a filmmaker, a politician's daughter, a dancer and Amelia. Sonja Melnikov-Baker, daughter of Michigan senate hopeful Joe Baker and his financier-wife, Joy Melnikov, was a lampoon writer and a rapid, actressy child with the comorbidity of peculiar looks you might take for beauty and claims to small, believable tragedies like iron deficiency and fainting spells. She wrote poetry and did graphic design for the student paper. She did not wake before noon. She was a bad driver and abided, when she remembered, to a self-imposed rule against getting behind the wheel without first taking a generous dose of Vyvanse. Her illnesses were self-diagnosed, her medications lawfully prescribed. Living comfortably in the shallower ranges of feelings, she was drastically concerned with all matters except the most vital. If she had earnest reactions of love and care, they were communicated not by narration or exposition, her speech and deeds, but in small reflections that cumulatively revealed her: her bed unmade, her room unmanageable with mess, she held onto things with no system of organization for them; she did not fold her clothes before shoving them into drawers. When she left the house, she let her phone die and went entire nights unaccounted for, without causing much alarm among her cohabitants. Occasionally, when Amelia snuck into Sonja's room to steal a modest palmful of stimulants, she would stop at the bookshelf, where Sonja stored a few books and copious other things, camera equipment and out-of-season shoes, airplane pretzels and loose twenty-dollar bills her grandmother sent in holiday cards. There among the objects that conjured a person, Amelia saw her friend's efforts, nearly sincere, in looseleaf pages translating the problem of communal living into poetry or something like it. The pictures on her windowsill, some with faces torn out, told a fragmentary story of anger and disorder and excess.

Fay was a dancer who moved downstage with aplomb and could recite long etymologies for words like *à plomb*, the French “according to the plummet.” She slept around, though she was whorish more in how she spoke of herself than in any fact of her actions; she scrubbed the dishes, developed elaborate theories about the basement, the flooded laundry room and black mold; she was a bad tipper and a big talker and a child of multiple divorce. She did not reveal the forces that patterned her. Her mother lost a fortune to a practitioner of witchcraft in Sedona. When her mother was caged in the psychiatric hospitals of Arizona for days or months, Fay lived with a series of mothers’ boyfriends. As an adult, she did not accept her mother or the boyfriends in their trailer park homes as contributing factors—to psychological distress, to stage fright, to promiscuity, wanting and refusing and still wanting to be loved. She did clerical work for the college’s admissions office and, on weekends, worked for a catering company at donor events; dressed in black, she presented trays of elegant finger-food on toothpicks or tended the bar, pouring wine for patrons of her education. She spent her paychecks on ballet clothes and tobacco vape pens, broke in the shanks of her new pointe shoes before dawn by striking them against the furniture of her attic bedroom with the aplomb of a mother shaking her infant to death. Everyone in Mackay house indulged her vanity, because those vain gestures signified a low self-regard, and because she was Fay, lantern-jawed beauty whose clothing sagged around her gamine frame, who bent and stretched in line at the dining halls or in the airport to avoid being still. They indulged but did not forgive it, and Fay was loved least of anyone in the house. But to watch her move: she danced like howling. According to the plummet. It was to witness what you might call natural talent, the pearl of her disease.

Hugo was known for making a schlocky slasher film called *Hunt!* whose artificial viscera, bad writing and exceptionally offensive rape scene made it a cult classic of campus lore. He postured as a controversial creative luminary, in on the joke; it was a symptom of his inability to discern social

cues, a disorder so helplessly ingrained it almost made him a sympathetic character in his own life. He was ruthless and unbeatable in a verbal argument even when he was wrong, as he often was. He was the kind of young man who got in and got out of trouble. No code of conduct seemed enough to contain him. Their first month in Mackay house, a neighbor fired a revolver in Hugo's direction when the boy, loitering about the premises in his drunken state—that drunkenness particular to him; that stammering, staring inertia—raged petulantly that he had important business to get to downtown. He spat at the ground; wraithlike on the lawn, he talked loudly to no one; he made a scene and made of his body a cause for alarm. The bullet had not been aimed at Hugo but merely fired in his general direction to frighten him. This end was satisfactorily achieved when, hearing the blunt shot, he made off in a clatter of undignified haste. The papers made a week of it: the liberal arts student on the lawn, fumbling at a window latch where a woman might have been running a bath; some civic uproar, terror in the eyes of a father, a local family man protecting his own. Hugo faced suspension but got off with a well-written letter that appealed to his fundamental sanity while emphasizing the distraught aftereffects of a traumatic close encounter with a weapon, with guns and their oblivious legality, they were everywhere, and he was a kid who got drunk and only wanted to take a piss on the grass, not considering that this grass or any could belong to someone, and who are *we* to assert ownership of this earth and this nation, colonizers, all of us—

Only Hugo exceeded the provincial social significance of that house and its residents. In the mornings when they were the only two housemates awake, Amelia would watch him pace and stutter and ideate around the upstairs hallway, wondering if there were anything shocking and great for which she might be known, something like public urination or surviving a warning gunshot or indecent exposure or *Hunt!*. Having the dad she had, perhaps, or dating the boy she dated. Leaving parties without saying a word to anyone, or drinking herself out of inhibitions and saying all kinds of words to everyone.

Ted's car was parked near the Bedford dock. They took the beady sedan through Upper Hammonds Plains, southbound to the border crossing at Saint Stephen and Calais. It was March and there was snow on the Atlantic provinces. They got their news on the radio. A labor shortage in hospitals, protests about who owned the land, a suicide bombing on the Eurostar. A customs agent berated them as Amelia parsed through her suitcase for her passport, digging up pressed dresses she had not worn and shoes she did not need before eventually finding the passport in the glovebox. They were admitted back into America and found an open room at the Calais Motor Inn. Amelia smoked a cigarette with the owner's wife, a hackneyed woman-type in a long coat and fur-trimmed boots, while Ted unloaded the car. He was in bed when she pounded on the door to their room, having been left without a key. He opened the door in his boxers and told her to come to bed, they would have to be up early tomorrow if they wanted to make the rest of the drive. She washed her face, which looked terrible in the hard light and the limescale-flecked mirror. A person blames the light, blames the mirror (thought Amelia) so she doesn't get suicidal at the sight of herself. She crawled into bed and wrapped herself around Ted, whose body, curled in the fragile beginning phase of sleep, breathed shallow breaths and gave off heat.

May flights of angels sing thee to thy rest, now cracks a noble heart, life a shadow and a dream, the prayers went. Vanity, thy name is woman. Amelia brushed the hair of the damp nape of her neck and blotted petroleum balm between her dry lips. They spent their nights stowed away in coats, these lovers and strangers and seafarers, and they were a long way from home. Ted never let her drive; fair, she tended to jolt and lurch, but she had never been sidelined by a cop car or formally reprimanded, not even in high school when she knocked the passenger side mirror clean off her father's car in a hit-and-run with a mailbox. She was remorseful, not about the mailbox but about the mirror, vowing to pay the cost of repair, even finding an after-school job taking orders at an

all-hours diner on Palmer St. Remorse or none, she was seventeen running through the paychecks as quickly as they came, and her dad never came asking for his money, and Amelia's hours and wages were poor, and besides he didn't want her around those types of men, the workers and the patrons of the diner that never closed, so she quit, at her father's guilty insistence, by summer and never paid his recompense. Money had been a problem for Amelia and Ted, though both were born into it—he more so, or more obviously, than she. It was how they spent it, how she spent it, that afflicted them with tensions. Now he was earning a living of his own, on track to surpass his very parents, old Willem and Lena, whose wealth came from nowhere and everywhere: they were on the boards of media conglomerates that branched into the streaming subscription sector; they were patrons of the new arts; they held stock in a domestic airline.

Ted woke them up early the next day and refused to let his girlfriend drive, even when, eight hours in, he ran over an animal on the interstate and Amelia started to cry.

“Please, baby, stop that. He was already dead.”

“He might have been *sleeping*,” she sobbed.

“Are you tired? Do you want me to change the music? I gotta stop for gas soon, we can get something to eat.”

“Why don't you let me drive?”

“Because you act this way! You're crying like it would have been better if I'd swerved to avoid an animal and killed you and me and half the highway instead.”

“It would have been better. I wish I was dead.”

“Fucksake.”

They did not speak for an hour. She bought a case of beer at the gas station off I-90 near Utica while he filled the tank. The door chimed as she came outside in the bright cold sunlight; he looked at her, his prosaic beauty; she bounded up to him and kissed his cheek in the open air.

“I’m sorry for being awful,” she said, kissing his neck while he smiled and winced at the possibility of spectacle, though the filling stations were deserted. Gas prices were up. No voyeurs, no audience but an old guy smoking on a bench under the glass awning like a person waiting for a bus in the rain.

He held her face without returning her affection.

“All I could think,” he said, “was how you ate red Jell-O at breakfast this morning, and Jell-O is made from the bone marrow of cows.”

“Is it? I thought it was made from the hooves.”

“That’s a dead cow either way.”

It was dark when they got into town. They stopped at a drive-thru Pizza Hut. Ted paid for dinner. He made all the money, he said. It was true. Amelia let him pay for everything, at least until graduation, assuming she’d hear back from the editorial jobs, the gallery curator positions, the things she did not particularly want to do but would do anyway, at least until she could think of something else. There were no material plans. There was nothing. It felt like a cheap thrill and it felt like drowning. If she could not secure a good job she’d have to marry Ted, and if he would not have her she’d have to go back to her parents and say: I am your child, still.

That could not happen. When she began to think like that, like a fatalist, or when the potential consequences of her impotent work ethic started to scare her, Amelia would go into the bathroom or an otherwise confidential space, but the bathroom at home was best, and she would run the tap so the plumbing rattled in Mackay house and no one could hear her say *I am in this bathroom. These are my hands, and this is my body, and inside my body is a soul or a mind, which is also here with me in this bathroom. I am a real person. I was born in 1999. My mother is Annie and my father is Harold. They have been married twenty-two years, and twenty-two is the age I am.* And so on, until she believed she existed

or might exist, seeming, at least, to be a body born in Newark in 1999, twenty-two, standing in a bathroom inside a four-bedroom house near a college campus in upstate New York.

The pizza was cold by the time Ted and Amelia sat down to eat it. The Mackay house was quiet in the middle hours of night. Hugo came downstairs in his underwear for a glass of water and made a joke about not expecting company. Hugo and Ted used to work together on the student newspaper, and it was an open secret that Ted, last year's Editor-in-Chief, had put in an unflattering word to keep the editorial board from appointing Hugo as his successor. The effect was graver than what Ted intended, which was only to humble Hugo to the extent he deserved; but one man had slandered the name of the other, and the younger writer was forced to step down from the newspaper staff.

"Hey man," the boys said to each other in the kitchen, and Hugo gave Amelia a listless hug before he went back to bed, spilling some of his water down the back of her shirt. He was sunburnt across his chest, and in the low pendant light of that room she could see a tan break from his shoulders where his shirtsleeves would end. Ted knew they had slept together once, as freshmen. It did not bother him, he said. What bothered him was that his girlfriend professed to being an earnest fan of the movie *Hunt*.

"Why's he walk around like that?"

"It's the middle of the night," Amelia said. Ted said nothing, and she sensed the mistake. "He usually has clothes on," she added, but the correction did her no good; she was, in her small way, still defending him.

"I bet," said Ted.

"Let's go to bed. Please? I'll put the rest in the fridge."

Ted brought Amelia's suitcase upstairs while she packed up the leftover pizza and, upon finding no viable refrigerator space among the takeout boxes and IPAs and milk cartons and opened

condiments, left the box on the countertop. Fay would eat it when she woke up to start her day in an hour, and a few minutes after that she would run a bath to mask the sound of the vomiting she induced.

Amelia followed Ted into the shower. He washed his hair with her shampoo and came to bed smelling like she smelled, like rosewater and dryer sheets and her mother. In bed with him she was not tender; no more tender than a man would be with himself. She touched him deftly and impatiently, received him in a deliberate, flacid way and moved how he wanted her to move and said the kinds of things he wanted her to say, as though through his body she could make pleasure for herself. He hoped that was true, that she could get a sense of taking from him as he did from her; otherwise she might be bored of being taken, only making the sounds she made to be polite. He was in most ways a self-assured person, but since the age of fifteen Ted had suffered the same paranoid thought in moments like this moment in Amelia's bed: he might be a terrible lover, and she would still be polite. That they loved each other did nothing to quell his panic. He figured if a girl was polite at the start, just to ingratiate herself with him, then she might stay polite long enough to keep him, at which point it would be too late to get impolite without exposing that she'd been faking it the whole time. Just being polite. That didn't sound like Amelia. To make sure, he asked her a rude question from time to time and studied her response. (That night the test went like this: "Remember what you said in the car? Do you think about killing yourself?" She laughed and moved her body off of him.)

"I was talking about roadkill. Why do you have to bring up old fights?"

"Baby it was only a few hours ago."

Amelia checked the time on her phone. "It was yesterday." She sat up, getting a good sudden look at him. "What, you thought I meant something by it? Maybe I thought about killing myself when I was younger, but I was young then, and I got over it. I lost interest. I don't think about

killing myself anymore, not more than the average person thinks about it. I mean, without meaning it. Like thinking of killing other people. I feel no more or less inclined toward one than the other.”

“Oh,” he said. He tried to kiss her, and in her stillness she neither accepted nor rebuffed the advance. “Well, that’s good.”

“That’s *good*? Why would you even ask.”

Never just polite. Not his Amelia. It was a Dreiserian scene. A carpeted set, a prop lamp on a nightstand on castors, a man and a woman disheartened in bed, though they were up against no spectacular odds and adhered to no distinct ethic. The man breathed ritual plumes of tobacco smoke. The woman sat with her book opened to the same page for twenty minutes, pretending or trying to read it, or pretending and trying to forget its existence, or her own. They had habits. She took two half-milligrams of klonopin in the morning and half of a half-mil at night. They sat apart in their underwear, looking at his phone, looking at her book, until he kissed her head and reached over her for the lightswitch. He had to be awake in two hours to get to the city in time for work. He got up swiftly at the first grating note of his alarm, and he did not wake Amelia to say goodbye. There was something abstracted and inert and satisfied about the slumped look of her that made Ted wonder how any man could penetrate that flesh. Even to brush aside the hair from her temple, expose her pink ear and the dampness at the nape of her neck—it was an intrusion he could not in good conscience perform. It would soon be light. He fretted over Amelia as though she were a corpse in whose blood he was suddenly soaked. He wanted to give it to her while she slept. He had done that before, and it woke her up. Never had he seen her have such a fit, get so tortured over him, all her life’s disasters his doing, yes, do unto others; she was his problem now. And the real gut-punch to the ego, or the soul, the part that hurt them both the most, was when Amelia quieted down and pulled him back into the duvet, which in their struggle had gotten twisted up with the bedsheets, and she said to him in a small, firm way, *you know Teddy, you can fuck me while I’m sleeping, but*

you have to ask, at least the night before. Like he would ever do that! All this planning ahead, all this conversation the modern woman demanded. And then he felt like crying, but he did not know how; not like she did, substantial and affected, affecting, done often and gotten over with quickly. But that morning. On her back again, heavy sleeper with her lips apart, she was serene. Like she never was! Not even breathing a discernible breath. It looked so easy that, for the first time since he had done it, he understood again what came over him and all the ways a lesser man might ruin her. On her nightstand—he fixed his gaze on the old wine glass and her retainer on the windowsill to keep from looking any longer at her—he left a note saying he loved her on the back of a 7-Eleven receipt. Then he drove three hours to his apartment, got on the train, and went to work.

She woke in the afternoon with the sun on her. The bedroom's only window was propped open with a wooden casement stay. Her father kept a cool house, being of the opinion that the gusty cold aided in efficiency, lucid thought, and restorative sleep. The cold house ethic was a piece of him, like his pallor and the cosmic downturned eyes, from which she could not dismember herself. She had her mother's populist taste in cinema, her dad's righteous intellectualism, the competing martyrdom of each. She had her mother's feelings, the kind you could do nothing but wallow in, and wallowing was fatal to art. She looked like her father, or so people told her as a child. Her parents' friends would stop to comment on the resemblance when her mother called Amelia downstairs to greet the company. Children come out of the womb looking like the father, so that the man does not eat his young. She'd heard that. It sounded like the type of conjecture to come from her mother, or any mother, or from Amelia herself. It also sounded true enough to be true.

On her way to the bathroom, Amelia passed Sonja's open door and saw without turning her head that two people were lying on it. They were entrenched in something, almost in each other's arms, though their eyes were cast down into their phones and their bodies, though close and mostly

bare, did not touch. They caught her as she passed, and Fay leaped off the bed and called Amelia's name. In the hallway they embraced. Amelia was never completely at ease in the arms of friends, who were at once her most intimate and estranged attachments. They lived and ate and drank together. Their hair mingled in the shower drain. They took turns performing and neglecting ordinary chores. They each adapted to the others' inharmonious relationships to mess. They did not discuss the goings-on of their days and months in broad strokes, but they confessed shameful secrets about themselves and the people they slept with or dated or saw in passing. In May, on the anniversary of its momentous release, they all wore black vinyl and mesh to watch *Hunt* on its original flashdrive, and each year the movie was more historic, the event more sacred, the company better kept.

Fay stood in the bathroom while Amelia brushed her teeth. Sonja came and sat down on the rim of the tub. They told stories of Mexico as Amelia bent over the basin, cupping her hands beneath the faucet and glancing at the scene of her friends in the bathroom mirror. Sonja lifted her shirt to show off the tanlines around the stark pallor of her breasts. Fay whined that her back was peeling. A bottle of aloe in Mexico costs six-hundred pesos, she said, and the two began to argue about the truth of that figure and the conversion rate. They spent too much money, they agreed. The clubs in the resort district were humid and filthy with American college kids; they drank mojitos at breakfast and fell asleep in the afternoon sun; Hugo sustained a tense, unhappy mood throughout; Fay gave all her cab money to a woman rattling a cup and pleading with partygoers on the sidewalk; she had a baby in a sling, which was why Fay gave the money to her as opposed to every other beggar, and Hugo made her cry with his righteous misanthropy when he told her the baby had been a wax doll swaddled in a blanket against the woman's breast.

Sonja lowered her shirt and Amelia sat down on the bathroom tile to be closer to them. Fay went downstairs with a deckman on a yacht, Sonja said; no one noticed she was gone until she

hauled herself back up to the deck, flushed with sex and oversun, and made Sonja jump in the ocean with her to get his semen out of her hair.

“Oh my *God*,” cried Amelia, and it was a genuine cry, one of longing and loss, as though she had missed a historic assassination or been texting while a car drove into her friend. That did happen to her once—Sally walked into the street while Amelia stood at the crosswalk, looking at her phone. No one was badly hurt, and the driver, though conveying his anger toward the snobbish little girls through facial positions and gestures, did not speak much English, if he spoke it at all.

“Fay, tell her what you said. When she came back up all disheveled, she came up to me like this and said it was the best twenty minutes of her life. I told her it had been hours since anyone had seen her.”

“I heard a song to that effect once,” said Fay.

“And was it from the perspective of the woman or the man?” said Amelia.

Sonja put her hand on the back of Amelia’s head as though holding her next thought for her. “You haven’t even heard the best part,” she said.

“He let me drive the boat,” Fay said, proud and wincing. She nudged Amelia. Her feet were gauzed and taped for afternoon rehearsal. “We’re making it sound better than it was, really. We were so hungover half the days we barely saw any sunlight. Hugo vomited in the ocean, the same ocean I used to get clean from some guy’s cum, and now we’re making it out to be beautiful.”

“It is beautiful, when you talk about the ocean like that. It’s religious,” Amelia said.

“There was nothing religious about it. I am talking about the piss and vomit and semen in the Gulf of Mexico.” Fay looked radiant, giddy with her own profanity. “Although we did see missionaries, and there were crosses hanging from the mirrors in taxis, braided decals like royal pines air fresheners, you know? So in that sense—” The tile and the porcelain bath were cold. Amelia lay

her head in Sonja's lap. Ted never left her alone long enough for her to make these friendships into something steady, with limbs to hold her.

"We missed you," Fay was saying.

"Tell me about driving the boat," she said to her friend, for she had also missed Fay and might say it, if only it were the two of them alone in the kitchen.

"Tell me about Ted's parents," Fay rebuffed. "I used to wonder how on earth a person like Ted is made." Everything was nice, Amelia told them, describing obliquely the ocean and the cold and the cabin and the old Flemish couple who looked alike and had a love like you hope for in a man and wife. Surely all pretense, she said, recovering herself. Fay's mother was married three times, though it occurred to Amelia she merely knew the fact as though it were the name of a flyover state's capital city. What she did not know, what no one talked about, was whether anything mattered, or if any of them really carried around the consequences of theirs and their parents' lives.

"They are exactly like you'd think," she concluded. "They are exactly the sort of people who would make a person like Ted."

"They should make a manual on parenting," said Sonja.

"Oh, because Teddy-boy is so perfect!" Mocking, Fay raised her voice.

"By the book." They looked at Amelia, who only smiled. Conversations like these made her want to hold onto Ted for longer than she should. Every night of their vacation they lay down together, configured in each other's bodies, thinking of ending things.

It was a simple story, and a sweet one. Amelia took a shower, and Fay flung open the door every few minutes, rummaging for her house key and a tampon, soaking her hands in warm water and pushing back the cuticles, resuming fragments of conversations she brought in and out of the bathroom with her. Amelia found comfort in getting clean. Usually she was getting clean of someone, Ted or herself or the polite touch or groping embrace of a stranger. She talked to herself

almost silently, making the shapes of words she imagined saying to a future lover in an argument they were having, or giving an interview on a late-night show or eulogizing her mother. She shaved her legs even when Sonja told her it was self-imposed misogyny (and unfashionable anyway, she added); she cried if she felt like it and admired her naked body if she did not. She did these things whether or not Fay was batting around in her womanish way, opening drawers and talking, on this day, about her therapist.

“She is *so* useless,” Fay said. “Then she talked about how everyone remembers where they were on 9/11, and if I had anything like that. A memory of something I would’ve forgotten if it weren’t for something happening somewhere else? I was like, on 9/11 I was maybe a year old, and we lived in Albuquerque with my stepdad Pete. My ex-stepdad. So at *that* she perks up, and I have to be like, no, he did not molest me or whatever you’re hoping I’ll say. In fact I’ve had three stepdads and more landlords and priests in my little life than most people in this century can imagine, and I was actually never molested, though I know you wish I’d just say I *was*, Doctor, because then you could get the pleasure of the breakthrough and take the credit. For *getting* it out of me! Shrinks are just begging you to say you were molested, I mean. You have to remind yourself you were not. Do you know what happened to the real Sibyl? She didn’t have all those people inside her, she was just one woman with problems, probably just regular depressed or menstrual, and she made up the personalities to fit with the therapist’s suggestions. In that time period people were *very* suggestible.”

“In Ancient Greece?”

“Probably then too, but I’m talking about *Sibyl*, Amelia, from 1973.”

She left and came back again. Fay was someone who referred to something like the Vietnam War as having occurred in the nineteen-hundreds. They all made fun of her, Amelia was thinking, but she was right, wasn’t she—it was the nineteen-hundreds, it was.

“I had another interview,” she said.

“And?”

“I feel so lonely when I speak to idiots. And nothing. Nothing comes of it.”

“Shit. I’m sorry,” said Amelia, rinsing out her hair. It did not surprise her that employers were not taking well to Fay, not any more than it surprised her that employers did not take well to herself. They didn’t work in the context of this very particular world, but that didn’t mean that there was not a different context, somewhere else, in which they could belong and participate and make sense.

“I’m okay, you know? I’m not of this world,” Fay said. “You won’t tell anyone, right? I don’t know why I’m even asking. I should be asking the politician’s daughter. *She* talks.” It was true: after her father lost his re-election campaign in last year’s midterm, Sonja gave an interview on a college radio station attempting to absolve herself of her family’s name by detailing a few key matters on which her political opinions diverged from the Michigan governor’s. When pressed, she admitted to being the beneficiary of “some benign nepotism.” She was a liberal arts student at the college where her parents met, that was true, and her father did donate some-odd million dollars for the new squash courts, yes. But she was also a person, she explained, with opinions on healthcare and ideas for racial harmony on which she declined to elaborate. She was also a person, she said, who respected the work and the history that built her family. In June, she would start her career as a paralegal at a law firm in Ann Arbor with her grandfather’s name on the building.

“I won’t say anything,” Amelia said. She was standing in the shower, letting the water hit her back and running up a bill she did not have to pay. They paid utilities upfront ten months ago when they put down the deposit on the Mackay house. She was clean and alert and beginning to prune.

“Good. People love to talk.” Fay retreated, in mourning, from the bathroom.

“I don’t know what that means,” said Amelia. Around that time the screen door hit the wind and Fay left to rehearse her senior thesis, *A Dance in Two Parts*, in which she danced the roles of two ungendered lovers out of love.

Amelia stepped out, wrung out her hair and got back into bed naked. She read about Clement Attlee’s boyhood for a paper on healthcare and the working class of Britain. So far she had composed an epigraph, Wordsworth on the naked heavens, majestic, free. She flagged as important an email inviting her to a discussion panel called Generation Dread: Purposeful Living in the Age of Climate Crisis. Amelia would not attend the panel, but she wished she were someone who might. The world had been ending, said somebody somewhere, for as long as it lived in human consciousness, or consciousness lived in it. Didn’t it end many times over in the Bible? She had never read it, but she thought so. If only she did not have so much to do and so little interest in the doing. Then she might be a person who did not merely think of going to things; someone who thought of going and then went. Someone who was not content to simply feel as though she knew what happened in the Bible, but who actually read a copy from her father’s shelf. Someone for whom the thought did not count and the gist was not enough. Too bad; she coddled herself. A person cannot be more than what she is: a moving part, painting up her face, afraid of what other women will think, or waiting to come unstuck.

Sonja and Hugo made a pot of spaghetti and listened to music with harps and banjos and the shrill sybilline vocals of a Scandinavian woman in it. Amelia lay down on the couch reading a book for Monday, losing her place and re-reading the same passage on Clement Attlee getting shot in the leg by a shrapnel shell in the trenches of the First World War. Someone should write an alternative history, she thought, in which the shrapnel hit him in the back of the head, or in the chest where they could not stop the bleeding, or he was too proud and too noble to cry out for help; in the alternative history there would be no healthcare in dystopian Britain. Someone had probably already

written it. Caring for the old; they liked their old in other countries. An old age pension was “less galling than an allowance made by a rich man to a poor one,” Attlee wrote. So a country can love its old and sick while still hating the general poor, the poor who are not as feeble or handicapped as they should be, to excuse their situation. The reading overwhelmed her, not because it was hard on the mind or made emotional demands on the reader, but because it was a task, and there was no way to get rid of it except to reserve an hour of concentrated thought, of presence. She wished she were more diligent, serious and better-read like her father, and a person could only become well-read by reading, and who had the time? In the kitchen, steam rising, a stack of dishes in the sink, Sonja and Hugo listened to music they did not like, because God forbid something be just pretty, God forbid they opiate the people, God. She did not want to live among them like this, an uncommunicative stranger who did not offer to help out with the cooking, but what better way was there to live? They did not argue, they did not go all silent with anger; listless, they drifted, these untethered people, and grew up and had nothing in common anymore.

She visited Hoboken once, regrettably, during Thanksgiving of her freshman year. She brought with her some kind of flu from the dorms, which gave her mother something to do, looming over her with a hot rag, putting coasters on the nightstand under mugs of tea and chicken broth. It gave her dad a reason to stay away. He came to see her once, standing in the doorway, and they tried, she thought, to be sweet to each other.

“I’m not even that sick,” she told him, for there was only one way for a father and daughter to bond, and that was to share a precious supremacy, mocking the little mother. “This is too much.”

“Gives her something to do,” he said. And, looking at his bedridden adult daughter, “So this is how the rich live.”

“I told her not to worry about me.”

“It’s her job to worry,” her father said, and she hated when he said that, because it meant that she would reply–

“A shitty job, and it doesn’t pay,” and he would say back to her–

“But it’s steady work,” and she would pretend to find him funny.

She did not want to think about her father or that Thanksgiving from hell, how all four days she winced at the sound of herself laughing at his jokes and thought, not too seriously, about committing suicide, mostly to prove a point. And what point was that? Amelia returned her focus to Clement Attlee, whose leg was being tended to by a medic and who was going to be just fine. History had no surprises. Fay entered, flushed and radiant with evaporating beads of sweat on her hairline, the colorless hair tied up and thinning (it came out in a million strands, clogging the shower drain and stuck to the tile wall). Her clothing, so large and ever masculine, caused her to almost not exist, a sylphic thing, delicate as those beads of sweat and the fine strands of hair she was losing. Perfect-looking in a sense, even the slow baldness complimenting her anemic little body, so pink and alive, still, in the face. She had a horrible stench after these long sessions; she pulled off the boots she wore on her walk back from the recital hall and left her gym bag and pointe shoes on the radiator, and she put her stockinged feet up on the coffee table, and no one seemed to be able to tell her how terribly she smelled, or perhaps no one minded, having spent four years loving her, to the extent that anyone could.

At the sound of the door and the boot-pulling and the shedding of the gym bag, Sonja called them for dinner. Hugo, standing at the head of the table as though he might say grace, was holding in each hand a bottle of Dan Akroyd sweet red wine. A pair of shapely legs in stilettos figured prominently on the bottle. Those legs should not work (thought Amelia, from an advertising point of view). They made you think, like a landscape portrait of California grape pickers or the name Sofia Coppola, that the wine was going to be bad, at least as bad as a bad piece of music; but the bad

music she was thinking of was catchy, and not actually bad. Neither was the wine, cheap porno legs and all. Hugo gave a toast to the meal, to the spring of their senior year, to the vacations that took the residents of the Mackay house north and south on the continent. Expecting him to talk too long, Fay and Amelia downed their first sips of Dan Akroyd as he gave his protracted spiel, with more than enough time to replenish their glasses, to share a private look of—what, affectionate hatred of their best and truest friends?—and even to smile at each other. “And to Sonja,” Hugo finally intoned toward an ending, “for preparing this meal.”

“No,” said Sonja. “Please. The patriarch deserves a little credit.” And to that, they drank. Only Amelia did not lift her glass. They were flirting—who, *them!* Just picturing it! With nothing to do but wait for a heat spell to push the neighbors’ gardens into bloom and cause time to pass so she could leave this place and do something. She had the time, she had the know-how and the vigor to make a life, the manic upstart; she only needed the proper tools.

Fay, all hurried and grateful, took two room-temperature dinner rolls from the Costco plastic, soaking up the sauce and parmesan, talking through the meal and the company with the libertine’s reverence for pleasure, and the libertine’s table manners. Amelia watched her mouth move and gnash, the gullet bulge with the swallow, the tongue recurring, wetting the lips. She was the child of lotus eaters, or the barbarians who tore into the raw flesh and entrails of their game with savage teeth and whetted tongues. The table shared in the joke of the open secret, the spectacle of Fay bent over the basement toilet, where a person could get a little privacy, young tight body with her fingers in her throat. They were laughing, even Amelia who was thinking, as she sometimes did, that for all her beauty Fay was the most disgusting person she had ever met.

Fay was her first college friend. They lived down the hall from each other in the dormitories that first year. Fay had a grand falling-out with her roommate, an art major from Manhattan with whom she had far too much in common to sustain a sympathetic friendship. The freakish clothes

they wore, the girls and boys they brought home from parties, the art they made in their separate forms, circling each other in competition. Amelia shared a room with the volleyball team's best outside hitter Lillian Rafferty, who kept her clothes on the floor and spent every night in her boyfriend's room in Lambda Chi, but by Halloween, Fay was living there too. Amelia knew it started Halloween night, because that was the night Lillian and her Lambda Chi boyfriend went as Yoko Ono and John Lennon, the costume that got her benched in three volleyball games for doing yellowface, after which the poor idiot Lillian Rafferty stopped coming home to the dorms entirely. It was also the night Fay started her period while dressed as a bride in white lingerie and recovered by painting herself with costume blood from JFK's head wound. JFK was Hugo, and with his bottled blood on her Fay made a joke about the bride consummating her marriage, the joke that made Hugo fall in love with her. Rumor said Fay's bridal virginity joke inspired the homemade rape scene in *Hunt!*, for which Fay rejected credit. You did not need friends in college like you needed them in childhood, but it was better if you had a few. A conversation she had with Fay that night, when she was bleeding in virgin white, called Amelia back to the reason she still loved her, still accepted her, tolerated her abuse. They were waiting in line for the bathroom, and Fay speculated on the inner lives of the men, who were only boys—the source of their fraternity, the reasons for their violence, their animal sex, their homosocial rituals, their sadism, their law. She wrote them epic, bardic histories, singling them out one by one—how can you be so sure he doesn't want to fuck his mother? (said Fay). You might say no boy wants to kill his father, but they all sort of do.

Her sleeping was dreamless or, at best, flecked with dull, lifelike dreams. Sometimes, sitting in a lecture hall that imitated night in the daylight hours, or listening to a friend gossip and fret over a meal, Amelia remembered that she would soon be unconscious, her waking life peripheral or dead, extraneous and remote from her. It was a relief like no other, like baking in the sun on the shores of heaven. Heaven which belonged to someone else. It was past three in the morning when she woke

up to pee and noticed Ted's note on the 7-Eleven receipt. Not his best work—he had once written her a birthday card that said, among other things, *We are voyagers whose ships have taken the strangest of blows... You should run for President...* —but she read it, kissed the impersonal lettering in deference to his touch, and spit her nicotine gum into it, the gum that was listed on that very receipt. She did not chew it as an ex-smoker, but because she heard it helped people concentrate, and the Ritalin prescribed for this purpose gave her sleepless nights and panic attacks in the grocery store. And the gum did help her concentrate, even if it did not. Believing was enough. The view from this part of the Mackay house was an unexpected one, a bend in the black trees, a yellow streetlamp implied, not seen. Lichen on the saplings and wet moss she'd walked on, barefoot and drunk, mane of weeds; the woods sloped where there was a cemetery, or where a cemetery was rumored to be. A wide gravel path where the road receded and gave in to the forest, a lovers' lane for high school kids. They had no neighbors whose private lives were within earshot of theirs, though sometimes in the warmer months children played in the street. Whose children? When they moved in over the summer, Sonja and Fay would lay out tanning with a bottle of baby oil in the yard, Fay's back oiled and long and dimpled at the base of the spine. Amelia might lay on the lawn with them, her legs growing faint red lesions from an allergy to grass, or hang back on the porch with Hugo, who played his guitar or watched from a discreet enough place. Amelia thought of her mother, her red hair and proneness of melanomas, her loyalty to hats and SPF, her ideas about the thinning ozone and nuclear war. They were happy, she was pretty sure, with lives broad and cocky and waiting to occur. She tried to sleep, listened for passing cars, listened for the floorboards, crickets singing for a mate; the low, fixed ringing that was general to a place.

III.

The problem with women (said Davey) was they clung too close, needed too much and would suck the money and the life and the liberty right out of you if you didn't stay vigilant. That's why you kept them at a distance. Ted nodded, lifted his glass, grimaced into his drink with knowing resignation, though his experience of the problem with women was that they were cruel and aloof.

"Walter, tell Ted about Molly."

"Man," said Walter.

"His *ex*," said Davey, "left him for a guy in Stage Smut."

"She left me for the bassist in Stage Smut," said Walter.

"Who?" said Josh, the recent hire.

"His ex-girlfriend," said Davey.

"Whose?"

"Walter's!" said Ted.

It was Walter who had gotten Ted the job and Davey who trained him. Josh was new, a film school dropout, and his arrival meant Ted could finally be a man on the inside of something while some other poor stranger looked in. Every Monday they went for drinks at the same place, wore the same clothing, complained of the same headaches and long commutes and bad company.

"Man," said Walter again.

"Women are dogs," said Davey. The waitress came back with his drink. "Slimy, depraved, stupid bitches. Thank you, beautiful."

This talk from this young man endeared people to him, even (Ted thought, getting a glimpse) the stocky waitress whose servitude in her tight vulgar clothes offended Ted; she smiled back at the scrawny boy from Boston sweet-talking her, talking in general, because he had never been as cool as his brothers, never had a friend like Walter, never felt a figure like the one in the

pictures of Walter's ex-girlfriend. He was showing Josh, the new fledgling, those pictures now; Josh was nodding, saying Oh yeah, wow, nice.

"You're shouting, Josh," said Davey. "Did you know that? You're shouting."

Josh apologized.

"I didn't know girls could pull that off anymore," Davey went on about Walter's girl.

"Anymore? What's anymore?"

"Ted, you ever listen to Stage Smut? Oh, *Ted*. You are missing a treat."

"Davey, I don't know what Stage Smut is and neither do you," he said.

Davey sulked, and the vulgar waitress was back in his ear, bringing the water pitcher around to her patrons, feeding this house of boys. She looked like she might be pregnant, or might have been pregnant a few times before. Why hadn't Amelia called today? Perhaps she had never left bed. Ted did not trust her to do a practical thing like that when he wasn't around; plugging her chargers into the wall before sleep, setting an alarm for morning, texting her boyfriend who left a note on her nightstand and was adamant in his love. He could not even picture it. Sometimes, if she received what she suspected might be a difficult email, she made Ted read it to her. A professor granting an extension or permission of absence; an employer telling her how sorry he was to inform her that she was no longer being considered for this or that job. Amelia feared all correspondence, no matter its content. She had an ego too huge and penetrable for the modern world. Too self-obsessed, and too frail. Did that mean she was still sleeping, through all the day's light and into the next night? Her bedsheets kicked off her body, sleeping in the boyshorts she'd had on when he left her this morning, when she was that naked and he knew he might not see her for another month and still he did not wake her, did not fuck her, sock it in her, not even discreetly without the pain, not getting up so far as when he wondered where he was, among the kidneys and liver, guts; didn't he leave her in the morning, not letting on that he was starved? Did he not write down on that note that he loved her,

meaning he spared her when she looked pretty and warm and he felt unresolved, meaning that he could not live without her, or that, if he could, he did not ever intend to find out? Now Davey and Walter were getting into it about Molly, Molly—Molly whose name Ted had not heard until this night and was now having a hard time not wondering what she might have looked like next to Walter. Tonight he would get back to his apartment and, if he was lucky, if he had anything left in him, lay back and try to picture what turned him on, and what turned him on was getting worse, and he was running out of pictures. Tonight's might be Davey and Walter over the body of Molly; he would not see Davey and Walter or know if it was really them or just two Teds at either end of her, and he would not know until tonight what Molly looked like, just like he could not see tonight's picture until tonight. (He did it this way, with his mind alone, ever since Amelia got him feeling bad about porn, saying she could tell when he'd been watching it by how he fucked her, hard and mechanical and lasting too long like she couldn't coax it out of him, and then when it was over he knew she was pissed, because she would not let him kiss her, would not be reassured of who he was.)

She was good for him that way. A man should pit the new self against the old temptations. And she was good. Unto others—yes. He did not flirt with the women around, who had a hard fleeting urban way about them that Amelia did not. He shut his eyes and masturbated to pictures in his head. He had only been out of college a year, less, and they made good on their arrangement never to cheat on each other, not when they were living in the same state with only so many hours between them. He did the right thing when it came to women, and for his friends he could not say as much. All day Ted drafted press releases for despicable men, wholeheartedly denying the allegations. Those drafts got looked at by the next guy, then by Walter, and then by a woman named Michelle who conferred with the client, a spokesperson for the accused, and upon the spokesperson's approval the final release went out in an email to the press. If he browsed the news

on his phone, it would not take much scrolling before Ted would find a honed, careful version of his words attributed to someone speaking on the client's behalf. "Mr. Weinstein unequivocally denies the allegations" was the joke Amelia liked to make. And for this joke of a profession Ted made good money and had an apartment to himself with his own view of other, better apartment buildings. So it was no small feat that Ted himself was a good man, for he was good in spite of contradictory circumstances, taking care of business for the people who took care of the business of bad actors. Of course, a person cannot concern himself with both ethics and money. A person must choose. Amelia would learn that, he knew she would, and then she might stop making the awful joke and just let Ted do the work he did without imposing some larger meaning, something about his position in respect to human greed. She wanted him to repent and be sorry, to be sorry every day as long as he made his money that way, and what he would never tell her was that not once, not for one moment as he drafted the same statements of innocence, as he denied all culpability on a stranger's behalf, had he felt anything close to remorse.

Ted was the second son of Willem and Lena Nelson. He was born in St. Paul in the summertime when his brother Jamie was ten. His mother was forty-one when Ted was born, and in a decade of raising what the psychologists called a troubled child, she had gotten comfortable with the idea that she could not, by any natural means, get pregnant. Not just gotten comfortable; she'd begun to take comfort in it. Three rounds of IVF over a period of two years before she was pregnant with Jamie. She did not care about the risks, the waiting rooms, the clinics and the paperwork, the unintelligible waivers she signed. They could have her signature, her ten thousand dollars and her legs up, sedated, her cells for incubation, her husband masturbating into a sample cup in the bathroom down the hall. What did he think of while he did that, did it not for the sake of himself but for the sake of them, the sake of their marriage, getting himself off in the fertility clinic

while the doctor probed her insides for something usable? Well, she did not care. He could picture what he needed to picture, he could bring stacks of magazines or put a porno on TV. Yes: they could have everything. Death or another woman could take her husband, and Lena would keep going, trying with a donor's sample, trying with strangers. She was a born mother, not like her friends who seemed to get knocked up as often as they wanted or didn't. In high school, when her friends were having abortions and pregnancy scares, Lena got into the backseat of a boy's car for the first time and told him he'd better wear a condom if he didn't want a kid, because she wasn't going to be the type to clean up his mistake.

"I know that, baby," the boy said.

"Are you listening to me? If something happens, I'll keep it."

"Nothing's gonna happen."

"That should scare you, what I just said."

"I know, baby. I've got it covered."

"But do you, literally? I'm not making a joke."

She got her way, and she watched him struggle with the condom, lose his erection and ask her to help him get it back, which she did, and then they got comfortable. In the dark car on the deserted lover's lane, in the middle of the act, he took it off and dropped it on the floor thinking she could not see him. But she did see, and she did not say anything, because at that point she could not conjure a feeling of anger toward him, and she did not want to make him stop. She did not want anything to make him stop. When the boy dropped her off at home before curfew, Lena cried in her bedroom and called all her friends to brag about what happened and to sob that she was now certainly pregnant. Her friends were as bereaved and excited and intrigued as she was. One told her not to worry; she knew a clinic in Macalaster-Groveland where the staff was friendly and they didn't make you show ID. And besides (said each of Lena's friends), Allison Foster had done it herself with

the underwire of her bra. When her period came on time the next month, Lena cried again, with what she told herself was relief.

She did love school: the work of it, which her dad insisted she love, and the people, the talk, the scenery. Even as a little girl she'd liked it, especially when she had a teacher who let her read her romance books in the shade during recess, instead of insisting (like so many did) that she go play wiffle ball with her contemporaries; contemporaries who, by adolescence, she had learned to abide, to admire and even to love. She liked walking into the girls' bathroom during lunch, as the bulimic girls puked and the others, maybe a pair of best friends, spoke to each other in their stalls: partitioned, stripped, horses in the stables. One might warn the other of what she'd heard that boy did to that sophomore that night at Billy's dad's house—and if prompted, she'd feel around in her school bag, in the pencil case in the front pocket, and pass her friend a tampon under the stall. Other times they did not appear even to be squatting over the toilets, their jeans pulled down, old denim folds around their stomping boots or the pleats of a cheerleading uniform grazing her white tennis shoes—maybe one of each, the stomping boots and the tennis shoes—but instead just talking or smoking or drawing their initials inside hearts on the bathroom walls. Lena listened and learned, that way, what a woman was. (“Must have a small cock, the way he can put it in anything.” “But you heard what happened to his mother?” “The girl was a slut, she earned the attention.” “I’m telling you, it’s mommy issues, like all psycho-killers have.” “I know he’s a sex-psycho, but he’s like my oldest friend. We used to take float trips on the river. Remember that night at Sidecar?” “I remember. The way he talked about you...” “I know, he wants me.” “Fuck. Do you have a tampon?” “In his dreams, creep. Yeah, here.” “Don’t you watch slasher movies? He’s gonna kill girls someday.” “You’re jealous. I’ve seen all the movies. I wanna be a Scream Queen.” And in echoes, they would laugh.) Gossiping, yes, but it was more than that: they were consoling and teasing and looking after each other.

There was tumult, at first, in her married life. Lena kept rusted toy trains as home decor, which her grandfather Ewan Doyle, rail industry executive, had left to her father, presumably to be passed forth to a male heir, of which among his grandchildren there were none. All three of Ewan's sons had daughters. Of course, the old man didn't live long enough to know. Willem hated those damn trains, especially the one she hauled out of a storage bin at Christmastime, when in their living room beside the artificial Christmas tree with a twenty-spire Moravian star there appeared an electric train set circling the length of the side table, playing an instrumental rendition of "Little Drummer Boy" on a loop. A sheet of white wool signifying snow under its tracks. He had his own collectables, a set of gamharwood airplanes on the windowsill over his desk in the so-called guest room. He had once aspired to earn his pilot's license, join the force and fight the enemy from above. But he was colorblind, and alas, he said, a pacifist with no meaningful desire to kill. He learned that about himself from the boys in flight school in Knoxville, who were (said Willem) no better than inbred, bloodthirsting cannibals. ("Forgive him," Lena would say to guests when her husband began to explain his planes; "he's only mad at the world for making him colorblind. Can't tell stop from go, can you, Captain?")

But a child with him! She'd read all the naming books, all the parenting magazines, and inherited enough money from the death of her father—Albert Doyle, Minneapolis-St. Paul commissioner for the U.S. Department of Labor, who got his money from his father, Ewan Doyle, rail industry executive—to give her child the kind of life a child would want, if it could know what it wanted. Then, after two years of visits to the fertility clinic, there was suddenly Jamie, a real baby with his three or four real human needs. To sleep, to feed, to wake up crying: all that a person did, James Nelson did from the moment of his birth. He was a prodigy of baby-things, a genius of nursing and fits and needing and weeping. When Jamie was five, he began to scream when his mother gave him a bath. She assumed he was afraid of water with the catlike reaction he had. But

when she reached to pull him out of the shallow tub, placed him on the bathmat and swaddled him in a towel, his screams did not cease. The tantrums carried on into bedtime, when he kicked and thrashed if she tried to tuck him in. He stopped eating the food she put in front of him, forgot the games, forgot airplane and the train in the tunnel; his limbs flailed to keep her off of him. It was not water or food, she thought, but his own mother that terrified Jamie. *Her!* The one who wanted him, who prayed and begged and met with specialists and put up with unspeakable fees to bring him to life! She should hate him back. But of course she couldn't, not once she saw that Willem made no better substitute: all the thrashing, the squirming and kicking, the wailing was not particular to her. Jamie developed eczema on his hands, which soon began to bleed and crack in the Minnesota winter. He washed them too much, bathed himself too much, would not be held by his parents, and stayed in the bathtub for hours at a time in fear of his little feet touching the floor. The food, the sink, his carseat, his parents, his body was never clean. He tore at his skin, talking about being dirty. When Jamie was six, Willem and Lena found a child psychologist named Alan Richter on the internet. Dr. Richter operated a private practice above a laundromat and was exceedingly well-reviewed. He did not accept insurance, so Willem filed all the claims himself, in the kitchen at night when Jamie was precariously asleep. After meeting with Jamie three times, Dr. Richter told a stoic Willem and a sniffing Lena that he was diagnosing the boy with obsessive-compulsive disorder and prescribing two medications, a low-dose anticonvulsant sedative and an antidepressant. Within a year of meeting him, after a few hypnotherapy sessions and several medication combinations, the parents were calling Dr. Richter their miracle worker. Jamie was going to school, looking at bugs and making refrigerator art like the other children. He was collecting stamps and war figurines, digging for geodes in the sandbox or making a tunnel to China, delighting in the sight of worms washed up on the sidewalk after a night's rain. For three years, he had the trajectory of a normal child, and then, as though out of nothing, he had a baby brother.

Ted was a delicate child. He was born premature, with a body so red and small it reminded his mother of an abstract, birdlike doll. His older brother was taught to hold him with one arm cradling the body and the other hand cupping the head, and still his parents loomed, held their hands under his, stood ready in case Jamie decided to throw the new baby across the room. Instead, he decided to love it, to make up songs with its name, to tell it goodnight. Lena had not even had time to be shocked or joyful about the pregnancy, or to steel herself for a likely miscarriage, or to celebrate when none came, or to be disappointed when the second child was not a daughter. She had been too worried about how Jamie would respond to it, how he would learn to interact with it, how he would handle the arrival of something unusual, something frail, a foreign body, a parasite in his house. But the boys only ever seemed capable of idolizing each other. When Ted started pre-K, Jamie waited outside the viewing glass at dropoff until his brother calmed down and began to play with the other children. Lena and Willem eventually had to discourage this ritual, which was making Jamie late to homeroom at the new private school where that kind of truancy earned parents a serious talking-to, but they held off as long as they could from pulling him off the glass for good. When he got his driver's license, Jamie took Ted to his little league games, staying to watch and correct his brother's form. Though Ted turned out to be the vastly more athletic brother, Jamie was ten years his senior and held his own on the field, if only because Ted and his friends didn't know any better than worshipping what was bigger than them. And Jamie was big, a tall broad kid in size 13 shoes, outgrowing his twin bed, outgrowing his parents. He was good with computers and bad at social connection, bad with his peers and bad with girls. Ted was entering the third grade when his brother went east for college. Their bond, which had really always been Jamie's bond and not little Ted's, suffered for the distance. With every Christmas that Jamie came home to St. Paul, Ted was older and knew his brother less. Liked him less, too. A moody, estranged young adult who showed up for holidays and made great demands on everyone's time, got into screaming fights with their

parents, spent all day in his room, disappeared at night and never hung up his coat. He was disordered and mean, but man, he was going places, everyone said. Jamie was getting his doctorate in neurochemistry at Columbia. Jamie did not need to be a romantic figure, or a sweet one, or even likable, because he was so boyishly smart, so neurotic and technical and literal and severe. No regular person needed to understand or endeavor to understand someone like that. And no one did. His family did not ask Jamie what his work entailed, or how it felt to be the person doing it, the person making everyone look good, letting Willem and Lena impress their friends, whose children went to the state university or trade school or right into the workforce, while in Morningside Heights Jamie operated on vertebrate animals under the idle supervision of the foremost neurochemist in the field.

He was happy once, and full of promise. A bricklayer at the foot of the world. Sleepless, myopic Jamie: he injected mice with potent depressants and logged their responses to sensory and sexual stimuli. Most of the time they just slumped over, too sad to consider food or fornicating. He felt himself sickened and squeamish among rodents; he felt himself being one of them, too tired or doped to crave the hot blood of a mate, with no hope of voicing his troubles to the keeper of the drugs in a language they would both understand. He could have jumped from somewhere, loving no one, but all possible outcomes (death; survival; an intermediate vegetative state) were as bleak as doing nothing. Jamie the nonactor would never marry, never get better clothes, never enact radical violence against couples in theatres or schoolchildren or his boss. He tried to develop a gambling habit but could not commit to doing himself such specific harm. Though Ted did not like his brother, he felt sorry for what he represented, which was a new class of boys and men. Did that include Ted? The modern man: he could not be what he saw in his father's generation of men. For months, Jamie went to work at the university and thought about ending his life. He went out with women he met on the internet and could not often convince them to sleep with him. One spring day, he dropped out of Columbia before earning his degree, just walking into the dean's office and

signing the papers when he should have been clocking in at the lab. He did not tell his family, and they did not ask; he ensured they never had a reason to. He moved to a smaller apartment and got a job as a chemist for a pharmaceutical startup, in a lab where people wore sandals and tested urine samples for opiates. Nobody in the family, not even Ted, knew what Jamie had done to his life, until the afternoon in August when Lena got a phone call from an officer at the 24th precinct. She was pouring out a carton of expired milk from the back of the fridge. The cop described a 911 call from a landlord who said one of his tenants had stopped paying rent, so he'd gone to check on him and found him with a gunshot wound through the head, said it looked like it had been a week, at least. An autopsy was underway to rule out foul play, but the coroner was confident the pathologist would find it a suicide. All the classic signs, he said. She should arrange for the body to be brought home, if that's where she wanted him. "Minnesota," the young officer said. "Your boy was a long way from home." Lena demanded to please speak to her son, while the cop repeated into his office phone: "I'm sorry, Mrs. Nelson. You are James Nelson's mother, aren't you?"

It was a story Ted told to account for himself, for his being an only child, for his parents' undue providence in his adult life, for his behavior. Ted knew, when he got to college, something that other people did not, something about the mind and work and men, mankind and its sicknesses, the small pleasure of the first bloom of private egoism in a young man, of being near it, and the ruins. About making something of oneself and the mania of making, every little boy setting out to make history, every little boy a chump. He also knew that most people, including Jamie and including himself, knew they had to die like everyone else, and that it distressed them, and that every person born was now dead except for those now living it, and that it disturbed them, and that they would also yearn for it; they would have the fear and the hunger, and suppress both, so that they could care about anything else, be overwhelmed and ennobled by ordinary tasks, get a sunburn, get drunk, get

money, sit in a restaurant and wait for the food they ordered and wonder if what they ordered was what they really wanted, and have their doubts about what they really wanted to make and to own, and then eat what was put in front of them. On Wednesdays, his mother went to a support group for bereaved parents; his father gave Jamie's clothes to the Salvation Army. The three living Nelsons became a close unit, kin of a tight social weave, a thread plucked loose and cut before the fray; they became a family who played board games and had a summer cottage in Halifax with the beveled glass and sunlight bargaining on the hilltops, a wooded road with a grotto and an ocean at the end of it; they sustained hours of unbroken conversation to prevent intervals of silence, Willem's sneeze turning into a discussion of the change of seasons, the pollen on the northern white cedars; when one asked how another's day was, he expected a sincere answer.

They retired, Willem from the bank and Lena from the school, the summer before Ted began college. They drove their possessions east out of St. Paul, deposited their son in New York, and crossed the border to live in Halifax until (Lena said) they were dead and buried in the garden where the summers were lush and the winters that overtook them brought pine needles and snow and just glimpses of the Atlantic Ocean behind the barren forest.

How romantic, Amelia said in a lush voice when Lena described the couple's marital death-plot over dinner that first night when Ted brought home a mate. There was never a lull in conversation. He wanted dinners like Amelia had in her house, or so she said, with long emotive silences and scarcely a mutter of thanks. Of course, he could not know if things in her house always went the way she said, because she did not bring him there, at least not in three years of knowing him, not *yet*, as she said, for reasons he needed to accept. So he accepted those reasons, like he accepted everything. She had appeared in his life in a curious manner, without explanation or promise, just the ordinary light of upstate New York, the dormitories, the traditions and vernacular of a place. Sometimes he noticed her again, humming in the car, stirring in her sleep, talking during a

movie—always movement, always noise—and he was overcome by the strangeness of it, that he believed in this person like a religion, this person he did not know and whose material existence felt yet unproven; for as much as he reached out to touch her and found that she was there, flesh and breath, for as much as she was his girl, he was not persuaded of her innocence, of her meaning it, the meaning of her love. People do not rest persuaded forever, “forever” of course meaning as long as there is a world to stand in, in which to persuade. The first time he got the impression he was dealing with a stranger, Ted was driving her home from a bar and pulled the car over so she could vomit into a snowbank on the side of the road. He did not stop desiring her. He left a tall glass of water and two ibuprofen on her nightstand before going to bed with her that night. She got nightsweats when she was drunk, the clammy nape of her neck, the humid room, how their bodies stuck. He did not stop desiring her.

It was Walter who called it a night, and young Josh followed, picking up his coat before Davey could fool anyone into another round. Ted stood up, with the feeling he always had when he stood after a period of sitting, the feeling that he was missing something, that he had left his apartment unlocked and the stovetop switched on and his metrocard was still in the pocket of yesterday’s pants on the floor next to the laundry basket. He did the motion, patting the pockets of his jeans and coat and surveying the glossy table, everything accounted for. Davey would plead, the petulant young king of the beasts, and Ted would say he was tired like the others, better call his girlfriend, better not have more to drink, you know women. Get home safe, Davey. Yeah, yeah.

The streets he took were economical, dreamless; he woke early on Saturdays and lay in bed, berating himself for it. Something insensitive, material and coarse about a weekend morning. He had neighbors in the building whose footsteps and fights he heard, whose dinners he smelled, whose faces he did not see and did not imagine—imagining faces was a challenge for Ted, what kept him from becoming a great artist. Every man and woman he heard but did not see—pacing abraded

floorboards, abraded lovers shouting or moaning in some verbose pleasure—was a man or a woman about whom nothing was known. He did not name them, he did not assign faces to them; he sometimes forgot the faces of people he knew well. If you asked him to describe the face of Amelia, he might say it was pale, it was pink after sex or in a hot apartment; it was pretty but not extraordinarily so; it was not symmetrical, though he could not describe where the asymmetry was, maybe in the eyes, was one brighter, more expressive than the other? He did not know. She probably knew. All the time she spent tending to herself in the mirror, soaking in an epsom salt bath, putting scented lotions on that skin (how did she reach every corner of that skin on that body, were her arms out of proportion with her short body?), painting her eyelashes black, painting over a blemish on her chin; she could probably describe herself with such cruel precision, someone could paint her portrait over the phone, never seeing her. Some painter should try, or some psychologist. She would be a great subject to study, because she was not shy with herself; put a drink in her and she was too much, she could make a real scene. She did not start arguments or wallow in unintelligible tears; she just talked about herself. That was how Ted learned about her, in that first year, when they were having sex without love, sleeping in a bed together two nights a week, more if she was drunk, before she was his girlfriend. That was how he learned about her father. By that time, he was guilty of getting drunk on purpose, always pulling out a fresh bottle of something she liked, cheap pinot noirs and SkinnyGirl margarita mix. They were drinking a celebrity wine in his room; she was slow, assuming, hauled herself along a sofa, lush, trying to be quiet, which she could not be, even in the dark while behind the closed door his roommate slept. He asked her what her parents did for a living, knowing the answer by heart. Harry Macpherson was not hard to find on the internet. Neither, for that matter, was Annie Price. In another life, a life that took a softer course, she was more searchable, discoverable than her husband. The actress. Amelia replied:

“My father is a professor. My mom doesn’t work anymore. She was an actress.”

Testing him, seeing what he knew. He looked at her without a glimmer, he thought, except the glimmer of a man pretty sure he was going to have sex within the hour. It could be a while, with what a talker she was, but he knew it was coming. Go on, he said or seemed to say.

“Theatre. I don’t know. Lots of Shakespeare.”

“Hm.”

“My dad and I don’t speak anymore.”

Figured. She conducted herself like a girl who did not have much of a father.

“Oh?”

“Well, he—wait, are you asking? Nevermind. He got involved with a student, and in *this* political climate. There was a ‘trial’ of sorts, but he got off clean. It was written about. You’re not a pervert for this stuff, are you?”

“What stuff?”

“You have a nice face. That’s a shame, I’ll trust anybody with a nice face.”

“Nice how?”

“Anyway, nobody believed the girl, who never said her name. His people defended him, and I’m assuming her people defended her, not that it mattered. My mom believed him, his friends, his colleagues and whoever else, at least publicly. Privately, who can say. Nobody believed that poor girl little Miss Jane-Emily Doe, but I did,” she said triumphantly. “Of course she could have been lying. I’m not some lunatic who thinks people don’t lie! *I* lie, I mean I’ve probably lied to you somehow already in this conversation. I know I did, when I said she never said her name. She did say it. It was Sheila. I know women *lie*, like people, people are people and so on. And women are people, I think. Everybody hates women, including myself. I might especially hate them, being one of their kind. Don’t make that face. You know what I mean, even if you think you don’t understand. You think you’re not supposed to understand! Don’t make a face, like it’s never occurred to you to hate women.

I'm not any more inclined to trust a woman than anybody else; I'm not some fanatic, you know, but the fact remains I know my dad. I know him enough to know he's no better than anybody else. He lies, of course he lies! I just can't approve of him anymore. It would be inappropriate. He's old, sure he's old. Sure, you think he might not get it, he's sixty-something now—they were old when they had me. But he gets it. He knows. And you know what else? You think it's the stupid ones, don't you, who get mixed up in this. We all think poor Sheila was an idiot and a lamb, but she had to be smart. It's the smart ones who get into trouble. She was smart, that's how she wound up sleeping with the wrong people."

"He *slept* with her?" This was news to Ted. This was news to the news, from what he'd read.

"No. Who knows."

"It must be a strange choice. Side with the woman, or side with your dad."

"The *woman!* That's not what it was, not at all. I'm not—I wouldn't just side with the woman for being a woman. Would you side with a man just for being a man?"

"I don't know. I might be inclined—to stand with my kind."

"Really?" Her eyes were big and aroused.

"I might. If it were between John and Lorena Bobbitt."

"Well, it's not."

"You know what I mean."

"I don't. You chose a far too sensational example, and now I don't know how to put gender back into the whole thing. But sure. When it comes to—castration. Yes, maybe we stand with our *kind.*"

"Come up with a better example, then, of a man."

"O.J. Simpson. Woody Allen."

"Ha. People do tend to side with their kind."

“No! Fine, I chose bad examples. Anyway, fuck off. I don’t think of it like that. Of women, breeds of people. I wouldn’t consider women my kind anyway, if you must use that word.”

“So how did you come to your verdict?”

“What, on John and Lorena?”

“Come on. Your father and the girl.”

“I don’t let loyalties blind me one way or the other. I don’t—I try not—to be so loyal I don’t see how things are. Oh, I’m so bored of this conversation. I don’t know.”

She leaned into him, feigning affection in order to feel it, which she consequently did. It was a posture she had seen other girls take up with their boyfriends, one which suggested neither body could veer from the other, neither person wanted to be free. That was how things should be, and so they were. She was angry at him, why was she angry? He acted like she did not know the difference between the blood of a family and the blood of personal politics. He did not understand her. What was she drinking, what did he give her to make her tired, to make her talk? He’d made her feel stupid, and she did not even like him that much. *He* was courting *her*. Yes. She did not even care if he found her smart, or if he found her pretty, or if he told his friends she was good in bed, or if, supposing he did tell them that, it was true. But now he was singing with the music from the party next door, moving his hips funny, and she was won: “I went home with a waitress, the way I always do. How was I to know she was with the Russians too?” She reached for him, and he carried on. “Send lawyers guns and money, Dad, get me out of this.”

“Why am *I* the girl who has to witness this?”

“Because unfortunately for you, I’m in the prime of my life.”

“Someone should take your picture, then. You never know when you’ll wake up tomorrow, out of your prime.”

“Fat, bald, and rich like my mother’s father. It’s all about the maternal grandfather, you know.”

Making her hands like a box and shutter, she mimed taking his picture. It was the old times they were playing in, so she did not reach for her phone.

“Come touch me,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

But she had become serious since then. Humorless. Ridiculing his work. He tried to remember, when she was upstate and he was here with a television and a fire escape and a mattress on West 74th, the things that troubled him about Amelia. That she was stammering and sensitive, that plaintive watery look of her face hiding arrogance, hiding insults hurled in poor taste; that his job amused her, she was embarrassed of it, she pitied him. She doubted his urbanness and his generosity, his sensibility, all to appease herself for not being with him in the city she claimed to feel at home in, the distorted sense she had of herself as someone detached, free, moral. She wasted time, did not rise to any occasion, never met the needs of an emergency. His senses quickened. Outside it was almost noon, and the sounds of this insipid, penniless, fatherless place were guttural.

IV.

She spoke to her daughter on a cell phone, hers, the only number Amelia cared to call. She placed the phone in her lap, her child's voice on speaker, Hal listening from the far side of the couch, the bottom of the stairs, pacing in the kitchen. He kept a pen and a notepad on him to take notes. Be still, Annie willed him, but he did not often look in her eyes anymore.

If he did look, it was not like he used to. She'd had a heavy breast of milk after Amelia; sometimes in those nights made late by the baby, when they had not yet resumed having sex, he drank from her, more delicate than he ever was with her body, more delicate for seeing the labors of it; or was he estranged, jealous of the infant for getting all her flesh and attention, the milk and the body made softer for the storing of it. Afraid to ask for anything from her in those days, those months after the birth, he kept her off her feet, kept her more bedridden than she needed to be, more like a wife, surely he liked it that way. He kept her still. She felt like a woman in love and she felt like a concubine; she felt like a soldier carried back to the barracks, disabled, deformed, fawned over and nursed, his merciless affections, his guilt. She swatted his head away and said it made her feel like a cow. A carriage horse dying in harness, she'd read of that happening on city streets in olden-time summers, and it was somebody's job to clean them up, broad rugged muscular things taken out by the heat and fatigue, good workers, farmhands, rouseabouts, rowdy and dependable boys now wilted like goldenrod, parched and ultimately dead. She slapped him: made to feel like a mare in his stable. Other times she did not mind it, and later she missed it, all that attention he paid.

It was a bad spot they put her in, the daughter and the man. If Amelia called in the evenings, Hal wanted to listen. "How else am I supposed to know about her life? Search her name on the internet?" Annie closed and opened her eyes to convey the immense strain of being his wife. "I'll tell you what's going on, that's how you'll know." "I want to hear her voice." "I know." "And you

wouldn't tell me everything." "*She* wouldn't tell you everything." "Goddammit I have a right to know my own child, don't I?" "Yes. But on whose terms?" He raised his voice: "My own!" She lowered hers, bitterly: "Oh, I wish you'd both keep me out of this."

The couple no longer had this fight. Annie got tired of Amelia, her tirades, unloading her oh-so-impossible life, closed off to advice, how could her *mother* possibly know how it felt to be young, to be unmoored, to be furious and miserable and giddy, all in the frantic way she was. Annie found herself agreeing with her husband that it was a little ridiculous, how willing she had been at eighteen to believe something untrue and unjust about her father at the age of eighteen, and to never get over it. Oh, get over it, Annie might say, but then what if Amelia stopped calling. Too resolute in her ways, too certain. That child knew nothing, nothing—

She called in the evening. Hal was in his undershirt and boxers by that hour, drinking white wine with one ice cube and watching the Knicks in his armchair, on which his weight had made a permanent impression of his seat; Annie was on the sofa in her slippers and robe, reading a crime novel. Her husband muted the game at the sound of Annie's cell phone buzzing on the coffeetable, jolted alive in its cartoonish way, a rotary phone ringing off the hook—damn it Amelia, he mutes the game, he loves you, it's pathetic!

"Hi, sweetheart."

He did not need to ask. She had the volume up for him to listen.

"Mom, hi. Are you okay? You sound tired."

"Am I tired? I don't think so, not in particular."

"Oh. Good."

"And you're alive, I'm glad to know."

"Only on the outside, mother."

"Well, the outside's better than dead."

“Yes. Not dead, and neither are you.”

“Neither is Dad.”

“Praise be!”

“*Amelia.*”

“What?”

“That reminds me. Do you remember your friend Addy? Her mother was Diane Genetti, seems like Addy had her dad’s last name, I don’t remember what that was.”

“Addy? No, I don’t know anyone named Addy.”

“Yes, you do. From gradeschool. Long black hair, pretty. She was in your Girl Scout troop.”

“I wasn’t a Girl Scout.”

“Of course you were. You went to Jockey Hollow. You wet the bed.”

“Did I sell cookies?”

“Only briefly. We took you out of it when the little girl in Glen Rock was murdered going door to door. You don’t remember?”

“No.”

“Well, anyway. Diane’s dead. Your friend Addy’s mother.”

“Condolences.”

“I worry your medications are doing something to your memory.”

“I doubt it. I never remember to take them.”

Annie could hear that her daughter was outside, walking, her small urgent voice taking lashes of wind.

“Where are you, Mealy? It sounds cold.”

“I’m walking.”

“It must be dark. Are there streetlights? You’re on the main road?”

“I’m looking for my car. Fay thinks she left it on a side street around Harris.”

“What was Fay doing with it?”

“God, I hope it’s not in someone’s driveway.”

“Stay on the phone.”

“I am on the phone!”

“You should always pretend to be on the phone when you’re walking alone at night.”

She shouldn’t walk alone at night, Hal seemed to say. He shook his head, her mute husband.

Don’t speak, please do not speak, Hal, or your eavesdropping privileges will be hereby revoked.

“I don’t have to pretend. I’m talking to you, aren’t I?”

“Yes.”

“East Cedar...Palmer, I was just on Palmer. Where am I?”

“Have you been sleeping?”

“Too much.”

“That’s good. You need to sleep.”

“If I was an idiot, where would I leave my friend’s car?”

“Dad and I booked a room for graduation. The Arbor Cottage Inn. Have you been there?”

“No, I live here.”

“We found it on Yelp.”

“I’m sure it’s fine.”

“It’s close. Not too expensive, but certainly not cheap. They know it’s a popular weekend.”

“Mhm.”

“And your father’s retirement party in June.”

“Yeah.”

“You didn’t reply to the e-vite.”

“Why would I? I have to come.”

“It would be nice to RSVP.”

“To a party at my own house?”

“Well, when you RSVP, it opens a new browser that tells you who else is going.”

“So?”

“So I think— it would be nice— for people to see that you intend to come.”

Nom, Annie... Hal would like to say. Be still, hopeless boy. I am handling her like I handle all our affairs.

“You may RSVP on my behalf,” her daughter said.

“It doesn’t work that way. You have to click the link in the email.”

“My car! That sweet idiot hit the curb. God she’s dumb.”

“Amelia, please. You’re so harsh about people.”

“Fay knows she’s not the brightest. Too pretty.”

“You know, you really ought to stop judging everyone.”

“If I parked your car like this I’d be slapped.”

“Please! Your father and I never punished you, least of all when we should have.”

“Such as when?”

“You brought drugs to your prom.”

“Poppers aren’t drugs, and I didn’t bring them, I was holding onto them for a friend. That stupid school didn’t do a thing. All some parent had to do was wave money in Mrs. Killian’s face, she rolled over like a dog.”

“*We* certainly did not wave money over anyone. I thought you should’ve been in trouble. Having things taken from you is a wonderful way to learn about the world. It’s your dad who went

easy.”

“What’s ever been taken from him?”

“Don’t start.”

“When has he ever had to learn about the world? He doesn’t know anything.”

“Oh yes, when he’s twenty-two he’ll know everything!”

“You shouldn’t have put me in private school. It’s why I’m so mean and spoiled.”

“Maybe it’s in your nature.”

“Why don’t you hang up, if we’re going to shout at each other.”

“No one is shouting. Get in your car and go home.”

“I am in the car!”

“Oh. Good.”

Annie lay her body down across the length of the sofa. Hal had begun to pace. She could see him in the kitchen through those swinging oak saloon doors, kneading his brow bone, some stress technique he’d learned in therapy, the two times he went. Hopeless boy. Come back here, she didn’t mean it, we just fight, it’s mothers and daughters, that’s all.

“I’m going to respond to your e-vite.”

“Yes?”

“Yes. I’ll RSVP, so his academic co-conspirators know...so they know, you know, that I’m coming.”

“That’s thoughtful of you.”

“I would never do it if you hadn’t asked.”

“Why not let me think you’re being thoughtful.”

“I don’t forgive him, Mom. I’ll come to his party—for you—but don’t for a second let him think I forgive him.”

“What is it exactly that you think you don’t forgive him for?”

“Oh, you’re a fanatic. You’re in love with him.”

“Am I? I thought I was his wife.”

Sometimes when her mother spoke, Amelia found herself ashamed of the weakness of all womankind. I brought myself into this world, she thought, and I protect myself from it, too. But her mother *loved* Hal. Then control the body’s fate and the body; be at the mercy of no man! Well, that just wasn’t how things were done. Then do it anyway, Mother, quit your job and change your hair and go to Mexico, beyond the reaches of the law.

“Don’t get so excited, Baby. I’m going to die here in this house in New Jersey, or in a nursing home in Sarasota if it comes to that. I chose this life, believe it or not.”

“Can we talk about anything else?”

“I saw a play last night.”

“What play?”

Annie hesitated. Hal was still within earshot, taking notes, heaven knows.

“*China Doll*. Off-off-Broadway. It wasn’t his best.”

“Whose best?”

“Mamet’s.”

“I only know *Oleanna*,” the daughter said.

“I’m sure you do.”

“So you didn’t like it?”

“No, I liked it. He’s so violent. Do you notice, ever, just the—the ingrained violence of men? The violence honed and released as beauty, as art? As though there’s no other beauty, no subtle art,

just—*wback*.”

In reply, Amelia made a gunfire sound.

“I’m guessing Dad loved it?”

“No, I brought a friend.”

“To *China Doll*?”

“He likes the theatre.”

“He! So this person—this man, you go out with this man?”

“We go to the theatre. You know who your mother was once.”

“And Dad?”

“Dad finds it boring. Apparently he always did, but he was polite enough to go to all my shows, even the really terrible ones. I mean every single night, when they ran for more than a night. He watched me play *Goneril* for six consecutive weeks, the poor man.”

“Harry the saint. The tortured martyr.”

“Please, will you calm down?”

“I’m happy for you. I think this is good. This is very good.”

“I don’t know what you mean by that, but you can stop smiling. I am not exacting any kind of revenge, if that’s what’s got you excited.”

“I’m not excited!”

“All right!”

To the silence on the other end, Annie said: “Do you need money, sweetheart?”

“What? No. I have money.”

“Are you sure? I can give you money.”

“What money?”

“Listen, I read an article about something girls your age are doing. Dating older men for money. Or pretending to date them, just being pretty for hire. I was so worried that—if you were too proud or too angry at us to ask for money...”

“I’m not a whore.”

“But that’s just the thing—these girls, they don’t actually *sleep* with them. It actually sounds like easy money, that’s the whole problem.”

“It can’t be much if you don’t sleep with anyone.”

“I’m serious. Please don’t sell your body online.”

“I have a job.”

“Babysitting is not a job.”

“I have plans. Big plans, Mom.”

“After you graduate?”

“I’ll move in with Ted.”

“Living with a man is not a job either.”

“It’s what you do.” Annie went quiet, holding the receiver away from her face. Amelia traced the stitching of the steering wheel, idle with the heat vents blowing, fogging the windshield; she could hear her mother breathing, and her heart just lay down, a stone. “Like I said, I have plans.”

“As long as they don’t involve sex work.”

“No one has *plans* to do sex work.”

“If you’re so serious about Ted...”

“I am!”

“Why don’t you bring him to your father’s party?”

“To a retirement party? He’ll be bored.”

“He can be your escape.”

“I’m sure he’ll have work.”

“On a Friday night in the summer?”

“Or plans.”

“That’s too bad. I’m starting to think you made him up.”

“I can ask. He probably won’t come, but I can ask.”

“Thank you. That’s very nice of you.”

“I won’t be polite, you know. I’ll embarrass you.”

“This is not heaven, Baby. This is the world.”

“I would never mistake this for heaven!”

On Sunday mornings, Annie Price and Hal Macpherson played tennis at the Radcliffe Club with another couple, the Hornbecks. Joan Hornbeck and her husband Dale were doctors. Annie liked the idea of playing doubles with a pair of doctors, who would know what to do with a bad knee or a hipbone, who would swoop into action if Hal had a sudden heart attack. She had a fear, a dreamlike scene that came over her in the waking hours, that Hal would collapse one day of some organ failure or another, and she would stand there, watching, doing nothing, not even praying for divine intervention while he bled like the overworked livestock she knew when she was young, just waiting for help to appear.

You could see he had been handsome once, and not too long ago. He had a week’s growth of stubble. On a quiet drive, he picked up her hand and pressed his lips to the knuckles. They did not tell each other of their love anymore: how trite, how obvious and deceitful! It was something young people said to get sex. And it was not enough. Conjuring nothing, it made no impression on human memory anymore. Their language had its deficits; a person had to speak French to utter such a scarce and mighty thing as *jolie laide*, something beautiful (a woman, she presumed) in spite of ugly

features. How much was lost on them—she read about tribes on those few uncolonized islets of the Pacific who felt things, rich and graphic human things, that Annie never would, simply because what they had a name for she did not. On North Sentinel—did they have a word for the lone impudent missionary who approached their shores, a word for killing him, a word for defending themselves against what he signified, what he was? For snow! They had no reason to speak of it. That was a bit like love and marriage, a bit like Hal. When *fuck* was not enough, when it had been repurposed to mean everything from pain to lovemaking to grim news, Hal reverted to his mother's German for its stronger consonants, those guttural tones: Du blöde Kuh! *Fotzge!* He was trying, had been trying for twenty-five years to stop saying *cunt* when he stubbed his toe or broke a dish—trying, he said, for Annie's sake. As though her feeble condition, her condition of being someone's wife—his!—and his condition of being a husband, *bers*, were the only reason for a man to censor himself. Well, it was. The only reason to change anything about oneself: now what was the word for that? Was it romance? It must be. It was romance. *Cunt* was no easy habit to kick, in part because Amelia used to revel in the compressed, potent sound; as a child she used to repeat after him, *CUNT!*, knowing it was bad and not knowing precisely how; it horrified her mother, and that was enough. Some of Hal's most cherished memories with his daughter came after he'd found something broken, after the car didn't start or he found bats in the attic, when she repeated after him: *cunt*.

At the Radcliffe Club, they played doubles on the clay courts, fenced in with the wider network of courts, an expanse of grass beyond, a golf course, the road. In the summertime, kids played in tournaments, rich sons and daughters with coy, vicious smiles. They were temperamental and popular and withholding, so beautiful in motion, when their faces were red and dewy with beads of sweat, erotic and spent, radiant with indignation at the slightest losses. The girls were darling and rich and good at their sport; Annie wondered if they had sex with the boys, or if it was enough to be looked at. When it came time to go around with the basket to collect the balls, some of the girls

hung back, let the boys clean up while they sat in the shade of the changing-room awning, refusing the ungratifying labor, which Annie had reason to admire. The boys looked happy to work. Pretty girls, like children or dogs, are used to sycophants. They are at their best when they don't behave like their lovers. Little girls on the arms of hopeless, panting men.

When she played, driving clean strokes and watching the arcs of her enemies' lobs—the launch of a new serve, the climax of the return, the ease of the rhythmic exchange and the prediction of disaster, the sorrow when the ball clipped the net—she felt herself upon a stage, in the company of a supporting cast; every volley, every fault, every poach was written to be performed exactly as she performed it. The others knew it, too. Children's laughter, old women bathing in the sun, golf carts surveying the premises. It was a rich, packed scene. It evoked the nature of the play itself, the play as sport, momentum, artifice, the possibility of mistake. Considering the beauty of that afternoon and the high school girls under the striped awning, looking down at their phones, it might even be a bit on the nose. One girl tore open a letter from a boy, held it dear to her chest, then got up and threw it in the trash. God! Annie did not know whether to admire that or not. Were she not so prepared for the role, were she not so comfortable inside the pressures of stardom, she might have forgotten how to move. In this scene, of course, movement was speech. It was a dance, Hal poaching the ball at the net was saying his line, saying it wonderfully, unsentimental, performing it with no excess of affectation, not even performing. Better than the novice actors in the shade, who were crowding the scene, foregrounding their own voices, which should have been only the steady commotion of a house party, restaurant noise, the conversations of strangers. Annie fixed her gaze on the chorus, maternal and scolding, to remind them that a storied actress such as herself held centerstage, and it did not bode well for their careers to steal attention.

She was struck. Joan Hornbeck sent a perfect daring stroke down the midline, and Hal receded for his wife to receive it. It struck her in the low torso, and she stumbled back. The teenagers laughed, covering their mouths and folding into each other.

“Sweetheart!” Hal said. “Are you all right?” The question was addressed to his wife, but he was looking across the court at the Hornbecks: “I don’t know where her mind goes. I’m sorry.”

V.

On a wet morning, the first of its kind that May, Amelia walked the paved route between the freshman dorms and the chapel, up the imposing museum steps where the ceremony commenced. It was the procession of the graduating class; if there was music, if there was chatter in the courtyard, or among the graduates walking at their slow, strange pace, she did not notice it. The college president's speech was heavy-handed with metaphors about taking flight and references to hallowed halls (*What halls?* thought Amelia, trying to picture a hallway used for more than a bathroom waiting room; *what halls?* and she tried a breathing technique to make herself cry, as the girl beside her had been doing since before the president's speech began, but the technique called too much attention to herself); a forgotten lower-echelon imagist poet by the name of Lee Rosalsky had graduated from this school, President Howarth said, one hundred years ago to the day. (Of course he did not say lower-echelon, but instead said "one of the greatest poetic minds of our young nation.") Rosalsky's poems were read many times in many voices: the class speaker, who read a hurried sonnet about the trenches of war; the student body president, who opened his speech with a love poem in which Rosalsky compared America to the dawn of a new day; and the celebrity guest, an actress who wrote an incendiary op-ed about sexual abuse in Hollywood and became a recurring guest on *The View*—she likened Rosalsky's polemic against child labor to the conditions of the modern actress. Having never succeeded in making herself cry, Amelia crossed the stage to receive her diploma, wondering (to her horror) if she would ever be able to orgasm again, since lately she seemed incapable of the furthest limits of human feeling. Then it was done: they were graduates of this idyl, this unfeeling Eden that promised to teach them how to think. Was Ted cheering at the call of her name? She imagined the tenor and bellow of a young man's voice. He was.

Fay was off talking to her mother and her mother's new boyfriend, Clarence, who seemed like a promising candidate for a fifth marriage. She was angular and undone, scaffolding after a fire or some loafing god's unfinished layout, a house bought for preservation in the gothic Old South. There was only one place to go then, only one refuge to take. Amelia found her parents, who had already found Ted. They were praising the actress's speech; her father was again quoting Rosalsky. Ted was repeating how nice it was to finally meet them; then in his arms was Amelia, who was decidedly in hell.

Her parents took them out to dinner at a Japanese restaurant, packed and alarmed with graduates and their families. Hal and Annie across a booth from Ted and Amelia, Annie saying how hard it had been to get a reservation, how sorry she was about all this noise, how they all would have preferred something quiet. How wonderful it was, again, to meet Ted, wonderful, yes, what a beautiful couple, what nice weather for a graduation, hadn't the rain stopped just in time?

The residents of Mackay House stuffed their belongings into boxes and drank yellow champagne with their parents until their parents retreated back to their hotels. Watching her father mingle with the other parents, the extraneous people who did not know what he was—God strike her down. She did not speak to him. If he asked her a question, an idiotic little question along the lines of *How does it feel to be all grown-up?*, she gave a curt, deliberate little answer, looking not at her father but at the wall or a plastic fern or her mother as she did.

She and Fay stayed up talking past the small hours of morning, past the time of the first falsetto birdsongs, which got them anxious thinking about sleep, talking about life and its seasons, this part—the breaking dawn—signifying puberty, they thought, though the obvious metaphor was birth.

“I’ll never get all this stuff into Clarence’s Prius,” Fay said. Her eyes were damp and begging. It was with genuine terror that she spoke.

“How long do you give it?”

“Clarence and my mom? A year. Two, if they get married. He’s an artist.”

“Does that improve his odds?”

“I think so. She likes artists.”

“She doesn’t think that marrying artists could have some causal relationship to being three-times divorced?”

“Four times. She doesn’t care. Women like that don’t learn from love.”

“Four times!”

“Anyway, her dad was an artist, and you know what they say.”

“What do they say?”

“Girls really do grow up and marry their fathers.”

“Oh. They do say that.”

“You won’t believe where they met,” Fay said. Birdlike and sulking in the scraps of light from the streetlamp below the bedroom window. “Sex and love addicts anonymous.”

“I believe it.”

“You can’t have a club for sex addicts. It’s hopeless. Only helps them find each other.”

“I didn’t know she was addicted to it.”

“She’s not. She went to find an exciting man.”

“No!”

“That’s what she told me. Left the rest up to my imagination. So I had to wonder what she meant, exactly, by *exciting*, if she came out of the meeting with Clarence who is sixty-five and drives a

Prius. *You can only imagine.* That impersonal way she talks. Makes you participate in the perversion, makes you imagine. So I try to imagine, and now *I* have a moral debt to pay.”

“Come lie down.” Amelia patted the blank open side of her bed. The quilt and the duvet were packed; all that remained was a faintly bloodstained fitted sheet and one caseless pillow. Fay moved onto the bed and spread out beside her friend.

“Take off your socks,” she said. “It’s gross.”

“It’s my bed!” said Amelia, taking off her socks. “What’s wrong with you tonight?”

“I think I’m anemic,” Fay confessed with a long, stilted release of breath.

“What are the symptoms?”

“I’m tired.”

“Everyone’s tired.”

“Are they?”

“Yes,” said Amelia. She liked who she was with Fay, when somebody had to show a little conviction.

“I have some sickness. I feel it.”

“It’s always about the mother,” said Amelia, growing in her conviction, growing ecstatic and cruel.

“I guess. But my mom’s all right. She tries so hard with me.”

“She got a boyfriend at a meeting for sex addicts. Of course you’re messed up.”

“But she wasn’t like that when I was a kid. She was so Catholic. She didn’t let me wear skirts above the knee.”

“Dictating the child’s clothing *is* sexualizing the child.”

“How?”

“You get all dressed for school, right, and as you walk down the stairs for breakfast, there

she is, your mother or any parent at the bottom of the staircase, and she announces that you're a whore because your skirt stops above the knee. Then you have to look at yourself and wonder what it is about your knees, or knees in general, that can make a body whorish, which is sexual. Do you see what I'm saying?"

"We didn't have stairs."

Of course. Of course they didn't have stairs in New Mexico! If the symbolism of the staircase did not resonate, the point was lost. Now Fay was trying to picture some other childhood, one that had nothing in fact to do with her. She was picturing other knees, other mothers, other skirts.

"Where were you when your mom said you couldn't wear skirts above the knee?"

"I don't know, anywhere. In the car or at the movies. Probably sitting, so the skirt rode up. But it was more of an ethic than an actual remark."

"An ethic can be just as sinister. It gets inside, lives in you."

"You're making this bigger than what it is," said Fay, who lacked imagination and could not picture a childhood involving stairs. "It's the stairs that make it sinister. The view from below."

"Forget the stairs! Forget I ever mentioned them."

"Girls shouldn't wear short skirts, probably. Don't roll your eyes! What if it's true? It sounds conservative, but not necessarily. What if we are the cause of our own rape?"

"I was just talking about skirts above the knee. Now you're talking about rape."

"They're the same thing, skirts and rape," said Fay.

"Not remotely!"

"What if they are? It could be that simple. The one in the short skirt gets raped."

“It was never about rape. The knees and the skirts have nothing to do with it. Your mom was probably jealous you had nice legs, and she was getting old and fat, and you still looked good in a skirt.”

“Good enough to rape! That’s what it is to be a parent. You have to protect them, even if you disagree with the reason or the ways of the world. Even if you wish the skirt didn’t mean rape, you have to think like that, because it does.”

The stars are undoubtedly superb, Freud said upon reading Kant’s cosmological proof of the existence of God.

“I’m sure she thought she was protecting you,” Amelia said.

“I *feel* anemic. Don’t I look tired, even for me?”

She looked like herself, anxious and disordered. It was the hunger, Amelia thought; the hunger of this life. Fay was unhappy with the state of things and so she wanted to eat the world. Of course, they all had it. That’s all it was. But instead of saying so, she pretended to be asleep. This was only youth, Amelia reminded herself. They would not be lifelong friends.

VI.

His colleagues were having a conversation about “the good life” and the fact that more people have it in small towns than in cities. Roger Metzler, a short broad man who taught the Divinity School’s most popular course, “Exodus 2 in Three Contexts,” appeared to be conducting the debate. Professor Martha Pitkin, at nearly eighty years old, smiled and said she wondered. Annie was looking past Metzler’s head, out the window at the man clipping her stately hedges like a difficult head of hair.

“Well, small towns have community. There’s a friendliness built in. The kids can ride their bikes, the parents all know each other. You have your quiet roads, your clean air, your good neighbors,” Metzler said. His wife died last year. Cerebral embolism in the night.

“People don’t go to the city for the atmosphere, now do they,” said Martha Pitkin.

“Why do they go then, millions of them?” A pilgrimage toward wealth and free love. Ecstasy. A certain hunger, of course. All these people did (thought Annie) was talk. They wasted their whole lives talking. Talking about the new president, about psychoanalysis, Exodus, the new youth, abortion; they still prodded a centuries-old sonnet for new interpretations. They pondered the sex lives and suicides of dead poets. These people let nothing rest.

“For work, don’t they? If you go for anything else, even ‘culture,’ I think you’d be disappointed,” said Hal.

“Culture’s one thing,” said Martha. “People don’t like to be bored.”

“I’d love to be bored! Imagine it,” Metzler exclaimed. “More time than you know what to do with.”

Did Annie think it was a happier life in a small town? What was the point of such a question, when nobody here lived in one! Did Hal mention, on the occasion of his retirement, buying a plot of

land, a garden or a village, a piece of the suburbs—what constituted small? Did he expect her to join him in a house on some west-facing prairie, an Alaskan fishing village? Better to go alone and have it out with himself, feel the earth, what a man needs. She was torturing herself over the hedges, on the verge, in fact, of bringing them up. Were they getting too short? It was a game of risk and reward. She'd rather be outside trimming them herself! And now that it was on her mind, she could not remember asking someone to tend to her yard. Who was paying him? He wore a fluorescent vest like a convict logging his community service hours. But this boy had trained hands. Must be the neighbors paid him. A man doesn't get rich working for rich men. Should she tell him those were not his hedges to clip? But Martha asked her a question about the painting over the mantel.

“Some local artist,” Annie said, a bit listless to her own ear. “Schafer. *Faith Pleading with Reason.*”

They'd found it in a friend's gallery when they first moved to Hoboken. It depicted three abstract naked figures, cursory brush strokes and rounded edges in place of human features and viscera; these faceless bodies, ostensibly female but without much to show for it, held up their arms like earth goddesses paying tribute to a higher power, presumably the sky, though it was not depicted. The young couple purchased it on a whim; they were helping out a friend in her new and expensive venture, installing a home advertisement to lure in new patrons, and the title made them laugh. But over the years, Annie began to find the work profound. How did the artist, with no structural signifiers or hard lines, convey the bodies' upward gaze, the binds of reverence, the feminacy?

“It's quite something,” Martha remarked.

What a pointless thing to say. Why bother speaking at all.

“Let's top off your drink,” Hal said to his wife. He was reaching, insistent.

“No, I'll do it. Anyone else?”

Poor thing (thought Martha), the gracious host celebrating her husband's retirement despite—despite. What was the matter with her? Martha Pitkin suspected that Annie did not know her husband as well as his colleagues in the Divinity School. It was Martha who recruited Hal for the faculty, and she stood by him through all the trouble that girl made. If she lost some respect for him, or for the institution, for herself, for men or for women—then so be it. That was the world, and sometimes a person had to lose some respect in order to keep something that mattered more. As for the Doe—well. Martha was not interested in speculating.

She was the first to publicly come to Hal's defense when the trouble began. Her male colleagues would too, they said, only if Martha went first. It was not about their conviction, they said. It was optics. Didn't she understand that?

In some show of solidarity or guilt she could not reason with, Martha followed Annie into the kitchen. The chatter from the living room became indistinct. Lobby noise. Everyone asked about everyone's children. Men and wives retired from their various trades, bartering for the best seats in conversation, getting drunk and selling each other stakes of land on the moon. What might happen that night! It was a feeling Annie had not felt in years, though she recognized it: the host, the thrill of anxiety at the sight of a house guest, the assessment of risk and reward that culminated in cleaning up after a party. What might happen to shut them up, their elegiac tirades, if all pain would be tendered and given a name.

“Martha, are you teaching in the fall?”

“Oh, God. I am,” she said with a sadness, earnest or performed, that might have endeared her to Annie if she did not have to wonder what the sadness wanted, whether it demanded to be known.

“Did you enjoy your sabbatical?”

“*Enjoy* it? Well. It was useful, I suppose. I don’t know. I don’t know how to spend these months anymore.”

“Sure. Time changes.”

“That it does.”

“The years go by.”

“They certainly do,” said Martha.

How long was she expected to make conversation with these guests? She never knew what to say to Hal’s associates. Who among them would understand, for example, that she did not envy the professors and the professor-types? That her sole and driving vision for her life was to be beautiful, beauty being, as far as Annie could tell, humankind’s one admirable and worthwhile trick? To be beautiful in the way of the wet-lipped stars on the television shows forbidden from her mother’s living room; in the way of the dogwood that bloomed without company or cause against her bedroom window each spring, so coy and transitory that by June it was as though it had never been. To be beautiful in the way of breasts; to drape small gold crucifixes between them. To loiter where older girls lit up beneath movie marquees, lying about their ages to watch Martin Hewitt’s naked torso seduce a rich girl on the big screen. That fondness for life’s most primal offering, her complete disregard for work and craftsmanship in preference of the world’s essential sex appeal—she could not confess it to old Martha Pitkin, for whom beauty marked a kind of silence, a blankness found in demure churches and in the dull minds of magazine-emulating women who had nothing else to give. Much less to Roger Metzler, helpless and impotent against the new widowed life, losing his lungs to the asbestos-walled Divinity School archives where his wife’s spirit was said to reside. He looked as old and conspiring to harm as lead paint.

She would not demand that the people understand her. She would not make demands on their sympathies, their time, their above-it-all worlds. She had been a wonderful actress. She’d had

her choice of men, and it was for absurd and juvenile reasons she'd chosen this one, the one so worshipped by his peers. But he wasn't worshipped after all; didn't his dearest friends still believe, here at his party inside his own house, that he slept with a student—if not several—not so long ago? And didn't they think less of Annie because of it? They did. She could have slapped Martha. They did; they all did.

Amelia appeared in the kitchen, pretty in a white dress, red in the face and drunk. She flung her arms around her mother and even seemed to kiss the top of her head.

"I'm so sorry we're late," she said, too loudly.

"We?"

"I brought Ted. He's out there charming the old men." She let go of her mother. "I'm Amelia," she said to Martha, whose expression was of recovering shock.

"Amelia, of course. I remember you," she collected herself. "I won't shake your hand. I'm afraid I have a cold."

Amelia retracted her hand. Funny. Annie had seen Martha shake plenty of hands that night. She had even put her usual kiss on Hal's cheek, a lapse Annie forgave as being old-timey or somehow European, which Martha seemed to be, not in birth but in temperament.

"Look at you," Martha sighed, filling a strange distance she sensed between the mother and daughter, or between them and herself. "You look so much like him."

What did Martha see in her that made her say that? Afraid that Amelia might pout or give some brief, nasty reply, Annie cut in to see if either woman would like a glass of water. No one answered. Perhaps she hadn't actually asked, only thought of asking; she was still standing in their midst, quite stationary.

"Thank you," Amelia said. As though she heard it all the time! And Martha went on staring with that curious gleam and the faintest little smile.

“I’ll leave you girls to it,” she said, forgetting her drink. Martha taught “Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Ancient World.” She was a patron of gossip. She knew how to settle in for a good story. She exited the kitchen, and Annie in exile felt once again that everyone and everything was welcome in this home but herself.

“I don’t look like dad, do I?” Amelia examined her reflection on the far window. The yard worker was closing his shift.

“No,” replied Annie. “That woman is a hundred years old.”

“How is he tonight?”

“You didn’t speak to him?”

“They had him surrounded.”

“Good, good. He looked happy?”

“He looked like he was enjoying the attention.”

“You’re very dressed up.”

“Do I look nice?” Amelia pulled at a loose thread in her dress to prepare the garment for praise.

“Yes. I just said you did.”

“No, you said I was dressed up.”

“No, I said you looked nice. And now I’m saying it again.”

“You’re not actually saying it!”

“I’m glad you came,” Annie said to her daughter. “Really. I didn’t know if you would.”

“I said I was going to.”

“I worried something might come up. Things tend to come up with you.”

“I cleared my schedule.”

“How nice.”

“I’m drunk,” Amelia said. “I’m sorry.”

Her mother shrugged and gestured at the bottles on the center table.

“Get those for me.” But when Amelia reached: “Only if you’re steady. Don’t drop anything, please.”

“I’m not that drunk.”

“Because if you’re going to drop them, I’d rather make two trips and carry them myself.”

“I won’t drop them.”

“Just let me do it.”

“No! You asked me, for God’s sake.”

“Fine!”

They went out smiling. Phil Eccles, who wrote a famous book on the commercialization of holidays and taught a popular economics seminar called “Business Ethics: Succeeding Without Selling Your Soul,” was making passionate small talk to the new Dean of Faculty. A woman: the first to hold that title. Annie had seen her face in promotional materials and read enough about her to know that her name was Linda Nguyen and she had been chair of the sociology department before moving up in the world, as they say. Annie was surprised to see her, the highest of the higher-ups they’d invited that evening. Her predecessor would not have made the trip to Hoboken in June for such a menial occasion. Hal was significant in his way, but he’d brought more shame than funding upon the university, hadn’t he? Linda should be glad to see him off. Too glad, in fact, to wish him well in his future endeavors, yet that was exactly what she appeared to be doing, ducking out of Phil’s grasp when she saw an opening with Hal. She called him Harry or Harold—Annie could not make out which, but either made it obvious they were not well acquainted. This might be their first time speaking. Had Linda felt obligated, by her shiny new title, to show her face at an old man’s

retirement party? Oh, Annie hoped not. This thing they'd put on could only be a disappointment, a wasted evening and a missed opportunity to be doing something else. Did she have children? Had she hired a sitter for the night? Had she called a car to take her out of the city? That would be expensive, and for nothing. No one here would appreciate those efforts; no one but Annie would even consider them. Or—had she taken the train? It would be practical, but inelegant for someone like Linda. People threw themselves onto the tracks everyday, and Annie didn't blame them.

Her mother's hand was fixed on her father's back; the touch was stubborn, but light. The caterers had left elegant arrangements of eggy hors d'oeuvres, salt-cured meat canapés and a cheese plate with a tall centerpiece of purple grapes. Despite the refined French connotation, the elaborate morsels presented guests with the indignity of using their hands to eat, plucking up finger foods from a communal platter and shoving them into their mouths in one bite, all while trying to keep up a sophisticated conversation. There was no system for this sort of thing, milling around, syncopating a mouthful with the rhythm of a conversation, sucking it down with a drink in time to answer the next speaking cue. The taste of brine and aged cheese and dill (heavy on the salt to encourage guests to drink more); Amelia thought of big-dick patrons at a darling young artist's exhibition, how they would swallow the square cuts, the crimped edges of puff pastry stuffed with inscrutable jellied meats and garnished with bowfin caviar. It would be evening, and you'd find yourself standing before the open fridge in your apartment at the end of the night, hungry for a proper meal. The fingers, the collective touch, the bulging gullets, the social expense. Most people didn't eat at these things—and to think of all the ducks slaughtered for their livers, their characteristic rotten taste, the wringing of necks, the geese beheaded, only for the foie gras to be taken out with the next morning's trash. A hungry caterer might take a few home, if such a thing was permitted. But he had his dignity to consider, and the surveillance of his boss. It was against the rules, wasn't it, for the hired help to

eat even the scraps of the partygoers? Amelia did not know. She was filling herself with the glut the others could not muster. Something about being in one's childhood home. That and the drunkenness, only getting worse with her mother's wine, put Amelia in an uninhibited, ruinous mood.

She made sure to introduce herself to her father's colleagues as though she had never met them; the act of ignorance was almost sincere, as most had the kinds of names and faces you couldn't be expected to remember. But they knew her, or seemed to: those lighted, probing looks, those smiles, those pleasantries. They had not seen her since she was *this* tall they exclaimed, making some knee- or hip-height gesture. Frank Ingram, her dad's lawyer friend, embraced her in a grand display of familiarity, though she would not have known his name if she hadn't overheard someone else calling it. They all spoke to her with their hands. Expressive, guarding, signaling. Making sure the physicality of a point got across. What showy gestures! Did they think she was stupid, or was that just how they talked? They seemed surprised that she had made it into adulthood. They seemed to be devastated or relieved. Who were these people, and where had they come from? She left one monstrous conversation for another, then for a corner table with a tray of champagne flutes, each filled less than halfway to the brim. She chose two, downing the first in one swig and bringing the second with her, an ornament to hold. She bumped into a beautiful man and spilled her drink down the front of his shirt.

"Careful," Ted said.

Amelia kissed him. She couldn't help it. She'd forgotten he was there.

"Thank God it's you. I thought I was in hell until just now."

"You still could be," he said. Was it a smile? Yes. It had to be.

"When is the train?"

"It's barely eight. Don't worry. I won't let them lock you up."

He began to dab at his shirt with a crumpled napkin he'd apparently already been holding. Probably on his way to dispose of it. The nice shirt: the one he wore for nice occasions. She'd ironed for him this morning while he was at work, and the whole time she reveled in the domesticity, how absurd it was: children playing house. She had not formally agreed to move in with him (he had not formally offered), but she slept in his bed and ate his food in that dreamy moth-infested walk-up on West 74th. She had been doing so for a whole month, and she would keep doing so until she stopped wanting to, or until she had a job. But she did not look for new apartments, and she did not look for new jobs. Sometimes she answered Facebook ads for babysitters on the Upper West Side. The parents wanted her to walk their children to school, five or ten blocks for forty dollars in the morning and another forty in the afternoon.

"I'm not worried," she said.

He eyed her glass with some contempt, but did not reach for it. Smart boy, he would not make a scene.

"Haven't you had enough?" he asked. But the poor man was meek.

"It won't be enough until I forget where I am. Aren't these people awful?"

"If I can say so," Ted said, "you look like you've been having fun."

"That's how I'm supposed to look," said Amelia.

Ted glanced around for observers and, seeing none, kissed her quickly, perhaps in agreement or perhaps to bring the conversation to its rightful end, and went away from her. At that, Amelia swallowed the contents of her glass. When she turned around to get another, she saw the tray empty and Martha Pitkin standing there, holding two drinks. She extended one to Amelia.

"I was told I shouldn't."

"Yes, I heard your fancy man. But I also thought I heard you say it isn't enough until you've forgotten your situation?" said Martha. That prying look. "Well, have you?"

Amelia took the drink.

Martha declared that the house was too warm and too full of people and led Amelia out the back door. The patio was a cool, silent relief. The hum of cicadas, the nearest thing to wildlife, the whirl of cars passing out of sight on their way to Newark airport, or just a ringing in her ears. Her mother's hedges had been overtrimmed. They looked too tidy, sculpted; Hoboken the uncanny valley imitating a quiet life across the river. A rope swing tied to a tree: it was still there, the rope, though the tree shed half its weight in a lightning storm when Amelia was a child. She had no memory of ever using the swing, though it was presumably for her, or for a child who lived here before she did. She had no memory, in fact, of this backyard. Was this their house? She never played here. It was a frightening thought: she'd assumed the wrong identity, arrived at the wrong retirement party at the wrong house, even the wrong suburb, wrong cicadas, wrong hedges. And who was Martha?

"I guess it's been a while since you've been back?"

"A while, yeah," said Amelia.

The patio furniture was damp, though it had not been raining; it was of a fabric that was always wet, soaking up the dew and the atmosphere, the general wetness of domesticated earth. They seemed to know this, both women, without touch: just a sense they had for the textures and climates of things. They leaned on the banister; that was the natural posture to take on a patio outside a party, where one might smoke if smoking had not become unfashionable. Should they smoke? But they couldn't, just like they could not sit down on the patio furniture; there were no laws of nature that did not apply to them.

"It must be strange," said Martha.

"I guess you know all about it?"

"Some, yes. Not from your side, from his."

"I don't have a side. I'm not the girl, you know. I am not the enemy."

“But you made your choice,” Martha countered.

“I don’t remember you. Why do you remember me?”

“I haven’t seen you since you were a child. I made up an idea of you from stories and pictures.”

“What stories?”

“The usual ones. Doing well, traveling, going to such-and-such college. He kept talking about you, as though you never fell out of touch.”

“We didn’t fall out of touch. I stopped speaking to him.”

“But tonight?”

“Tonight I’m doing my mom a favor.”

“You haven’t spoken to him?”

“I never saw an opening. He’s the belle of the ball,” Amelia said, cautious but not defensive, for she had nothing to defend herself against.

Behind them, the living room was staged in full light, people milling around on the other side of the sliding glass doors. The outside could see in, and the lighted people within could not see out. The scene could be put to good use by voyeurs and perverts, which maybe these women were.

“Did you always know he was lying?” Amelia asked.

“I knew he would protect his ego at all costs.”

“Did you believe him?”

“He’s only a man,” said Martha.

Someone broke a glass in the kitchen as Martha, feeling her own weakness and yielding to it, answered.

“He’s your friend,” said Amelia.

Because her tolerance for drinking was low and because the company was quiet, Martha cleared her throat and tried to sound sincere. She was dying, all too slowly, of kidney disease—so be it! (thought Martha, telling no one of the sickness), as long as it did not reach her mind.

“We were very dear friends. I brought him in, put his name in for a job when most people wouldn’t have. I suppose I felt responsible, not for what he did, but for the way I’d championed his ability, his talent. His work had been part of the sensational charismatic stuff that put mine out of fashion. There were all these debates about what belonged in a Divinity School, whether it had the academic merit to exist. Whether theology has its place in the study of religion. I said it did; young men like your father wanted it dissolved. They wanted to teach atheism and secular humanism, not to train unitarian ministers, who, I should say, are not all as idealistic as you might suspect. A university of our caliber—to have only a Divinity School, supposedly to do both, to provide the theory and the practice, when the theory and the practice are so essentially opposed. Oh, we disagreed. But we wanted the same things. An end to blind faith, maybe, an end to moralism. We wanted religion out of our politics, out of our public schools, but we wanted people to read the Bible, which they increasingly did not, and their stubbornness on that issue made the quality of their educations worse. You cannot imagine how much is lost when a person refuses to learn history. He was one of those who believed that idiocy was a human sickness that could be cured by the dissolution of theism. He was wrong about that. He was wrong about so many things,” she said, smiling. “But I wanted him on our faculty anyway. If only to keep our field from going totally obsolete. It took a great deal of convincing for both sides to get over themselves. For the old guard conservatives to consider him, and for him to consider working for them. And look where it’s gotten us.”

“Do you regret it?”

“Never. I don’t have the time to indulge in that thinking.”

“When all that stuff came out about him, he told me his life was a failed experiment,” said Amelia.

“Did he?”

“Before I stopped returning his calls.”

“A failed experiment. It’s clever, but inaccurate. I don’t really know what kind of person your father is—sometimes I think I do, and he proves me wrong. But whatever he is guilty or innocent of, he’s never written a bad book.” Martha laughed. “But perhaps he meant his life, not his life’s work. They might be different, to some.”

“I get so bored of you people,” said Amelia.

“How could you be bored? With a sex scandal, a family you hate, a good education? For heaven’s sake, dear, I can’t imagine being bored in your circumstances,” Martha said, in a steadier, less conspiratorial voice than Amelia’s, but meaning the same thing.

“You enjoy all of this?”

“It certainly passes the time. I came to graduate school to become a unitarian minister. I’d only recently learned women could do that in some denominations. My mother said it was wrong, so I thought I was doing something radical. And do you know what? The other girls at the university disagreed. They couldn’t believe how old-fashioned I was, to waste an education on that.”

“A minister!”

“Well, I wanted someone to tell me what to wear and what to say and what to believe. In the end I couldn’t. I couldn’t come up with a better reason than the one I just stated, to you. No, I dropped out and did clerical work for an anti-war politician. I went back after a few years to finish my degree.” Martha said. It was not the true and complete story of those few years, but it was a piece of it. The girl did not ask for more than that piece. “I had a clearer head by then.”

Frank Ingram, the property lawyer, appeared on the patio. A rush of party noise as he opened the sliding door.

“Oh!” he said. “You’ve beat me to it.”

“Is that Frank?” said Martha. “Close the door, darling. Without the quiet there’s no point.”

Frank Ingram did not close the door. He looked at Martha, cleared his throat, swallowed. Made some little remark about the night sky. His comment put a strain on the company. Martha’s breaths were shallow and resigned. She walked up to Frank, who remained in front of the door—how small the old woman looked there, hunch-backed in the shadow of the lawyer’s stride.

“Well,” she said in that odd, pleasant way, “I won’t stay out here and stargaze any longer. Looks like I’m missing all the fun.” She muttered some unintelligible remark to Frank and, stepping around him, called back to Amelia: “Your fancy man is probably wondering where you’ve disappeared to.” She shut the door behind her, leaving the empty drink with the lipstick smudge on the rim and a different kind of silence.

“She’s right,” said Amelia. “I’ll let you enjoy the quiet.”

“Don’t be silly,” Frank said. “Stay a minute.”

“No, really, I think I’ll go in.”

“Actually, Amelia,” he said. “I was hoping to talk to you. Just a moment of your time. I promise.” That easy, persuasive smile.

“Oh,” she said. “Sure. What is it?”

“Do you smoke?”

“No. Actually, yes.”

“It’s bad for you,” he said, passing her a cigarette. She put it between her lips and inhaled as Frank held a lighter to it.

“So I’ve heard,” she said.

“It’s a beautiful night. Couldn’t have had better weather if you’d ordered it.”

“Frank,” she said, breathing smoke away from him, “What is this about?”

“Do you remember that cat, used to roam around here? You’d put food out on this patio and call out to it.”

“Barney.”

“Barney. You loved that cat. Your dad didn’t have the heart to say no to you, so he took it in.”

“Barney’s dead, Frank. Are you one of those smokers who can’t smoke alone?”

“I’m not smoking, am I?”

“You’re not,” Amelia frowned. “Why not?”

“I quit.”

“Congratulations.”

“So,” he said, clearing his throat again. “I hear you’ve moved to the city.”

“Yes. With Ted.”

“Young in the city. It’s the plot of all the great movies.”

“And the bad ones too,” said Amelia.

“You’re close to your family.”

“How do you mean?”

“In proximity,” Frank said. He was pushing for something. “But in the other sense, too, I hope.”

“Mostly proximity.” She was slurring her words. That or her remark caused Frank to look at her with an indecent smile or other lapse in composure. He didn’t have it in him, did he, to make an advance—but then what was he doing on the patio, priming her with a cigarette. Where was Ted?

The terror and the discomfort and the thrill of the expectation came over her. It was the expectation that something terrible was going to occur, and it was going to occur because Frank wanted it, and what he wanted would be something she was helpless to prevent.

“You understand, don’t you, that family is a sort of sacred bond.”

“Frank, whatever this is, please don’t. You’re my dad’s best friend.”

“That’s right,” he said, and his profile in the dark was unshaven and tragic, “That’s exactly right. Your dad is a good person.” He said it again, convincing no one. The wind stirred in the stormtorn oak, and there was the rope swing again, calling nothing to memory. It would be all she had to look at as he raped her, the rope swing that survived the lightning, mocking the tree for its haggard look, its deformities of age, its weakness. So that was why it was put there. Of course, like anything, it was a sign. A symbol with something to teach her about this life, this conversation with no end. He was going to rape her while she watched the rope resist the wind, and knowing this was not reason enough for Amelia to go back inside, into the party, where Ted and the old men were laughing like hungry ancients watching a hog roast on the spit.

“Amelia, I’m sorry for what I’m going to ask you to do.”

Her dress would look flimsy and whorish in a heap on the patio deck, discarded, frail, twisted, cheap, outspread, the gaping buttons like fisheyes.

“Please, Frank. I don’t want to.”

“So Martha told you.” He sighed. He lit a cigarette.

“Martha? Why would Martha—stop that. You said you quit.”

She was pleading. So was he.

“We can’t always live up to our promises,” said Frank, and a plume of smoke touched Amelia’s cheek. The taste was suddenly disgusting. She grinded hers out on the banister, offscourings

of tobacco paper and ash beside Martha's glass, the print of her mouth still intact on the lip, so it appeared that she had been smoking; a staged crime.

"I don't know what you mean," she said. "I'm going inside."

"Now just—hold on a minute. Martha didn't say anything to you?"

"About what! Let me go."

"Okay, see, I've started out wrong. Let me start over," he said. "You understand that—in the past—your dad's been the subject of some unfortunate and—well—eh, *misguided* accusations?"

"What?"

"And you also know—because you know him—that those accusations were not—to be delicate about it—not necessarily—true reflections of—of his character?"

"What? Frank, I don't understand."

"Amelia, he has decided to sue for defamation."

Nothing flinched, not a bystander on the premises, not a look—

"Oh my God. Oh *God*, Frank, why didn't you start with that? I thought you were going t-to—" She pressed her fingertips beneath her brow bone, her face downcast, swaying. "I mean—*suing!* Suing who?"

"The girl," Frank confessed in so quiet a tone it was as if he thought silence could absolve him, make him dignified; the lawyer was a man for whom silence was a good deed, a commodity he could exchange for prosperity and acclaim. "The woman. He is suing the woman."

She did not open her eyes.

"No."

The lawyer said nothing. Frank's manner of comforting himself in such moments of dispute, the human chaos that signed his checks and for which he was not emotionally equipped, was to subside into an illiterate mood. What in childhood denoted weakness was, in an old man, a show of

staid power, solemn grace. He was reserved; he was contained; it kept the other occupied, fumbling for language, and it kept Frank safe.

“He can’t. No. He can’t do that.”

“It’s done. He’s done it,” Frank said in that small, mute, pathetic way.

“No. No. You need to stop him.”

“He has grounds.”

“Frank, you’re his friend. Don’t let him do this. You can stop this before it gets bad.”

“He has a case. I can’t stop him, not as his lawyer and not as his friend.”

“Are you even a real lawyer? I thought you practiced property law.”

“I am a real lawyer, I’m afraid.”

“Real lawyer! You couldn’t even win yourself custody of your kids. I remember. You think my dad’s your friend, you should’ve heard the way he talked about you losing your kids.”

“I have joint custody! Now simmer down, little girl. I am on your side. I want to help you. Let’s be adults about this.” He faltered. Remember your training (thought Frank); one must maintain his composure amid such troubling insults as these.

“Oh,” she cried, with shallow tears and vicious laughter, “Oh God, I thought you were going to try to—I really thought, just a moment ago, you were making a pass at me—and this is somehow so much worse.” Amelia began to pace but found it worse than stillness, which, though it suffocated her, did not exert the body, probably leaving more life for the faculties of the mind. She stood beside Frank, looking at the rope swing, feeling almost exactly as she had expected to feel in the event of that other cruel transaction; how different the two things were, she no longer knew. “Don’t let him do it. He will lie. They always do. Please. You can stop him.”

“It’s done. Amelia, there is no reasoning with him. You of all people should know that.” Frank pretended to cough. “And as I said, he has grounds.”

She could not look at him, nor he at her, so they stared instead into the overpruned hedges, shapely and bruised, pocked with shadow like the face of the moon. That was too dire a symbol, the moon; another thing Amelia could not bring herself to look at.

“That bastard,” she muttered. “That disgusting, self-sabotaging, egomaniac—idiot. Enjoy taking his money. Maybe you can take your kids to Disneyworld, so they’ll forgive what a corrupt little pawn you are—willing to lie for him. You’re as bad as he is. You’re worse.”

“Please,” he said. “Please, calm down. I have more to say.”

And she did calm down, in stature if not in spirit, because finally someone had given her an instruction for something to do. Calm down, Frank said, and that was something to do. Amelia folded, resting her weight on the banister and tried to stop her breathing, something she’d heard humans could do, halting all bodily functions, even the pulsing heart, in a time of emergency. She locked her jaw against weeping and pleading. There was no malice in her dad’s decision, Frank said, there was only justice.

“We need you to testify.”

She laughed into her palms, or wept or groaned. Frank barrelled ahead, getting it all out in the open. He was afraid of what she might do if he took a pause.

“Now, hang on. We have a date. The woman says the alleged events—now, you won’t need to hear about that, we won’t get into it, so put that out of your mind—she said it happened on the 12th of September, 2012. She remembers that day because she’d gone to a 9/11 memorial the previous day, all right? Amelia, you were in high school in 2012, do you hear me? Now, I went back and had a look at some school calendars. There was a junior varsity tennis match that afternoon against Colchester. It was a home game, so to speak; your school used the Kensinger courts. You were on that team. Now, in September of that year, your freshman year of high school, you were not injured. You were not, by your parents’ recollection, sick or homebound. That was your first high

school match, and you are on the roster. You had a close match against a Colchester girl, last name Kozlowski. Do you remember that match? Now, see—that was the first match of your first season of high school tennis. The Kensinger courts, the site of that match on that afternoon—that’s fourteen blocks south from the Divinity School, a seven-minute cab ride down Riverside, all right? It is reasonable to assume, isn’t it, that your father, having no class to teach that afternoon, no office hours to hold, only a seven-minute ride from the tennis courts—it is reasonable to assume that he would have been at that match, isn’t it?”

“He wasn’t there,” said Amelia in a low, inflectionless voice.

“How can you be certain?”

“I’m not,” she said. “Of course I’m not.”

“So it is possible—even likely—that he watched your match that afternoon.”

“I think he was with that girl. If she says he was with her, he probably was.”

“But he wasn’t, you see, because he was at your match. He remembers getting you a gatorade from the vending machine.”

“A gatorade.”

“I am asking you nicely—”

“Asking me nicely, as opposed to what? Where were these recovered memories back then, when it mattered? When the papers came out? If that’s the alibi, have the vending machine testify. Find the footage. Get a warrant for the security cameras if you’re so confident. Does he remember the *color* of this gatorade? Is he certain he was carrying cash on him that afternoon? He doesn’t remember, and neither does anyone else. Fuck off.”

“Amelia. I am strongly urging you to testify—”

“Fuck off, really, Frank.”

“—on your father’s behalf. For the sake of your family. Think of your mom. Think of the relief, the years of undue shame, rectified. You could fix it. Do you hear me? This is about doing what’s right.”

“I don’t remember,” she repeated. “That was eight years ago. I don’t know. I just don’t know if he was there.”

“You have a fighting spirit, Amelia. When your dad said Schopenhauer was a hero of yours, it came as no surprise.”

“Schopenhauer,” she said, a gleaming fleck of spit falling out with the name, “is *his* hero. This won’t work on me. I won’t lie for him, Frank, so you can stop planting memories in my head. I just don’t know. I’ve never known.”

She went for the door. Frank called after her.

“Your mom is going to testify,” he reasoned. “So is Martha.”

She locked the patio door behind her.

Frank heard her call out to Annie in that crazed way, searching and seizing the house for a culpable face, and felt lucky to be shut outside. After his third cigarette, he would give over to Hal what was left of this pack and tell his friend to hide them, Frank thought. Each man would hide the other’s vice from him; that is a kind of love. Hide the pack, leave the rest for morning.

VII.

She did not have it in her, this time, to bleed for six days—and why should she? What body would hold such blood for letting? She stopped menstruating in June. Bleeding had been innate and permanent for all the meaningful years, and in its absence she was not afraid. She assumed it would come again, weeks or months from now, not like the tides conducted by the erosion of a moon, but something less regular—that was the body. Outlawed, unspectacular and irregular. A young body adhered to no moon-tides, and why should it. Her body there, hatching; it did not lay eggs like the domestic silk moth, but was born with all the ova it would ever have, and it shed them; it shed them, of course, for the body despite its means and making will avoid birth-giving, life-giving at all costs. Now a respite came, strange though not unwelcome. She had peed on the stick in the test kits in gas station bathrooms and grocery stores before; she had been careful. Not now: now, she did not care what occurred to her body, or whether she remembered the pill on this day or that. She'd feel it, if anything changed—she'd have to feel it, or what was a woman good for? If she could not feel a change occur, if she could not feel the insemination, the incubation there somehow (funny, she never felt him when he came; she watched it on his face and felt it in his body, but felt nothing inside hers, hoping against hope to feel something—not something—to feel what he felt); she felt no phantom change, no absence or presence, no sixth sense, what a woman. She stopped menstruating in June, and so be it, a brief menopause at the age of twenty-three was not the worst fate to befall one of history's women. Instead of bleeding, or in blood's place: for six days upon her return to the city, she did not listen to her voicemails or make breakfast or have sex. She lay in bed wasting daylight while Ted went to work. The AC unit lodged in the bedroom window made steady company, percussive gusts of cold air in a hot apartment. Amelia took long showers in the afternoon when she woke and then reclined onto the duvet with her head by the window, by the sputtering

machine. There used to be couches for Victorian women to faint on, and other couches for lying in repose while someone painted you, she assumed. She would have liked that work, but she hated to think of all the sicknesses then, all the syphilis in wet London, the spores, how serious the lives of the dead seemed.

Ted bought her dinner at a dark restaurant where pretty girls and old men dined together in pairs. He tried to talk about work, about the food, about the strange coupling of young women and rich men in their midst, but Amelia was unresponsive. He'd been unhappy with her in the city those six days, coming home to her in that inconsolable state on the bed, claiming she did not want to talk, claiming she did not want to be touched or fed or handed a drink. They sat together in the off hours in the kind of silence Ted thought no man of twenty-three should have to endure.

“Come on,” he said as they got into bed together, “let me make you happy.”

On the seventh day, she got up at the hour of a working woman and went out searching for a job. It was not the proper way to do it, not with a college education and some memory of a purpose, but it was how she felt like going about it. The first Help Wanted sign she encountered was taped to the storefront window of a place called Frances & Lola, which seemed to sell clothing for small children or expensive dolls. The shop was closed, so Amelia waited on a bench across the street until a woman came around the corner with a long stride and a troubling bunch of keys, which she sifted through on the stoop until she found the one that turned the lock. Amelia could see the silhouette of the woman drop her purse by the cash register and turn on a radio, and when the lights came on all at once, she began her practiced approach.

The shop owner, Maxine, was a beautiful vicious woman of indiscernible age with a daughter named Sofie who sat on the floor behind the sales desk or in the sun of the front window with her black cat, Miss Havisham, each behaving as though she were a piece of the window display. Maxine was divorced, she said, on account of one hour in St. Louis. She and her ex-husband Luis were on a

redeye to California for a friend's wedding when he got up to smoke a cigarette in the bathroom. The pilot landed the plane then and there, which happened to be 2 a.m. in St. Louis. The police met them on the tarmac. They let Luis finish his beer. Maxine was so loyal, so embarrassed and stupid (she said), she went with him. She threw her luggage down on the St. Louis tarmac with the wind lashing, the airplanes like war, the halflight of that low, flat city—she threatened to leave him. She said she was not a good woman when he was around. They took him into custody and she got on the next flight to Ontario in time to take a six-hundred dollar cab down the coast. That was it (said Maxine), and Luis hardly fought it.

“Not even for Sofie's sake?” asked Amelia, who was drinking Maxine's champagne.

“Luis isn't Sofie's dad!” Maxine scoffed, though it seemed to Amelia that Sofie had been the story's obvious end. What was the point in telling a stranger the story of an old divorce if not to explain something pressing and current? “No, Luis was before all that. Sofie—that was me on my own.”

But what did that mean? With a stranger or a donor? Any girl could get knocked up in some dark private room in a singles' club if she timed it right. But Maxine seemed older and more thoughtful than that, though each time Amelia looked at that tight, inhibited face, she was less certain of what age or what sort of person Maxine was.

The champagne was for celebrating, she supposed: it was Maxine's way of offering her the job. It would be a pleasant walk home, three blocks and a stop for coffee, a little drunk or proud, with a story to bring back to Ted. An evening stretched out ahead of them, a reasonable expanse of time: hours long enough to enjoy, cut short by the promise of the next workday. That promise alone was enough to make her feel free, free enough to hoard and save, to order drinks for the table, to author a five-year plan, go to graduate school, get off her parents' healthcare plan, leave the city. She had work in the morning. Somewhere to be, and someone to notice if she did not get there. Maxine

and Sofie asleep across the city somewhere—or in a backroom inside the shop or a place of their own on the floor above it—depending on her. Needing her! That was the cure: to wake up and step outside like a person. That was the nature of the jobless person’s disease: waking up is for people, and you’re not sure you are one. Now Maxine and Sofie depended on her getting up the next morning to restock the racks, to stand by the phone, to man the register for customers who might never come. It seemed that the customer (a young mother, probably, with rustic, impractical tastes and city money and city time) mattered less than the illusion of a service, the illusion of a consumer provided for, a need met. All that mattered was that Frances & Lola stood upright, incurring as much profit than it ever had, which might be only a pedestrian’s glance at the display window where Miss Havisham was sunning herself. The point of expensive baby clothes, Amish-style rocking horses and alpaca wool booties, was to make and to sell and to have them. A real child would only get them dirty. The items were in fact too lovely, too darling and precise for a child’s handling, so it was right that they should sit here in the clean vacant shop, collecting cat hair and dust.

In the back of the shop was a broom closet stocked with an excess of headless child-size mannequins. That was an unfortunate sight, but wasn’t it true that any industry had its version of the broom closet? She thought of something her father used to say to her in high school, when she was moody and sick with a deficiency of meaningful personal relationships and her grades began to drop: throw yourself into the work, Amelia; it is the only thing that can sustain you. But he was wrong about that, as he was about everything: what sustained her was not the sense of purpose she got from leaving the house in the mornings but the anticipation of coming home to a beautiful man in the evenings.

“Do you have kids?” Maxine asked.

“No,” said Amelia.

“Do you want them?”

“No.”

“Good,” Maxine said. “Because if you wanted them, you should be having them by now. Don’t have them.”

“Okay,” Amelia said, “I won’t.”

“I like you. I saw you scoping out the store like a madwoman while I was opening up. My psychic predicted something deranged like that. She’s always wrong. But here you are. I thought you’d be older. What did you say your name was?”

“It’s Amelia.”

“Huh. No, that name means nothing to me. I have got to stop seeing her, my psychic, only I can’t stop, because I’ve told her everything and a few times I haven’t paid on time, and now she’s blackmailing me. She had a vision of herself doing that.”

Maxine held a safety pin in her mouth while she took a tape measure to the waistline of a particularly unfortunate cloth mannequin. She put a dress on the small body, gathering the excess fabric and pinning it tight.

“This one,” she said, fitting a tweed newsboy cap to the decapitated child-model’s neck, “is Sofie when she was four years old.”

“How long have you had the store?”

“Sort of forever,” she said, stepping back from the model to look at her work. “It was my dad’s photography studio. He died sometime in the nineties.”

Maxine removed the hat and walked to the storage closet. She emerged with a featureless head that ended where collar bones might sit on a human girl, the kind used to display costume wigs. It hung from her grasp the way a chicken is killed by hand; held until calm, then stretched and snapped at the neck.

“He used to take his mistresses here, or so my mother believed. She had delusions, or so my dad said. They were so in love. It wasn’t always pleasant, showing up with a friend to have our yearbook pictures taken and some woman or gaunt little man was sitting for a naked portrait. Most people will let you take their picture naked, if you just ask.”

She put the tweed cap on the head with no face and placed the bust on a small folding table under a beveled mirror. Beside the table was a cardboard box labeled *BOOKS* in heavyhanded black marker, a deceptive branding for a box containing only an immense tangle of silk scarves.

“You should take naked pictures of yourself,” she continued, “and do it while you’re young. If I had a picture of my body at twenty-whatever I’d have one framed in every room of the house. Don’t do it on a phone, of course. They’ll find it and publish it where it can never be erased. Once it’s in the cloud, they have it.” *They. The cloud.* She said it with conviction, dire and serious, a hushed ominous tone and a lift in the brows, a lowered chin, a safety pin in her teeth, a mother.

“Okay,” Amelia said, matching the woman’s severity to convey that the advice was lodged permanently and urgently in her heart, and it was.

“So,” Maxine said, “I can pay you fifteen dollars an hour, which is what I legally have to pay you, but keep in mind that’s more than the minimum wage practically anywhere else. The cost of living is unforgivable. But other people have it worse, if that’s any comfort. Feed the cat when you get here, and again at five if I’m not in. She won’t starve, because I’m afraid we do have mice. Don’t let her get outside and run for the street. Sofie would be heartbroken. She has no siblings, and she never will.”

“Okay.”

“I’m usually writing in the storage closet. If there’s a customer, come get me.”

“Sure.”

“I’ll stay with you today. I can’t write, it’s hopeless. My mind is too full of ideas.”

“What do you write?”

“Oh, memoir-y things. I wrote my autobiography last year because my psychic said I had six months to live. Wrong again, that useless witch. Now I write the autobiographies of strangers.”

Amelia pictured a tragic love story between herself and Maxine. She saw the two of them fall desperately and violently in love; they were making their separate ways to the courthouse to elope when Amelia began to have second thoughts. Maxine, knowing she could never recover from the sudden loss, drank bleach the day she was left at the proverbial altar. Her final written request was that Amelia become the legal guardian to Sofie, who would otherwise end up in a home for orphans and runaway teens. Amelia would raise Sofie on her own, telling stories of what a noble and glamorous woman her mother was, never letting Maxine’s memory go unremembered, and never living down the guilt of having caused her demise. It was so clear an image, so obvious a life, Amelia was stunned for breath as Maxine brought a second bottle of champagne.

“We won’t open this yet. Let it be for the end of your first day. For now,” she smiled in a roguish way, letting Amelia know her fantasies of their life together were not fantasies but accurate predictions, truer than life itself, “we will just look at it and practice self-control.”

Amelia glanced frequently at the bottle to honor the proposal. Though she was relieved to be fast and brave in love, and though Maxine certainly matched the degree of her feelings, both the relief and the love, they must practice self-control. That was the only thing that separated human beings from animals, and it was better in most contexts to be a human being, which is what they undeniably were.

The day passed without the intrusion of a customer. Maxine told stories about herself and did not ask for anything in return. She was generous enough to let Amelia remain a discreet and perfect stranger. She was kind enough to preserve the secrecy and the seduction; when Amelia began to speak, Maxine interrupted.

“Luis was the first autobiography I ever wrote. He was not my husband—I mean he was, in his autobiography, but in what you call ‘real life’ he was a man who gave up his seat for me on a train. I couldn’t understand why, and then I looked down and saw that I was pregnant—visibly pregnant. It was like I hadn’t noticed it yet. I knew I was theoretically pregnant, but I had no idea I’d gotten big and helpless.”

“The plane story, none of that happened?”

“It all happened in his autobiography. It was the life of his dreams.”

“Do you give people their autobiographies?”

“Certainly not! I wouldn’t know how to begin to find them, and anyway, I think it would unsettle people to read something so true and accurate about themselves. I live in their heads and simply feed on them. I’m like a parasite.”

“Was his name even Luis?” asked Amelia, betrayed.

“How should I know. I think it was, because that is the name I gave him. I’ve never known anyone with that name, and it occurred to me the moment I saw him. The way he gave up his seat, I thought, This is Luis, the estranged husband, he is sorry for what we went through and he is devastated to see that I am pregnant and presumably happier than he could ever make me.”

“You were lying,” was all that Amelia could come up with in reply.

“I thought you understood,” Maxine said in her pained and serious way.

“I do understand,” Amelia assured with the urgency of a hostage pleading his way out of a killing. “I do.”

“Anyway. I never publish them, because I am afraid I’m actually a bad writer. Of course, that’s not a reasonable fear. So many bad writers prosper. Should a person need to provide proof of some high degree of literacy before writing a book? Depends who they are. A good education does not an artist make.”

“Isn’t a person either literate or illiterate? What’s in between?”

“What is in between,” Maxine scoffed, “is only everything. It’s a grasp on morality. It is the ability to comprehend Pushkin, or someone like that. Meter and verse. Interpreting one’s own dreams, using the right words to say exactly what we mean. Sofie, for example, is technically literate, but when she gets upset she can only express it using a color wheel. She turns the pointer-thingy to the color she feels. I have to undo all the school’s teaching or be stuck with a child who cannot tell me in words if she is livid or despondent or lonely or what. She can only point to purple or blue. I should really be homeschooling her, but I am totally uncredentialed and I don’t have the time. It’s so sad to be young. It is the saddest thing I can think of. What was I going to say a moment ago?”

“Which colors are which feelings? Is it obvious? Blue is sad, red is angry? Is it assigned, or do the children give their own meanings to the colors?”

“There’s no order in any of it. She points to green, I think she means jealousy, but she doesn’t work in metaphor. It’s something different everytime, the green. American education is so tragic. I can’t think of anything sadder than the American school system.”

“What is she like? Besides the color issue.”

“I don’t know. I will never know,” Maxine said, “I don’t get to see her out in the world as a person. I was going to ask you...oh, to hell, I forget. Always lock the doors behind you when you close the shop. They’re saying there’s someone in the neighborhood.”

“A thief?”

“Who knows. Just someone in the neighborhood.”

Amelia left work with her own rusty key to Frances & Lola and the bottle of champagne that Maxine begged her to take home when they forgot to open it. (“Celebrate with someone who loves you,” she said, “unless you live alone. Oh, don’t tell me you’re alone, it’s too sad.”) Amelia planned to

go all evening and night without popping the cork, keeping watch over the bottle, protecting it against vultures and fiends, and in the morning she would bring it back to Maxine, who would be awed and infatuated with Amelia's self-control, how quickly she'd honed the practice and made a home inside it. Ted was confused and not sufficiently proud of his girlfriend's accomplishment. He did not believe that her labor was labor, or that her money was money, not in the big way that his work exhausted him and his money piled up. He kissed her forehead and ordered takeout from the Thai place around the corner. He touched the neck of the champagne bottle, lifted it from the coffee table and read the label like someone who knew about nice things and cheap things, someone who could tell the difference. She tore it from his grip and put it on a high shelf in their closet, saying it was to be kept for a special occasion.

“What, are you planning to propose?” Ted said.

“No. No, are you?”

He looked at her as though she were some distant acquaintance in a shop, a movie star he knew from something he couldn't name, a lover in a past life waiting for the bus. He was trying to place her.

“I was joking,” he said. He laughed to demonstrate that he was joking. She laughed to demonstrate that she knew, she was in on it, she understood.

She brought the bottle with her to the shop in the morning. Maxine was away when she opened up, so she left the champagne next to the register, exactly as it had been the day before. She could not figure out the shop radio; no one listened to the radio anymore, not even chic middle-aged people like Maxine. It was tiresome and inconvenient, likely a holdover from her father's photography studio. Amelia tried to picture a studio in the small room that made a frilly showfloor for Frances & Lola: the backcloth of a portrait, the fluorescent softbox and refractory silk screen,

some kind of standing reisekamera like they used to catalogue faces in the past. A flashbulb that resembled the atomizer on a bottle of perfume in the movies. A lady having her portrait taken, spritzing the fragrance behind her ears, checking herself in the shop window. She was sleeping with the photographer. He kept a bare mattress on the floor for this reason.

She went to the storage closet, hoping to find Maxine hunched over her desk writing the autobiographies of strangers, perhaps the autobiography of Amelia. She lingered at the door before leaning on it lightly, turning the knob as little as it allowed, wanting not to disturb the woman at work but to watch her, to watch her for as many seconds as she could without losing her modesty before making her presence known with what she hoped would be a most delicate clearing of the throat, or just a breath, a soft inhale that might cause something to move inexplicably, a jolt of feeling, a material stir.

Instead of Maxine, a girl crouched on the floor, trying to lure a cat away from a cleft in the plaster wall. She was a solemn cat, looking expectantly into the opening without hissing or scratching at it.

“Here kitty,” the girl cooed. “That’s lead paint, Missy.”

“Hello,” Amelia said in the meter of a question.

“Who are you?” the girl replied without startlement or alarm or any meaningful interest in her voice.

“Amelia. I’m friends with your mom.”

“I’ve never met you before,” the girl leered.

“We’ve only been friends since yesterday.”

Sofie got up and grabbed the cat around the belly, strict but tender with it. *Bad*, she said in a mock-scolding way, kissing the animal’s head. She was older than Amelia expected; boyish, figureless still, but tall, maybe ten. Then again, children’s ages were impossible to discern. She looked old

enough to state her emotions in words rather than colors, Amelia thought, watching the girl cradle the mute disinterested cat and feeling a pang of jealousy.

“I’m supposed to feed her,” Amelia said, in order to assert her purpose there. She was a grown-up, after all, with duties and appointments and a reason for being everywhere she was. A child never had a reason to be anywhere.

“Don’t,” said Sofie, covering the creature’s ears. “She’s obese.”

“Because of the mice?”

“Did my mom tell you that? We used to find the little spines, but I think they died of natural causes. She’s too kind to eat a mouse.”

“She’s just an animal.”

“So are you,” said Sofie. “And me, and everyone you know.”

“Maxine didn’t say you were going to be here.”

“I’m waiting for Charlie.”

“Is that your imaginary friend?”

“No. How old do I look to you?”

“I have no idea. I can’t tell kids’ ages.”

“I’m twelve!”

“Maxine talks about you like you’re younger.”

“I thought you only met her yesterday.”

“I did. She talks about you a lot,” Amelia admitted.

“Just stories,” said Sofie, “from when I was a kid.”

She deposited the cat, who had begun to writhe in her arms, onto the rutted wood floor.

Miss Havisham stood on her hind legs and attacked one of the severed mannequins like a scratching post. What quick and human moods those animals sustain.

“She called you illiterate.” Amelia was sorry, right away, for saying that.

“I was an illiterate baby,” Sofie shrugged. “Or so she says. I didn’t babble. She thought I was messed up.”

“Like retarded?”

“You can’t say that!” Sofie gawked in horror.

“Sorry.”

The girl exhaled.

“It’s okay. Not everyone knows you can’t say it. Are you from some backwards place?”

“I’m from New Jersey.”

“Hm,” Sofie blinked. “That might account for it. Just don’t say it again, okay, ‘cause you’ll get in trouble.”

“Okay.”

Sofie squinted.

“Are you a Republican?”

“No.”

“Fine. I’ve never met one.”

“You’ve definitely met one.”

“Have not,” Sofie assured the outsider, mistaking her place in the world for the world itself.

“I promise you have,” Amelia said, though the firmness of the girl’s tone caused her to doubt herself. “They don’t necessarily announce themselves.”

“I’ve seen them on TV. They have R in parentheses after their name.”

“Who is Charlie? You’re waiting for him?”

“My mom’s friend. He’s taking me to meet his friend who can help me get into modeling.”

“Modeling at your age? I bet it’s a brutal industry.” For the girl, steadfast and yearning and young enough for troops of hunters and men to pillage and ruin her at a profit, Amelia felt a rush of tenderness and responsibility.

“Only if you don’t have what it takes,” Sofie said as though repeating something she’d heard, “and Charlie says I have it. Watch my walk.”

Amelia stood in the doorway of the storage closet as Sofie catwalked the showfloor with languid hips and a pouting, disaffected expression that Amelia had never seen on anyone before. She completed the performance and stood in the center of the room awaiting a verdict.

“It’s nice,” she said. “Do they tell you to be so...severe?”

“Severe? I meant to be pretty.”

“I don’t know how it’s supposed to be.”

“Charlie says to think of something sad. I’ve been trying out different sad things, like just now, I was thinking about how Miss Havisham can’t talk, so she wouldn’t be able to tell me if she was depressed. Did it work?”

“Are you supposed to look sad or just feel sad?”

“I don’t know. I’ll ask Charlie. What time is it?”

“Twelve-thirty.”

“He said he’d take me to breakfast. Do you think that means he’s not coming?”

Nothing remained of that unchangeable calm, that practiced artless look.

“People eat breakfast at different times,” Amelia said. Whoever Charlie was, she hoped he would not show up. What kind of a man made a girl picture so bleak a scene as her depressed, mute cat while she showed off her long posture and jutting angles! A bad man, you could be sure of that. A bad man for Sofie, who never had a father and thus (Amelia assumed) was the impressionable type who might readily attach herself to the first man who promised her breakfast and fame. If

things did adhere to psychoanalysis and its predictions—and they probably did—Charlie was a prelude to other, worse men.

“He might call the store,” Sofie said.

“Of course. I’ll let you know.”

Of course he might have. Of course he didn’t. At three-thirty, Sofie was back to cradling the cat in the storage closet. At four, she presented the cat to Amelia at the register.

“She’s hungry,” Sofie said, sniffing. “I shouldn’t have told you not to feed her. Can we feed her double now?”

“Is that okay to do?”

“Yeah. She’s an easy cat, basically unkillable.”

Amelia stood on a chair to get the cat food from the high shelf in the closet.

“She likes the chicken more than the whitefish paté,” Sofie instructed. “She hates tuna. Don’t you, kitty? It makes sense. When would a cat in the natural world be exposed to the ocean?”

“Or for that matter a chicken,” Amelia said.

“A chicken is big, but too stupid and weak to fight a cat. Miss Havisham is a killer by nature, but she’s moral. She doesn’t kill, do you, kitty?”

Amelia supervised as Sofie scraped twice the recommended serving size into Miss Havisham’s bowl.

At four-thirty, Sofie taught Amelia how to use the radio. They listened to Today’s Top Hits, Sofie belting along, for the last half hour of the working day. At exactly five, Amelia asked if they should call Maxine. Sofie shrugged.

“Why, did she say to call?”

“No,” said Amelia, “but it’s five and I’m supposed to close the store. Do you know what I’m supposed to do with you?”

She was supposed to walk her home, Sofie said. It wasn't in the job description, but it sounded like the right thing. Was every day like this? Sofie said every day was different. She strapped Miss Havisham into a harness, the kind of contraption a hiker might use to bring a baby along on the leisurely trails, and led Amelia through twenty-two blocks of scaffolding and dissonant inflections of construction sites framing the occasional row of shops—some almost as empty as Frances & Lola and some drawing crowds that lined up down the sidewalk, stalling foot traffic, making an unhurried scene. Sofie scratched the cat's darting head, covered its ears and hushed the animal when it mewed at the commotion of steel piping and drilling. They stopped at the foot of a brownstone with an enclosed garden of herbs and oversunned tomato plants blooming, coiled around the guardrail of a tiny second-floor balcony. Amelia thought they were stopping to admire the townhouse, the scale of it, how it withdrew from them, how the city receded from the row of identical brownstones, causing the property to stand taller than it was. Or to admire the tomato stems twisted around a high fenced ledge, heavy with rotting fruit—then Sofie released the padlock on the gate, released the cat from her harness and handed the creature to Amelia, who did not know how to handle it. With infants, cradle the head. Miss Havisham was fatter and heavier than any infant Amelia ever held, though she was not sure now whether she'd ever held one, cat or human.

The rounded double-leaf entry doors were of decorative raised panels in black. The brass doorknob was loose and scuffed where residents and guests had handled it roughly like Sofie was doing now, tugging the knob of the stuck door with all her weight until it flung open against the wind. She looked over her shoulder in impatience and beckoned Amelia up the steps and inside.

“You don't have to take off your shoes,” Sofie said, which made Amelia think she probably did.

“I'm not staying,” she asserted, handing over the cat. Sofie unleashed the harness and the cat bounded away from them, off to corridors unseen.

“Come see my room,” Sofie urged.

“Do you really not know where Maxine is?”

“How should I know!”

“Okay,” Amelia said, taking off her shoes, “you can show me your room, but then I have to go.”

“Do you live with your parents?” Sofie ran up the first flight of uneven hardwood stairs as Amelia followed carefully behind.

“No. With my boyfriend.”

“*You* have a boyfriend?”

Sofie motioned Amelia into a little room, white barren walls with one narrow column of exposed brick and a reading seat carved into a bay window facing the street.

“Pretty,” Amelia said.

“Does your boyfriend get mad if you don’t come home?”

“Not mad, no, but he might worry.”

Sofie shrugged.

“Because if he gets mad,” she said in her calculated way, “it could be a sign of abuse.”

“Why do you know everything?”

“They showed a video at school where the guy locked the girl in the bathroom. Does your boyfriend do that?”

“No. Doors usually don’t lock from the outside, you know.”

“Then it was an artistic choice, the door.” She seemed to relent.

Amelia loitered about the ground floor before leaving. There were no photographs, no proof of life anywhere but in the kitchen, where a single dirty spoon rested in the sink and a collage of

Virgo horoscopes cut from newspapers populated the fridge. The most legible instructed the reader to call her power back to her: *Nothing scares you anymore. The new moon marks a new chapter in your awakening. You are reborn as who you were always meant to be: the most embodied version of yourself.* The most embodied version! To think a person could become more embodied than she was before, take a more corporeal form, live inside a more bodily body—but of course. She took that as a sign, the precise meaning of which she would decipher on her route home. Amelia had no sense of what phase the moon was in now or if a new one, moon or body, was scheduled to occur as it had in April of 1999, the date of the newspaper clipping, but she suspected she was as susceptible to its movements as anyone; likely more.

VIII.

It was a chore, though not an altogether unwelcome one, arranging life to suit Maxine's fads. Ted refused to take his girlfriend seriously, to consider her infatuation worthwhile, her income promising or useful, which after all it was not. Gas money, he called it, not enough to relieve the cost of living. He knew he made enough money to keep the lights on, to write a rent check that wouldn't bounce, to sign his name on all kinds of receipts. He knew he did not need her, not in that way. Minimum wage is higher in New York than almost anywhere, Amelia reminded him. So is the price we pay to live here, he said. You are a cog in the machine of capitalism just like me, he said, only a cog that turns slower. Do cogs *turn*? He did not mean to be cruel; he kissed her in the mornings and told her he was proud of her, smiling through the condescension he had neither the obligation nor the skill to conceal. He left with his briefcase and his nice clothes, the boy pretending to be a man, calling out a refrain about retail and the arts (something to the effect of "put that art history degree to use today, Baby"), making himself laugh as he said the next thing, which was invariably that he loved her.

Maxine was never around in the mornings when Amelia opened the shop, but she left traces of herself in the form of hasty, nonsensical notes stuck to the cash register and the storage closet desk as though she'd been there in the night, counting up their profits or sticking pins into mannequin-waists in her sleep. On the fourth day, a woman came into the store on her lunch break, touched the fabrics and remarked on the sweetness of things, and left without buying anything. Sometimes children put their faces up to the glass where Miss Havisham was sleeping or pawing for attention; Sofie grabbed her fiercely and possessively while the children just stared. One of Maxine's notes said *someone in the neighborhood*. Another said in blunt letters: *EARTH TONES*. Some had phone numbers without names or explanations; several contained partial descriptions of people,

qualities and ages. *Betty, 82, never married, happy, lots of makeup, used to be a hairstylist for old movies. Sleeping with the director: abortion, funny in school thought she'd be a nun like the teachers.* It was a noble and presumptuous endeavor, the autobiographies of strangers. There was no market for it, no demand to answer. People did not read anymore, and if they did, they did not read the sort of thing Maxine was writing, a novel by another name. People wanted true stories, autofiction, autobiography by its literal definition. People wanted memoirs, real accounts of fame and terminal illness and priestly rape. Life is dull and sad, and sirens pass to remind people of other lives, sadder and duller than theirs. That is the comfort and the reason.

“Why not write your own autobiography?” Amelia asked, standing in the doorway of the storage closet on a hot weekday afternoon. Maxine was holding a small portable fan up to her face. She did not flinch or turn her gaze from the document on her screen.

“Don’t be so literal.”

“But it’s your life.”

“And it’s a pain enough to live it!” she scoffed.

“Will you write mine?”

“I do not take commissions,” Maxine contended. “I thought of it, of course, that first morning when you were watching me from across the street. You were a young prostitute looking for someone to save you. You were Perseus and the chained Virgin, both. But then you came in here and introduced yourself, and you ruined it.” The writer closed her laptop and sighed in sympathy for the prostitute who never was. “For the best, anyway. Hooker with a heart of gold, it’s been done before.”

“Don’t say *prostitute*, Mom,” Sofie called from the showfloor where she was practicing her supermodel walk. “It’s *sex worker*.”

To her daughter, Maxine called out: “Do not mistake your *bien-pensant* bubble for the world, sweetheart.”

She swiveled in her chair to show Amelia a face of discomposure, of mock anguish. It was a secret they shared, an intimate and precious secret that meant they knew more about the world than its other, lesser inhabitants who took a corporeal form in the little girl striking poses in the next room.

“You hear what they’re doing to these kids in school,” she whispered. “Erasing their vocabularies. *Prostitute* has its place. Punchy word, pros-ti-tute. You hear the abuse and depletion in those syllables, you hear girls being bought and sold.” She reached for a pen, probably to write the idea in shorthand on one of her post-its, to be left and never looked at again. “Some things,” she said, “should not be made to sound nicer than they are.”

She was given three hours’ notice to prepare for Maxine’s party. It was closing time, midsummer. Amelia said yes to the invitation, which was presented informally in the style of an instruction face-to-face. She then asked if she would be attending in the capacity of a babysitter or a guest. A guest, Maxine said, and Amelia said yes a second time to that arrangement.

“Stop moving the furniture around,” Ted complained. Amelia stood on the ottoman in the corner of their bedroom Ted has designated as his “office.” She was holding a dress up to her chest, picturing how it might drape if she had a different kind of body.

“Do you like this one?” she said to her image in the mirror which Ted had hung too high on their bedroom wall, so she had to stand to push his desk away from the window and stand on the ottoman in the corner of the room in order to view her figure in its entirety, which was something a person did not often need to do, but certain occasions did call for it.

“It’s nice.”

“It isn’t too...funereal for July?”

“Why do you care so much?”

“Is it sexy?” she prodded.

“Is it supposed to be? For your boss?”

“You know what I mean.”

He did not know. He did not know one dress from another, what made a garment funereal in July, what in her life got her so worked up when he couldn’t; he did not know how to reach her anymore, or if he should, or if he was a prop or a person in the stories she told friends. If he made her happy. She was hot and damp in the nighttimes, keeping to her side of the bed, shrinking away from him after sex, complaining about the heat and the way their bodies stuck and clung with sweat. She was going through the motions of loving him, crashing like a vagrant or the sun, a tired whore, at his place. She was standing on the ottoman in her underwear, pinching her flesh.

“I know,” Ted said.

Amelia stepped down, withdrew from the mirror and got down on the floor with her sewing machine. Ted sat on the edge of the bed and watched her work. She liked an audience; for all her pretend-modesty, her pretend-resistance against girlishness and tyranny and her mother and her father, their dramatics, the family as the world and the world as a proverbial stage, she flourished when paid attention. She worked dexterously at the machine, laying the fabric flat and taut, replenishing the bobbin. The spool turned. Her gaze was low and level, watching the quick needle puncture the garment. Her expression was tense, the body extending long; her toes curled in those long minutes of concentration until she presented her final product, the same dress taken in a half-inch, a new waist on the factory model. *There*, she said. She looked to see if Ted was still watching, and because he was and because it was not a look of love or tenderness, just a blank scrutinizing look, she left the dress on the floor and crawled to him, knelt in front of the bed with

her head between his legs, depoliticized the act for herself and watched her get him hard. She did love men in that state, the pathetic sounds they made near the end when they started to get desperate; she sucked and swallowed, had him to herself, and recoiled from his reach when he tried to return the gesture. She was late, she said, and he'd already given her what she wanted.

He brought up the act of choking, as though it might make her want—what, more than to just give him a blowjob, a fast way to satisfy him, to quiet him down, suck him off? He was reading or pretending to read on the bed when he mentioned it, as though he might soon be ready to go again. He was greedy, like all men. He was also jealous. He did not want her to leave in a dress before he had a chance to take her over; what did he mean by that—that someone else might? She rinsed her mouth in the bathroom sink, made up her face, got herself into the unseasonal dress and left him on the bed. Easy as that, to love.

But he said the choking appeared in a sexual context, in the book: the lead guy was doing it to his girl, or someone else's. Was he killing her? Ted did not say. She tried to see the book's title, but she could not touch him, she knew, without initiating something further, and in its current posture the spine was bent, the cover illegible. Did he want to try it? Of course: why else would he bring it up. He had not turned a page in that book for several minutes; maybe he hadn't been reading at all, just opened it to a middle page, a stage prop for this conversation, the conversation in which he would introduce the idea of choking her.

Well, he did not get to choke her that night, because she had already washed out her mouth and gotten clean of him. It was not that the premise of sex disgusted her, exactly, but that it was famous for causing a mess. Though he came inside of her, there was the leaking and the excess to consider: her orgasm (which she did not have to worry about, having never achieved one with Ted, or any man) might leave a vague wetness on the bed, but it was innocent; his left semen in a pool where he came, wherever it was; even her insides did not simply suck it all up. It came down to who

was on top. If she were to ride him, which she liked sometimes, when she wanted to see how desperate that face of his became, how needy when he was close—in that scenario, she would pull herself up from him, fumble for a tissue on the nightstand; but that was a man's work. She did not mind cleaning him up—it was only a matter of time, its ruthless passing, what she could and could not afford. She'd already sucked his cock, the quickest and cleanest way. What more could he want, demand of her—a beating, chokehold, playing strangulation? If they were enacting a perversion (Amelia always thought this, when she thought of women with men), and trying on some new power-play, why wouldn't the man play the victim? Why wouldn't he concede, receive, lay down, take it—that was, anyway, the stranger fantasy. For him to choke her, a man around the neck of any woman—no, it was too close to life to be a fantasy. It was in this spirit that Amelia rinsed her mouth and left him in bed, reading his prop-book, her loving, dotting, moody Ted, her sweet boy, the one who knew her.

The interior of the brownstone was dressed for guests. The changes were subtle, no new art on the walls, no oriental rugs unfurled; the spoon from the other day, the one in the sink, stained from years of stirring sugar into coffee, had been cleaned and put away. As she wandered the premises like the invisible help, hoping and not hoping to be recognized by someone, Amelia regretted showing up empty-handed. It had not even occurred to her to bring wine or a bodega bouquet, because she was careless, too focused on presenting herself, her looks and her laugh and her gestures to concern herself with a gift, and because she was not yet accustomed to doing things on her own, unsupervised and unaccompanied. She considered leaving, but then Maxine's arms were pulling her into a hug, her hot breath smelling of gin, calling Amelia beautiful, making her sick and stupid with love. The stray cat of her childhood: when it stopped coming back, presumed dead, Amelia sat by her bedroom window watching for cars, calling for it in the rain. She thought of the

boy in Galway, whatever became of him after they left the hostel bunks and had sex in a car beneath the capitol building, feeling around in the dark for quarters to pay the meter with. In a dream she would have that night, a dream induced by the pot brownies the host was showing her now, Maxine would stroke her hair; Amelia was on top of her on the desk in the storage closet at Frances & Lola, trying to kiss her while Maxine turned her cheek and whispered *No, you are not an artist or an artist-type, you have no opinions of your own, you are not yet a person; get off me, no, no*. It would be so frightening, so lifelike that Amelia would confess it all to Ted, who said it turned him on.

“Come,” Maxine instructed. “Mingle.” She gestured to the room of people milling about, holding drinks, greeting each other like old friends. They were young and old, dressed well and dressed badly, in crisp dry-cleaned shirts and summer shorts, old cowboyish men with white ponytails and women with androgynous gamine cuts, trust fund babies in overalls and girls with pierced belly buttons and all the clashing theatrics whose irony Amelia could not confidently discern. Maxine had left her side; in the hallway, someone was making her laugh.

Taking in Amelia taking in the scene, a man approached.

“You don’t look like you’re having fun,” he said. He was broad, gruff in his suit, balding.

“I’m fine,” she said, not all impolitely.

“Fooled me.” He put forth his hand and gave his name, Charlie something. The place was loud with insulating conversation.

“Amelia,” she said. “So you’re the industry man scouting Sofie.”

“Am I? I thought I was a man about to get you a drink.”

“You stood her up.”

“Well, kids shouldn’t be models. She’s only twelve.”

“Yeah, and she’s in her bedroom practicing her poses in the mirror, waiting to be a big star because of you.”

Charlie only smiled. He introduced Amelia to the friends he'd brought with him, a redhead named Alice and the pretty, younger boy who had his hands all over her, Johnny. They ate the brownies from the baking dish on the stovetop. The girl licked her fingers while the younger boy felt her up.

"How do you know Maxine?" Charlie asked.

"I work at the store."

"Too much work at these work parties," Alice pouted. Johnny blew on her ear and she swatted him.

"This is a work dinner?"

"Ignore her."

"What do you do?" Amelia prodded. Charlie did not have the sinister look or the kind of temper she'd expect from someone in the business of bankrolling a child's modeling career.

"I'm a filmmaker." That made Alice smile.

"Really?" Amelia said.

Johnny was kissing the redhead's neck.

"Ow," Alice play-sulked, "you bit me." She returned the favor, kissing the boy violently for all the kitchen guests to see.

"Forgive them," Charlie said. "They're used to an audience."

"That's okay," she said.

"Come with me. Fire escape."

"Careful," Alice said, addressing Amelia for the first time. "Fire escape is a euphemism."

"Ha-ha. Come," Charlie said. "Alice, make sure Johnny has a good time."

"He can't help it," she raptured.

He led Amelia up the front staircase, not shepherding her, not taking her by the hand or glancing back, but merely walking, having gotten the impression she'd follow, which she did. They passed Sofie's room (in a band of light under the door was the cat's darting shadow; Amelia pictured the girl with her headphones in, tuning out her mother's party, making Miss Havisham jump for the red laser dot suspended high on the wall) and entered Maxine's bedroom. It had to be Maxine's, the wall over the vanity dressed like the fridge with newspaper clippings from the nineties and early aughts, Sofie's school portrait in a brass frame on the nightstand. Feeling her high set in, Amelia put herself down on the bed; the radiator finnicked, cold air lofted from somewhere, blond ebb of street lamps, a blistering crag of water damage in the ceiling, stuff of heaven.

"No," the new man said, "we're not doing that." He pried open the bedside window with a little grunt; Amelia hoped she lived long enough to hear many men heave those petty labor sounds, to see many men sick and stupid in love. Charlie told her to get up; it was an onerous command, but she obeyed it.

He ducked through the window and stepped onto the fire escape. Amelia thought there must be a better way, if the purpose of such a structure really was to escape a fire. Opening a window was not the answer. Now she was picturing Sofie trapped in the townhouse billowing with smoke and exhaust thick as war in the movies, calling for her mother, who evaded the flames, forgot she had a kid to save. Stop picturing it. She followed Charlie from the window, up the fire escape and onto the balcony where the tomato plant slumped, flaccid with the burden of overripe fruit. Charlie poured his beer into the potted soil. Goners anyway, he said.

"Who were those people?" she asked him.

"Look at that. You can see the neighbors fighting in the window."

It did not look to her like they were fighting, but almost dancing, or putting on a play, those silhouettes in the yellow room across the street. A social experiment maybe, a Rorschach test; what

you see is what you are. They were moving, exalting, hoping for voyeuristic passers-by. In the long hot breeze of the balcony garden, Charlie and Amelia watched the couple, brought back to their senses when one turned off the light. Amelia saw them still dancing, fighting or fucking, hiding from the horrible world the way their sorrows show off for each other in the dark.

“Who was the girl?” Amelia pried. She touched his arm, turned over his wrist and fingered the letters where her name, fontless lowercase *alice*, was stamped on the skin.

“This?” Charlie retracted his arm from the balcony’s edge, reading his own tattoo in the dim surplus of houselight. “Different Alice, not the girl downstairs.”

“So who is she?”

“Which?”

“Either. No, the Alice I just met.”

“A colleague.” He touched an unfamiliar balcony plant. Its wiry stem bore small white fruits, round and wet like cocktail cherries. “White baneberry, sometimes called doll’s eyes. Don’t they look like they’d taste sweet?”

“Yes.”

“That’s their trick. Doll’s eyes can kill you.”

“How do you know Maxine?”

“I tried to put her in my movies.” He touched the baneberry stems. “But it wasn’t up to her standards, artistically or morally. The stuff’s not for everyone.”

“I had a friend like you once,” Amelia said.

“Oh yeah?”

“Mhm. He made a movie he also described as ‘not for everyone.’ That was his way of avoiding the question. What are your movies about?”

“Political documentary,” Charlie said.

“No,” she said. “Tell me something that means something.”

“Porn,” he said. “I make feminist porn.” But of course. He crouched to pull weeds from the baneberry pot. “Like I said, political documentary.”

She couldn’t help it; she was laughing at him.

“There’s a market for it,” he insisted.

“I bet there is.”

“What, you object to it?”

“Yes. To all of it, the porn and the feminist thing.”

“Don’t be righteous,” he said. He plucked the fruit of the white baneberry and seemed to clean it on his shirtsleeve.

“What’s feminist about it?”

“Fair wages, no underage girls. The girls don’t fake it.”

“Please. Of course they fake it.”

“They don’t. That’s the point.”

“They’re actors. You can’t tell,” she said.

“I can tell. I’ve watched some hundred real orgasms and probably a hundred thousand fake ones. I can tell.” Amelia smiled and said she wondered. Charlie stayed proud.

“It’s worth more if it’s real. That means something to people.” He held up the berry and pulled back Amelia’s head. She opened her mouth. Surprised, Charlie fed her the doll’s eye. She waited long enough to alarm him, rolling it in her mouth like hard candy before she finally spit it back into his hand.

“You don’t want to kill me here,” she said, as though to promise him she would accept the poison on a separate occasion at a time when they were not strangers on a fire escape with a party conspiring inside. On a more doomed, more romantic occasion, maybe for the sake of art.

But shouldn't the internet put small-time independent pornographers out of business? They crawled back through the window. Again he shepherded her without touch, he did not let her lay her slack body down on Maxine's bed; again he did not let her rest. She could think of no more important and self-asserting thing than Charlie, Charlie at the helm of a porno production by day, Charlie in her arms by night; her arms could be any arms. As long as he was held, it did not need to be Amelia who held him, who placed her thoughts in him—am I just an object to you and do you want to love that object and talk to it and pretend it's a person will you read it a bedtime story and is the object your dreamgirl and would it scare you if the object was alive or would you love that shit you freak, if I were a person—

In the hallway he kissed her, the party reveled below, she was limp and drugged and watching it happen, their bodies pressed together, wanting and spent; they performed for Amelia, beside herself, like the neighbors had in their rushed hour of lamplight. Her arms, her lips, Charlie all over them. The etherizing air of him, the groping under her dress, the intimacy threatening her consciousness and wakefulness, the touch conjuring her anew. It could be Amelia or just some girl. Somebody held him at night, making him good, making him mild.

So she had no self into which she could retreat and know what she was, no sacred tented person under the persona. She had the primitive love impulse, the mother impulse, which was the impulse not just to nurture but to be defied and exploited and left by something in search of better love. She believed product claims, lusted after material things, lusted after money and men and the women who belonged to them. Charlie let go of her and didn't linger.

In the living room, a man with a greasy white ponytail plucked the treble strings of an unlidded baby grand to the offset harping melody of an opening credits song from some important movie—it was a scuffed and neglected instrument, a decorative antique mahogany prop, toned deaf and romantic in the brownstone where Maxine collected and paraded her menagerie of guests.

Charlie's vocation explained maybe half of the people in the townhouse that night; depending on the softness or hardness of what he called feminist porn, it might explain everyone, even Maxine, even the store. To no one in particular, Amelia excused herself to look for a bathroom. The first door she opened was a closet; in the second, Johnny was fucking Alice on the sink. Her dress was hiked up to her waist and her underwear was pulled down around her knees. She looked directly at Amelia, who did not close the bathroom door with the instant reflexes one hopes to retain in such a scenario. She looked for a moment, sleepy and doped, at Alice's panting indulgence, the kind of flushed pleasure that did not lock the door behind it, hoping in its way that a prurient loner might hear its struggle through the wall, might even look it in the face. Something lonely for which to perform: Amelia was no better than watchers and wanters of feminist porn.

She went upstairs in search of an unoccupied place to sit, to look in a mirror and see that her face was intact, to adjust herself, to drink tapwater with her hands and sober herself up. She loved the comedown, longed for it: even in the aftereffects of a college night on MDMA, when her friends got suicidal and paradise fell from them, Amelia took comfort in the return to herself, the return to ordinary unremarkable dread. She found an open bathroom, where she fell asleep on the floor with her cheek on the rim of the tub, the sink still running, its metered tinny drip like wishful coins against the basin, a bedsong. She awoke from the lapse to the cat's clipped, blunt claws pawing her dress. Charlie was on his knees with his head in the cabinet, working on the leaky pipe. Amelia stood up, woozy and dry-mouthed—she stepped over Charlie and heard him lift his head inside the cabinet, a thud, a reverberating *fuck!*

She left the house and walked the late path toward home as the first subdued outposts of sun came up on the city, making the movements of nightwalkers once again human, once again absurd. A handsome couple loitered outside her building, the smoke of a shared pipe pulled from their lips in the plain morning. She found Ted asleep on the gingham couch they'd hauled in off the

street, the couch that made the untenable place resemble a home where people slept and fought and came home to each other.

IX.

The moral standards for public life were, in the new way, high and strict, and the scandals of its shortcomings made for a riveting sex education. The headlines had broken a fresh scandal by the time Ted woke her up on that weekend afternoon. He'd made coffee, had a shower, and moved from couch to bed to lay beside her as he caught up on the news headlines; he then paced the room during what seemed to be an hours long phone call with his mother; when that did not wake her, he checked the pulse of the girl sleeping in his bed, which was faint and steady like she was, artless and working. Knowing she was alive, he told her the story through the gauze of sleep, made it exciting, supplemented it with unforeseen twists, infused the events with the kind of shock value and suspense a person wanted out of her news, when life got tiresome and plain. A senator cheated on his wife, made a home movie of it to blackmail the mistress into secrecy, paid for her abortion and ultimately incriminated himself with the homemade evidence. The worst part, Ted said, was that his wife stood at his side and spoke in his defense with that blank expression, never faltered, and although she could not pretend her husband's alleged acts were merely alleged, a smear campaign or a media fiction, she could pretend that the other woman was mentally ill, out for the senator's money, deranged; that the video was her idea, that it was she who blackmailed him, the crazed little girl with a crush, spinning a false story when she could no longer hold a man's attention. The *real* worst part, Ted raved, was that she supposedly got a boob job: some amateur detective with a cell phone camera went and got the plastic surgeon on tape, bragging about his most famous clients, which included an actress too famous to name and, shall we say, a politician's wife. Now the surgeon was to be sued for violating doctor-patient confidentiality and some kind of precarious NDA. Even worse, he said: the wife joined him on the press tour where he announced his campaign to be

president. Now the senator's wife is hated by all, the conservatives who think her breasts are anti-American and the feminists who demand she leave her husband.

"There is something especially tragic about a girl crying over a new pair of perfectly doctored round tits," he concluded. And Amelia, who by this time was only pretending to sleep, broke out in laughter at that closing remark.

"There you are," he said. "I didn't hear you come in last night." He drew her toward him and, instead of assuming a more commanding position, rested his head on her belly while she touched his hair, letting himself be babied or at least held: in this configuration, they were both comforted. Babied, yes: that society-bred, mother-disciplined, father-pampered boy. She once admitted to him, after months of studied and strained college sex, that she had faked it every time, those performative operatic orgasms she let him think he caused in her. Ted was so distraught, as though he had never heard of any woman doing such a thing, and in the guilt cast by his wilting boyish embarrassment, Amelia tried to take it back, which only caused him greater misery, seeing that her idea of his ego was so oppressive and frail, seeing that he was proving it true. (In the sober dark where he learned of her fake moans, those months of exaggerated pleasure, he asked her to confess her sexual fantasies. Amelia was not coy; she'd grown out of that part of the act. She answered that she'd like, one day, to have sex with a psychopathic murderer, not by force but on purpose, knowing he was a killer and changing his mind, his behaviors toward women, his issues with his mother. She would feed him from a bottle, she said, and stroke his hair. He'd be a better man—returning to a child's preverbal love, inarticulate want. She would save him. But Ted got angry at what he assumed was a joke at his expense; a fantasy is usually a job, he said: a teacher, a nurse. At worst, it's a step-brother or a nun. They did not talk about her fantasies again.) Since then the orgasms became only more elaborate, an exhibitionist's uncanny valley show, an experimental venture in hyperrealism, a practiced art; they were performed with conviction, and though the

performance was done for his sake and his protection, the conviction was almost enough to get her there.

“I got in late, you were on the couch,” she said.

“Mhm,” he said, and she could hear that his eyes were closed, exhausted from reciting the epic poem of the senator’s wife’s boob job. It was his turn to lay sleepy and infantile while she did the work of talking.

“My dad’s coming into the city today,” she said. It was not fair, exactly, to ruin his earned moment’s rest this way, causing him to lift his head, to look at her face to see if she was being serious; and if she wasn’t, what was the joke? Oh God, Ted blinked. Her father was coming into the city.

“Why?”

“To see me.” She tried to coax him down, missing the second when he’d put his weight on her without worry, but he would not be helped.

“Is that—is that gonna be okay?” Of course it wouldn’t be (thought Ted, who now sulked somewhat away from the girl,

Amelia said yes, it would be okay; then she added that she did not know, that it might be a mistake, so that Ted would be forced to soothe her, to answer his own question—*yes, it will be okay*. But he didn’t.

“You *invited* him?”

And now he was sitting up, not making contact, causing her to put on a shirt from the floor next to the bed for comfort, because he was no longer giving it. He took an adversarial stance, not a lover’s, and it dawned on not just Amelia but the whole big entropied city and the skintag that was Hoboken New Jersey that she had made a mistake.

“He’s not coming to the apartment,” she insisted, meaning it was not impossible for her to stand him up; in fact it would be orthodox to do so; it was expected. “I don’t know. I don’t know. We just don’t talk, we never talked about it. I think—if I could just hear it from him once, then I could get out and be done with it for good.”

“He wants you to lie for him, doesn’t he?”

“Exactly: *does* he?”

“What?”

“What if he doesn’t want me to lie?”

“As long as I’ve known you, you’ve had one conviction about this, a conviction that never changed. Don’t doubt yourself just because he decided to cause a scene,” he urged; he was frightened and annoyed; he did not want to see her come undone. He did not want to find out she could have been wrong, devout and sure and unwavering and wrong.

“It’s not about having doubts. I know what I’ve always known, and you know it and he knows it, and I plan to tell him. And what’s wrong with having doubts, if I did have any? I want to hear him tell me the truth one time before he blows up his life again.”

Ted closed his eyes and disputed her reasoning.

“No,” he said. “You think he might have told you the truth already.”

“He never told me anything. My mom, Frank, the papers...fucking Martha, they told me. I got all my news from them.”

“A truthful person would say it to your face.”

“That’s what I’m manufacturing here, isn’t it? A chance for him to speak to me directly, face-to-face like humans.”

“Walk me through this. Say he tells you he didn’t do it, which is what he’s going to say. Does that count as a human interaction, or does it have to hold up to your idea of what’s true?”

Amelia got out of bed and bent down to collect the room's discarded objects, stray socks, mildewy towels, unopened pieces of mail.

"In that case," Ted carried on, insisting on having her attention, "why do you think she made it up?"

"I don't think she made it up."

"No? Why bring him up here if you already know everything?"

"I think—I think she thinks it happened."

"How can she think it happened if it didn't happen?"

Instead of answering, she locked herself in the bathroom and sat in the tub while the shower ran, drowning out the lover's prodding voice, letting the showerhead's bad water pressure graze her face until she no longer heard Ted reasoning and pleading on the other side of the door.

He was a slow walker, irresolute, heavier on his feet than she remembered, and yet he seemed still eager for life, still sick with yearning, still beckoned by pedestrian pleasures: a street vendor peddling god or baseball caps, a pretty woman waiting for the light to change on the other side of a crosswalk. A girl walking her Belgian shepherd along the waterfront in Riverside Park: Hal stopped to pet the dog, which barked at a passing mutt. (She tightened her grip on the animal's leash as Hal crouched before its panting, slobbery snout. "He doesn't bite," she said, and blushed. Amelia looked out across the lapping gray Hudson, a barge sounding over its wind-pocked surface, trembling still against the ocean's tidal pulse. Sensing his daughter's precarious mood, Hal said, "Better not hold up traffic," and wished the girl a good day.) They continued their walk in syncopated steps, past the artists and bird-watchers and beggars, until Amelia grew tired of the company, the man she neither loved nor feared, who was talking about birds, the yellow-rumped

warblers and the grosbeaks and Carolina wrens, the displaced flyover waders and unseasonal thrushes.

“A well-birded city, really, for all its traffic and faults.”

“Uh-huh,” she said.

“And how’s the boy?”

“I’m cheating on him, actually.”

“Oh. Oh, well. Human nature,” he plodded along.

“It’s not nature. It’s not even natural. It was a bad thing to do.”

“It is natural, and it’s also bad.”

“No. No it isn’t,” she said.

“Who’s the man? Or should I say man-woman-or-other?” he mocked, though he did not mean to sound so obviously mocking.

“He’s a movie director.”

“Uh-oh. Bad, bad news,” Hal said, and when his daughter did not laugh or smile, as she had not all afternoon, he tried a more serious tone. “Look, honey, how am I supposed to know how to talk to you.”

“This is fine,” his daughter answered.

He suggested they find a place to get a cold drink and a warm meal; she said that sounded nice, though the sun was high and heavy overhead. She had never had a conversation with her father over a drink; they’d stopped speaking long before it would become appropriate, and even now you could not be too sure. She was prepared for it when it happened: the news broke, she was eighteen in Galway, sticky in the hostel bed in the arms of that boy with the funny accent. At the steps of the 93rd Street exit where the bronze Maid of Orleans mounted her destrier for war, Amelia remembered the first time with him in Ireland, how in the room of stacked beds he found hers as

though by mistake, and she kept her eyes closed as he felt for her and spit in his hand—and how easily, without palaver or restraint she took it, and by the week’s end she said she loved him, the groper in the blind dark.

“Did you know,” her father said on the Joan of Arc steps, “that the base of this statue, which was erected to commemorate her 500th birthday, contains actual granite from the cathedral in Rhiems—and, unbelievably, limestone blocks from the Tower of Rouen where they held and tried her before she was burned?”

(Hm, Amelia said.)

“What’s more,” he said, “the women’s place on 24th, the Jeanne D’Arc Residence, which used to be a home for friendless French girls, is now a working hotel that does not allow men beyond the front desk? Probably the only of its kind. I wonder what the dissolution of gender means for the friendless French girls, huh?”

(Huh, she answered.)

He beckoned a taxi and got in first, making space for his daughter in the backseat. She stood on the curb and thought of leaving, but how does a person leave? She herself had never left a room without succumbing to the indignity of an explanation, an apology, an ill-crafted excuse. She made all kinds of excuses for all kinds of obligations, but no situation had ever been as uncharted and undepartable as this. Her dad gave a vague description of a place he’d eaten once, a dark Italian spot with a green awning around the Bowery, maybe Norfolk and Houston, and the driver drove. He tried to make conversation with the cab driver, a Bengali man who moved through pedestrians with confidence and irreverence and did not talk back to the passenger. His efforts in conversation embarrassed Amelia enough to speak to her father so he would stop trying to make the driver talk.

“Look,” she said, pointing toward the grime of the window on his side of the taxi, “look how fast the city moves.” As though he were her child, the unruly restless kid of her own making.

“Yes,” her father said, “impossibly fast. It’s comforting, how nothing really matters at all.”

“Things still matter.”

“But we all die. It’s comforting.”

“Maybe for someone in your position.”

“What position is that?”

“A creep.”

Hal smiled in his sad small way. Amelia smiled too, or he thought she did.

“An accused creep,” he said.

The restaurant was exactly as he left it in 2001, he said. He’d last eaten here with her mother and Martha when Amelia was just two, could she believe that? She could. It was just before 9/11.

“That’s the real difference between you and me,” Hal said. “I remember 9/11. It’ll always be a story to you.”

“That’s not the only difference,” she said. He paid the cabbie, who sped away as Amelia worried about what sort of amount her father did or did not tip. Was he generous in that way? She did not remember; she suspected he was. Probably too generous, probably patronizing, giving a dollar to the elevator operator in the hotel where he took his women—a dollar for his service, another for his discretion. God, what an embarrassment her father still was, to make her feel so adolescent and petulant and unkind toward the world. She took a breath, another, another another. One after the other, that was how breathing went. The restaurant had its green striped awning and its dark insides, and because they were a party of two and because it was a completely midwestern time to dine, they were seated right away. He’d ordered two Bombay martinis, one with olive brine and one with a lemon twist, before they reached their booth.

“Am I correct that you don’t like olives?” he asked. He had the look of a man about to plumb and prod her psyche from across a nubuck booth, perhaps to place a memory in her. The

white poly-cotton linen draped over their table reminded Amelia of a Chinese restaurant in Hoboken she frequented with her parents in childhood. She used to tear into the fortune cookies, split them in half, and read the fortune aloud for her mom and dad. If it was a good fortune, she ate the cookie; though she did not like the bland beige taste of the treat, her father said the aphorism within would not come true unless she ate it.

“I’m fine with olives now,” she said.

“We can change it,” he appealed. “I’ll hail down that waiter now.”

“No. *No*—stop. Lemon is better anyway.”

“That’s what I thought.”

And it was better: so much better, in fact, that she downed it in one go like a college kid while the server asked about appetizers. Her father ordered the bread basket, house salad and shrimp fra diavolo to share; Amelia asked for another of the same drink.

“Careful, kid.”

“What?” she said. “I’m trying to enjoy your company.”

In his meal, a simple, noncommittal afternoon meal of dissonant antipasti, the Id took a corporeal form. Curled bodies of shrimp simmering in the arterial red of plucked tomatoes and broth; burnt umber crusts of bread. Amelia did not eat, but watched her father punctuate his rambling asides with forkfuls.

“You know, I thought of you the other day,” he said. “I went to the college to pack up a few things left in my office. God, I hate going to that place. Way back, I mean way back when you were just a kid, I went to report an incident I was privy to—an incident between students—to the Title IX office. The desk girl was wearing those really small clothes, short and lowcut clothes—”

“Do you ever hear yourself?”

“What did I say? I went to the gender violence office—does violence have a gender, by the way? Does anything? Anyway, I’m standing there trying to report this incident, but then I get distracted trying to understand what’s so feminist about dressing like that—is it the attention? To desexualize the body by sexualizing it before someone else can, you beat the man to the punch?”

“Are you asking me?”

“No, I asked her!”

“Dad!”

“What? It was purely educational. It used to be feminists were all covered up and sexless, even masculine, the serious ones, and now they’re undressing to short shorts and thongs. I was curious.”

“Why do you know what kind of underwear she was wearing?”

“What? I don’t. That was embellishment for the sake of the story.”

“I don’t want to hear this story,” the daughter said. “Or the preamble, or the old days or the speculation.”

“You know,” Hal said, “under the Babylonian code of Hammurabi, a daughter could be killed for a murder her father committed.”

“Uh-huh,” said the dispassionate girl, the girl affecting disaffection.

“Of course, I didn’t just come right out and ask the girl—why would you come to work for the noble industry of gender violence prevention dressed like that, wearing clothes which—let’s face it—amount to nothing—no, I wouldn’t ask. I don’t have the courage—so I asked her what she would rather be, a de Kooning girl or the idol, Venus, the nude.”

“What’s the difference? An object or another object.”

“Well, it’s—it’s a woman or an abstraction of a woman. She had no idea what I was talking about.”

“What was the incident?”

“What incident?”

“The incident you went to report.”

A worldlier man would make up a better story; he would hide from life behind his art. But Hal was no artist, no deft liar hiding from life. He preferred to be vague, to be brief, to turn and evade when the so-sacred truth was hostile and unoccasional.

“Oh, something a student told me. I wasn’t sure if I should say something to someone, but she was all beat up over it, wasn’t showing up to class. That’s what I was thinking about the other day, when I thought of you.”

A second round of drinks appeared. The waitress was pretty, which made Amelia nervous, but her dad did not seem to flirt or even notice the opportunity—and if he had? He made a toast (*to family—no: to you and me*) and drank against his putrid liver’s better judgement. He was not a conventional alcoholic; not violent, not swept up in spending sprees, angry, reckless, tempting death or fate or treating the two as unrelated ends. He drank to talk easy, to sleep. In pursuit of comfort and closeness. She might even feel sorry for him, if she did not have to worry that he was setting out to make her feel sorry.

“We have fun, don’t we?” He nodded to himself, staring down the barrel of the cocktail glass, which was delicate and absurd and feminine in his grip. “Your mother thought this might take a turn in the direction of a murder-suicide. I said at least we’d be face to face.”

“She just says things,” Amelia slighted, and there it was: the father and the daughter who had no meeting point, no common conversational ground but their insult comedy, to pillory the mother, to hold in contempt her risk-averse old ways, her safekeeping, her worry, and to deny the daughter’s same fate.

“She’s scared of you. How stubborn and serious you get. I tell her that’s the consequence of her parenting, of course. You are exactly how she wanted you to be, or how she thought a daughter should be.”

“I don’t feel like the person she sees in me.”

“Is it an act?”

“Is what an act?”

“The way you are. All walled-up.”

“I have no idea. I can’t feel it, if it’s put-on. I just act how I seem to other people.”

“How do you know you’re real?”

“Because. Because—if I stub my toe, it hurts.”

Her explanation made him smile, the sad smile, the sorry look of an old man’s memory.

“You know how I know I’m real? It’s you. Knowing you’re out there, maneuvering in the world, getting older. Running from your parents, radically leaving the pack, pawning the love you’ve been given—it hurts. Like any true beauty, it hurts.”

It was labor, he meant, to love her. He tried to be bold, to be greedy, to bring her back to him, but sitting across from him in the booth of a dark Italian restaurant in the Bowery was a person, and a person was a hard thing to possess, to convince, to alter. And a person of a man’s own making was the most defiant and intelligent kind.

“No more talk,” she said, gesturing upward to signify the flighty evasive nature of this thing she called *talk*. “Please. Just make your case.”

“My *case*? I’m sorry for how Frank presented it to you. An ambush. Frank is an idiot,” Hal said.

“He’s your most loyal advocate, or nearly. There’s Mom.”

“I don’t care if you testify. All I ask is that you forgive me, if you can.”

“You see—right there, you’ve just admitted there’s something to forgive.”

“Every parent must at some point beg his child for forgiveness. It’s an impossible job to get right. Some say it’s the most widely distributed human beauty.”

“What’s that?”

“The apology.”

“So?” she pushed. “Go on, say you’re sorry, and then specify what you’re sorry for.”

“I was dishonest. I thought I could protect you, shield you. We should have given you a sibling, a brother.”

And she laughed at him: it could not be helped. Such wallowing, such little-boy stubbornness, such misplaced guilt, what a man.

“Is that it? Is that why we don’t talk—because I never had a brother to, what, watch over me, change my mind? A man’s perspective—is that why?”

“I’m just getting started,” he said.

“No,” she said, “get into it. Five years ago a girl told a lie about you, right? That’s your story, so tell it. Why did she lie? It takes a lot of time and effort to make up a story—and a detailed story—of that kind. So why?”

“Well, I think she thinks it happened.”

“How could she think it happened if it didn’t happen?”

“There were times...I might have been out of line. And perhaps she spoke to friends, counselors, you know. And they coerced a better story out of her. A more interesting one, with a villain and a preyed-upon lamb.”

“And why did these other people coerce her?”

“To make sense of it, you know, and to make the world into something clear and definite and unambiguous, which it is not. To look after their friend. To blame someone. To absolve her.”

“Absolve her of what?”

“The guilt she felt. For how she was, for how we were with each other.”

“Which was how?”

“Affectionate, I guess, but not physical. Flirtatious. It wasn’t sexual.”

“How can it be anything else?”

“It can just *be*, and be nothing.”

With his hair gone white and dishevelled, he gave the dull, despondent impression of someone awaiting conviction.

“Were you at my tennis match?” the daughter asked.

“That incident I went to report,” he reprised, “when I saw that girl in the skimpy clothes and I wondered...”

“A de Kooning girl or Venus, I know.”

“It was her. Not the desk girl—the incident. I went to report something this student told me in confidence, because I thought perhaps we’d gotten too close, talked too much. She told me about something with a young man she met at a party—she was graphic, I’ll spare you. But she said his name; she said it over and over. I tried to leave it alone. I knew I should leave it, but you see I cared for her, and I couldn’t let it go. I found the boy in the directory—how many times had she told me his name, like she hoped I’d go looking, see what sort of man would go after her. I found him, prep school kid, he had that face, like he’d do something like that. I actually worried about her, how this Dean’s list girl, good student, ex-megachurch Christian interested in theology, the history—how she could plummet, how she might fray.”

They shared a silence in the booth—or, if not a silence, she shared his expression, something noble and grim, expressions on two similar faces with differing intentions and reasons behind them.

“She asked me to promise I wouldn’t report the thing, wouldn’t tell anyone,” Hal explained. “She feared retribution—that was a sensible fear. I shouldn’t have promised. I should never have assured her of anything. It blurred the lines, a closeness, a comfort. After I filed the report, I didn’t hear from her for a long time. She didn’t come to class, to office hours, just went dark. They did something to her, the boy and his friends. Threatened her, maybe; maybe worse.”

“Were you at my tennis match?”

“No,” her father said. Amelia nodded: she nodded for a long time. She looked just like him, as she saw it now: those dark eyes, the lines that gathered with the pull of a smile or the furrow of concentration. Hollow cheeks; the sadness to which he thought he was entitled and for which he expected to be coddled; the drinking—they were so alike, she could have killed him. She looked at the butter knives and skewers, thought of glass shards falling from a broken window, falling from a five-story drop. But she was like him: she did not have it in her.

“But,” Hal proceeded, “I didn’t—”

“Okay. I know.”

“Okay?”

“I know you didn’t do it. Or—I know you didn’t do that particular thing on that particular day.”

“You still don’t believe me,” he said.

“I want to,” she answered.

“So believe me!”

“Where were you?”

“I was with her,” he confessed. “I tried to reason with her. I tried—we tried—to understand. What happened to her, or if—or how I made it so much worse.”

“You were with her.”

“Yes. I was with her,” he said. “But there were no cameras, no evidence, no proof. You can’t prove what goes on in a closed office, most of the time.”

“The vending machine. You said you bought me a blue gatorade, like it was the backbone of your case.”

“I know. I’m coming clean, I’m trying to tell you what happened.”

“If you didn’t rape her, why do you have to lie?”

“As I said—”

“Did anyone bother to corroborate the existence of a vending machine at the Kensington courts in 2012? I don’t remember flattening out dollar bills at a vending machine after those matches.”

“As I said. There is no evidence. I look bad in this, okay? I look bad.”

“The story broke five years ago, Dad. No one cares how you look. Just give it up, I mean—for Godssake—”

“She lied!” They had begun to call attention to their booth. The first tidings of a dinner rush came in parties of two and four.

“I want to know one thing. Please? Supposing I did believe you. If you did not do anything with that girl on that day—Dad, listen. I want to know if you would have done it, given the opportunity.”

“Hearsay.”

“Your answer won’t affect my decision.”

“You know, sometimes I think it’s men who lack a sense of justice,” he said. “The evolution of the female species, the sex appeal, it made us fight to dominate, to impregnate what we could catch. It is driven by the belief in one’s DNA as an extension of himself, that he is seeding the

human race, becoming immortal. *As arrows are in the hands of a mighty man.* It's just animal stuff. Men—it's men who are invariably weak, neurotic, possessive. Has that been your experience?"

The man in his own words. God, strike her down in this dim booth—there are wastelands where meaning breaks down (thought Amelia), and we must go to them at all costs. God, shore her up away from him, in a Sisters of the Good Shepherd convalescent home for the deranged and hellbound, the female and unloved—

God flatly refused or did not exist.

"We aren't good forever. A watched pot eventually boils," her father said. "Even a watched cell will eventually metastasize. Vigilance can't save us." He shuffled in his seat, squirmed under pressure like a man enacting his perversions in a shoddy no-tell motel, the green olive beading in his drink. "You know, the limits of language have tormented me for a long time. I've tried using sex in place of language. But when you—when you turn away from language, when you let your actions speak for you, then you are not even pretending to be a person."

"Dad."

"I'm telling you. I'm trying to say that—that I can't say in good faith that—if given the opportunity—I wouldn't have done it."

In his palsied hands, his upended drink; in his synapses' slow firing, in his patriarch's tremor of a voice, she heard his career's death knell. And she answered, "Okay." Okay. The mind concedes. She would testify. She would wear a white blouse and swear, listless and sedated, on the Bible, for which she had no reverence and by which she did not feel bound to truthfulness. At each question she would state in all humility that she did not recall. She could not perjure herself this way: it was true that human recollection was imaginative and changeable, and she remembered almost nothing of her life.

Is Harold Macpherson your father?

Yes.

Were you living with him at the time of September 12th, 2012?

Yes.

And you attended the Grace Lismore-Caldinham College Preparatory School at that time, is that correct?

Yes.

Were you, Amelia Macpherson, a member of the Lismore-Caldinham junior varsity tennis team in 2012?

I was.

And did you play in a tennis match against John Colchester High School on September 12th, 2012?

I don't recall.

But is it fair to assume, seeing as you were a member of the team that did in fact have a scheduled match against—

I don't recall.

Did your father attend most of your matches?

I don't recall.

Did he ever watch you play tennis?

Yes.

Is it fair, then, to assume that your father would have attended your scheduled match on September 12th, 2012 against—

I don't recall.

Miss Macpherson, please do not interrupt—

I don't recall, she would say; I don't recall. I don't recall. His accuser would wear a blouse not unlike hers, though Amelia pictured her newly married and visibly pregnant, and keeping a staid composure, recalling with a certain smugness everything Amelia did not.

Justice, anyway, was a human invention, and one whose systems proved flawed. She would flag down a cab, finally, and be done with him.

Instead, in eleven months when the day came for her to perform for a judge what she'd rehearsed with his lawyers, her father the plaintiff did not show up to court.

X.

Ted left her, somewhere in those eleven months. He first left his job to pursue eminence of a higher kind, the kind that could only be achieved in the absence of job security. If he left his job in order to be a genius, he left Amelia in order to be a man.

The bygone income did little to faze her: she made a romance in her head of a boy and girl struggling for money, struggling against time and odds. But, because it was summer's end and because she had to, she asked him.

“What will you do?”

“Well, I might try standup.”

“Are you funny?”

“The guys at work said I'd be good. We went to a bar and the girl performing wasn't even that funny, and she still had the crowd going.”

“What bar?”

“Her whole set was about sex, and I was thinking, I mean—I could do that.”

“Tell me a joke.”

“Don't be a bitch,” he said.

“Make me laugh then, Charlie Chaplin.”

“I'm the joke. Is that what you think?”

“No, baby, I think you're being dreamy. I think the romance of the city's gotten to you.”

“A rat ran over my feet on the subway platform today.”

“See? Romance.”

“I was wearing sandals.”

“Well, men shouldn't wear sandals. I dare say no one should.”

“I’m leaving the conversation now.”

“Why, is it hostile?”

“Yes. I’m walking out.”

“Good. Leave me stranded. That *is* romantic.”

He climbed on her and kissed her face, her ear, her neck. She wrestled him off, though she begged, inside, for more of him.

“Wash your feet! Stop—you’re getting the rat plague in my bed.”

“Our bed.”

She kissed him back.

“I’m going,” he said.

“Go.”

“I’m going.”

“Go then, Lenny Bruce.”

“Please believe in me.”

“I do.”

“Unconditionally?”

“No. There are conditions, of course. There have to be conditions in love.”

“Such as?”

“Get in the shower, come to bed and I’ll tell you.”

She could think of none.

When he left her, she wept—embarrassing as it was, she sobbed like a kid deprived.

Punished. She asked him to stay, though she was not even sure that was what she wanted. She wanted him to euthanize her, to pull the plug and end it, but to please hold her hand; to kiss her face, at least, before it got cold.

She wept on the subway: on the train itself, rather than on the platform where the echoes of her gasps might spook the waiting commuters into a suicide prevention effort. She cried behind a book, as though moved by it, sensitive and intelligent in a way another passenger could only envy. Because she no longer enjoyed the impractical havens of fiction, she cried into the collected letters and diaries of great novelists; she cried into the epistolary writings of Lady Mary Whortley Montagu, loveless, formerly beautiful, deformed by smallpox and discarded in old age; she cried into the diaries of Joan Wyndham. It was a theatrical effort, yes, but it was one she'd seen perfected by young women before. She liked to think those women were dead now, and their lovers mourned.

Or she cried on long walks through the same highway's edge of Riverside Park, thinking not of the summer's day with her father but of other, better walks of yore, when the woman inside of her felt only dull stabs of doubt and shook free of all feeling with that poise of affectlessness she'd mastered. When he left her, poise was lost. She bundled up in his intramural college soccer sweatshirt, walked and even jogged against the lashes of wind in late fall—condusive, of course, to public displays of tragedy, of feminine contretemps, of historic agony. When the tears came on, she bent over and heaved as though to catch her breath and, smelling him on the sweatshirt she slept and sweat in and never laundered, allowed herself to cry in a vertical way, so that gravity pulled the wet release toward the pavement. This position kept her from that frequent wiping of the face that caused it to redden, to expel mucus and guttural coughing fits. She found a spiritual guru on the internet who advised his audience of pathetic, unromanced women to bow, as often as they could, with their heads below their hearts, which caused the bloodflow of despair to move neckward, where it became cerebral, yielding to a logical and therefore masculine procedure of healing. Crying with her hands on her knees and her head below her heart, she was an athlete of impossible resilience, a quiet soldier, a man. The pose also stopped the tearfall from reaching her lips, where it tasted like an oyster shucked and briny with seawater, vaginal, recalling semen and sex.

What caused him to leave her was not the sudden change of career, his new pursuit of genius, a quarter-life crisis so generic it failed to elicit shock or sympathy, or any reaction at all. He left in the morning, in the hallway, in autumn. In the windowless yellow light. He was holding his commuter breakfast, a cold store-bought pastry and a thermos of coffee. Of course, he was not going to work; he had no reason, she thought, to go anywhere, to drink his coffee on the go. He was trying to get out, and she followed him out of the apartment, into the short corridor that gave way to an elevator, the elevator that at last took them apart. He offered to sleep on the couch until she found a new place. But that would be too gallant; Amelia wouldn't allow it. She slept fitfully in the blue glow of the television, playing QVC on mute, until the night—weeks into the arrangement—he brought a new girl home. She had once read a millennial-authored thinkpiece about how people their age, her age, were having less sex than was had by previous generations. The op-ed blamed loneliness, technology, estrangement from one's peers. In her experience and in her proverbial heart, it sounded untrue—but the article offered statistics, and numbers were hard to dispute. It was true, for example, that both of Amelia's parents had had HPV before they met each other, suggesting full, active, risk-happy sex lives—but was Amelia having less sex than her predecessors, simply because she was vaccinated against the disease? A series of HPV shots: she remembered them from puberty, as well as the urgency of getting thirteen-year-old girls on the pill. She remembered saying to boys, to the first boy she got on her knees for, "It's okay, I'm on the Pill." She did not understand its purpose, its furtive mechanisms; she took it because her pediatrician wished to reduce teen pregnancies in her practice. She did not know, exactly, how to give oral sex. Least of all to a ninth-grade boy, whose erect penis was the first she ever saw in the flesh (she had seen the crude illustrations of Vesalius on her father's shelf, and she had, by partial accident, watched at least a millisecond of porn on the internet before clicking away, sickened), and she handled it with care that verged on idiocy. Should it be touched? If it went in her mouth, would she do it wrong—and the

firm young balls, and the shy movements—would he know, had he enough experience to know, that she had never been told to get on her knees by any boy before? After their exchange, less exchange than favor, she sucked cock as often as possible (which was not often, at first, perhaps because most boys were not crude enough to ask, or because she was not crude enough to offer). She wanted to get better, though she hated the act of it: hated it, at least, until they came. A man, when he comes, is reduced to those desperate, pleading noises he makes, those clenched movements, that last push before the pause. No—she thought as Ted brought in a woman from the streets, from a bar, from the world beyond their life together—no, it could not be that the older generations had more sex than hers. And then there was rape: higher incidence of it, not because people grew more lonely and desperate as the generations changed, but because women grew likelier to report it, to identify it, to call it what it was. And what was it? The doubt she held close around this question might not keep her up at night, but in the daytime it did, if nothing else, contribute to her dislike of herself.

That same night, Amelia walked into the bedroom where Ted and the new girl were sleeping in each other's arms after a good fuck, packed a bag and moved back to Hoboken.

The day before Ted ended things, before there seemed the remotest possibility of an end, Amelia worked her usual shift at Frances & Lola. It was a bright day, and atypical. Atypical first because the store got a customer first thing, an old gentleman shopping for a winter hat for his wife. But this was a children's store, Amelia told him. The man squinted at his surroundings and said "nevertheless." His wife, he explained, had an exceptionally small head, made smaller by the baldness of chemotherapy. He purchased a yellow crochet cap with pink baubles and a turnback cuff. Amelia wrapped it in crisp tissue paper, tucked it in a white gift box on a bed of more tissue, and asked if he would like her to tie up the box with a ribbon. Appearing not to hear her, he took the box and left in its place a crumpled ten-dollar bill. Palsied reach and a palsied exit. She worried about the old man for the remainder of the morning until, at almost midday, Maxine burst into the shop with a cause

that would exercise the full capacity of Amelia's worry. Sofie had disappeared, she said—and in fact she screamed, dropping a heavy stack of flyers on the cashier's desk where the man with the cancer-bald wife had defrauded her only minutes or hours ago. Did he have a wife? Was her head indeed so small as to suit a child's wool hat? Was this a man shopping for the warmth and dying comfort of his sick old sweetheart, as she hoped—or was the man deluded, deranged, senile, buying children's hats for a lover who, if she existed in the first place, might already be dead. Would she die before he got the hat to her? Would he bury her in it, or find it too small, shrunken against the bloat of death—

“Do you hear me? Missing! Amelia, honey,” Maxine snapped her fingers in front of the register girl's insensate face, “you are going to put these up while I look for her.”

They were missing posters with the lost girl's name and her mother's phone number in strange upbeat fonts, a bold slab serif, she thought, all-caps, with exclamation marks punctuating its plea. A school photograph of Sofie had been hastily cropped, a little off-center, grainy, monochrome. The result was effective and severe: passing such a flyer tacked to a lamppost or above a pedestrian crossing button, a person might be moved to find the child, seeing the gravity of her situation; by night (Amelia speculated), the windworn posters would look more dire, and after a night's rain, passers-by might presume the girl dead.

“Have you called the police?”

“Useless,” Maxine said. “They want you to wait forty-eight hours—and if you do, they'll ask why you didn't call sooner. Make you a suspect. No: this is work for me and you.”

“Have you talked to Charlie?”

“Charlie?” she repeated, as though working to place the name. “He left in a cab to the airport this morning. He's halfway to Marseille.”

Though an ugly feeling tugged on her at the thought of Charlie leaving Maxine's house in the morning, Amelia accepted the explanation and the task at hand, which was grueling but which, admittedly, gave her purpose on such a regular day as this.

The flyers, per Maxine's instruction, should span as vast a radius as could be papered on foot. There were 200 flyers in that stack, she said, which would not get her south of Mount Sinai or north of the 24th precinct in either direction. When she was close to running out, she should save two flyers (one to photocopy and a second in case the first one got lost to the wind) and find the nearest copy center or kiosk, the library or the lobby of the nearest office building. Was she listening? She should hang a flyer on every storefront, every coffee shop bulletin. At every crosswalk, on every utility post. Yes?

"Yes," Amelia said.

She first walked across the street to CVS to buy a value pack of scotch tape. Then, because she could and because no one was looking, she stuck the first flyer to its front window under a slogan urging patrons to get the flu vaccine. She papered the streets as she was told, made byways through traffic; sometimes fellow walkers stopped at intersections looked up from their phones or from the faces of their lovers, the face of the red-handed stop sign, to ask about the picture on the flyer. It was a compelling one: the girl had braces, a smile, a coaxed straight posture for that blue-screened yearbook photo. And Amelia, competent liar she was, would exaggerate the details in a mothering way, yearning as she was for attention, and hoping (she emphasized to herself) to help and find the girl.

Without earnest beginnings, a panic flourished. The day wore on, cold, stiff, and Amelia tacked Sofie's school portrait to the city's ever upright utility post. What if she were trafficked, carted with care and discretion to Mexico, to wherever, to Charlie's jet to Marseilles. Twelve, wasn't she, though in the picture she looked about eight—perhaps to appeal to the passers-by or perhaps

because her mother had no more recent photograph of Sofie. Since the day she met Sofie—but not the first moment, the first hour, when Amelia envied the little girl’s closeness to Maxine, that paved eccentric life, those dinner parties and bedtime stories and inevitable danger, inevitable love—since later on that day, at least, Amelia had loved Sofie. She pictured herself a better mother to the girl, the hopeless futureless model-girl, this child she intended to save. She knew, in the vaguest terms, what could be done with a girl of Sofie’s age, of Sofie’s vigor, of Sofie’s dreams, of Sofie’s stature. In some impersonal, untraceable way, she knew that such a girl faced a fate worse than death: suppose she were sold, sexed, steroided, skinned, scourged. The image made hatred, made bile rise up inside her. Taping that face to storefront windows and posts, holding it up to the unfeeling—the loveless! the detached—looks of strangers, uttering *have you seen this girl?* Amelia felt a maternal, in fact a near-missionary responsibility to help the helpless child. That word, *missionary*, spreading plagues of gospel, naming after itself a sex position—but was it the position, then, most convenient for rape? It might require wrangling; easier to catch someone from behind. Of course, it was woman beneath man—it was status and subordination, and it was Amelia’s preferred position, for although she only came when she was on top, riding it, she found more pleasure in the idleness of inaction, of bottomness, loweredness, beneath him, where she didn’t need to (and couldn’t if she wanted to) move.

Maxine’s phone sent her straight to voicemail, to the automated lady-voice informing her that the mailbox was full. *Goodbye*, the lady said, but not before saying she was sorry, the disingenuous bitch. It was only natural that the android manning the answering machine should be a woman, or a simulated voice suggestive of a woman. Speaking on the phone was for women: the android lady-voice borrowed her cordial put-on tone from secretaries offering to take a message for the boss, from housewives springing for the kitchen landline, having involuntary fantasies, born of boredom and necessary mental unrest, of wrapping the cord around the new baby’s neck. Did a man

pick up a phone? She struggled to picture it. Perhaps the grating, pitchy baritone of the masculine voice—you tended to go deaf to it after a while.

Not getting through to Maxine, growing scared, needing to get to the girl before nightfall—a person only has so many opportunities to be heroic in this life, to offset the bad in her—Amelia took her last few flyers to the local hospitals, asking the desk women, the inevitable phone-girls, if they had seen the girl picture. Some looked, looked sorrowfully even, and offered to ask around; others glanced and told her to have a seat; others did not look up from their labors. They were tired: old men with heavy paunches were having heart attacks, having embolisms in every bed of the ER. Little kids with ear infections kicked in their chairs. In the waiting room at Lenox Hill, a teenager was bleeding out into a plastic bag after a vehicular accident involving a skateboard, she imagined, or a bike. His name was Chase or Brady, she thought, and his mother used to urge him to wear a helmet when he mounted that bike, until she died of a late-stage melanoma, causing the boy to rebel against the stepfather left to parent him. He was thinking of her now, sucking back tears, breathing with a busted lip, bleeding into a bag, wanting his mom. Had he taken Sofie? Amelia withdrew her sympathies. She left a flyer with the desk girl, who promised, though not without impatience, to be on the lookout until her shift ended in a half hour.

Should she call out Sofie's name? Should she scrounge together a bait of reward money for the child's safe return? She could check Craigslist for any self-promoting private eyes. It was dark when she left Lenox Hill, the last hospital, and hailed her last cab. Had she done all she could? She showed the driver Sofie's picture. *Have you seen this girl?* He inspected it with a delicate hand, sensing her peril, holding the flyer away from his face.

“Not this girl,” he said.

Then what other girl? He took her home, where she called Maxine five more times and went to bed with Ted, who fingered her to put her in the mood, who sounded tired when nothing worked

and she only got angry at how insensitive he could be when a girl had gone missing. Around midnight, Maxine called.

“Amelia, honey, I forgot all about you. She was at her piano teacher’s house—can you believe it—I had my days mixed up, it’s always a Tuesday that feels like a Wednesday, you know—in any case. I was so sick with fear that by the time I managed to track her down, I’d forgotten I’d sent you on that chase. I guess we’ll never lose her with her face plastered all over the city—she might even get scouted that way. That’s a notion: a model scout looks for a missing girl after seeing her pictures. *That’s a book.*”

Hearing fragments of this spiel, Ted groaned and rolled over, his head on her stomach.

“Good,” he said, kissing the soft skin of her belly. “They found her.”

Amelia hung up the phone and left him there. She went to the fridge and took swigs of the cheap yellow wine she loved straight from the bottleneck. It was a twist-top, uncorked, making itself so easy, the spread-legged whore of wines. When she returned to bed, it was with wet sour lips that she kissed him.

“That bitch,” she said into her hand. “I went to every hospital, spent like a hundred-fifty on cabs today. I thought of the most—the worst, most inhuman things that could happen to a child. I *thought* those things.”

“Uh-huh,” Ted said, moving to cradle her, groping her breasts.

“I mean,” and she wrestled from his grip, “she could have called. What’s a call? Selfish, self-important bitch.”

“You’re mad her kid didn’t actually go missing?”

“Baby, get your hands off me. I’m mad she didn’t have the decency, at least—”

Ted slipped his cold fingers into her underwear. Unthinking, remiss, Amelia jerked, elbowing him in the face. She sprung up to look at the consequence of her reflex: in the seconds between the blow and her fumbling beginnings of an apology, his nose began to bleed.

Amelia got a wad of toilet paper from the bathroom and tried to hold it against the blood, directing him to lean back, look up—he swatted her hand away. Riled, awake, shamed and deprived, he left her to stutter (“I didn’t mean to hit you, it was a reflex, come back, baby, I’m sorry, let me—come on, let me see it—you just surprised me, that’s all, I wasn’t feeling like it and you kept—no, it’s not your fault, I’m just trying to explain is all, oh come on, don’t be such a baby about it—”) and fell back on the couch.

The nosebleed, the sexless days and nights, the long hours spent apart—these facts were not cited in the breakup monologue. He burned his hand pouring coffee into his thermos, shouted many profanities, got his composure back, and told her it was over. He didn’t mean that, she said. But he did mean it: he was a strange case of a man, one who almost always meant what he said. Theirs was a strange case of love.

Instead, he cited past fights—he cited her “father” problems, deliberately avoiding *daddy issues*, a crude simplification known to send Amelia into a rage; he cited the rent she did not pay, the life she only half-lived, he said; the idleness, the boredom, the want-it-all politic, the inaction.

In the hallway, things heated to a screaming pitch. (“Your parents pay the rent!” she insisted; “And it’s a burden on them!” he said. “It’s not a burden if it’s inherited wealth!” she told him, “a drop in the fucking bucket! They baby you, their lives would have no meaning if you stopped letting them baby you. And you’ll never stop letting them, because you don’t know how to fend for yourself!” “And you’re so well-adjusted? Who’s going to hold your hand when you cross the street? Who’s gonna read your emails before you send them, practice conversations before you have them?” That was the end: the pent-up war on the person she was, the nonperson, the adult who needed her

emails proofed and revised before she sent them, who could not carry on a conversation unrehearsed. And she screamed: it was not language, but pure inarticulate noise.)

It had to be this way: the woman he left was the worst woman in the world, she thought, receding from the elevator that took him away from her. When he brought the new girl home, Amelia woke up on the couch to the sound of their struggle of lips and limbs—what thin walls these were, all of a sudden. Should she press her ear against the door? She would, if she did not have to worry that Ted expected—hoped—she would take up listening. She already knew: more infant than beast, pridehurt, he took this girl in after Amelia had been on the couch just two weeks, and pressed to her temple, his lips made soft moans or formed the words he used to get himself off with only the sound of his voice and the body beneath him. It was not jealousy that seized her on the other side of that wall: it unburdened her to know that love was replaceable, mercenary, mean. Having had it, she could go west, buy a house where the wind picks up dust. She would see California poppies from car windows, hitch a ride and, noticing a flat expanse of highwayside brush, instruct the driver to pull over, to lay her down on the tall grass. And she got where she was going, she would kiss him, her hair brush his coarse flannel collar, leave and be glad: they would never see each other again. The pangs would be hard and dull (as she imagined them from the couch in Ted's apartment as he made love to a new girl in the other room), no one would gain title to her, and she would leave her lovers early and often.

She decided on westward migration for her next life, the life after she gave testimony in her dad's defamation suit. She packed up in the night and, by the first deadening strokes of morning, was moving back into her parents' house in Hoboken.

XI.

A withdrawal from life, a fetal ending, a homebound adult retreats into her parents' place. She retreats, necessarily, into the talk and behaviors of an adolescent, self-righteous and self-hating, fickle in her moods, ungrateful, easy to anger and quick to complain. It could be a time—if the mind were in any shape to endure time, to seize and use it to its fullest capacity—of artistic ferment. Such a person might write a novel from the wallow of her childhood bed; she might render portraits of the domestic family, or have her own portrait made, she and muses past skimming the landscape of the same painter, the brown river, the hill and gully, the figures tilling the land in sophisticated color. Colors for which, like taste, the English language was at a loss for words. She might find a bar where people drank and danced, meeting a stranger, touching a strange face. Going home with him, she and the face taking the places of people they used to know, people they even deluded themselves into loving. She was no such person: she was prone to staying in bed for as long as the day allowed—and days at her parents' house allowed utter catatonia, total nonadherence to time. She slept as much and consumed as little as she could, for consumption required her to leave the bed to eat and again to relieve herself, the latter being a task—a walk, a departure from bed—too strenuous an exercise to inflict on herself later. On her desk she kept an electric kettle to sustain her with tea and ramen. The slimming effect of this condition was only a symptom, an aside, though not an unwelcome one. Instead of keeping in touch with old friends, she watched the *Scream* franchise twice in its entirety. She read the old tabloids from her nightstand drawer, having shoplifted a decade's worth of magazines from the grocery store rack, most dating back to the mid-aughts when she independently came up with the concept of stealing. In those long middle years of childhood, she felt sorry for those who had never thought of it before: all the grown-ups reaching for their wallets,

failing to consider the obvious choice of leaving, retreating into their parked cars with a free magazine.

The comfort of the old tabloids was the comfort of passing time: necessarily horrific, time paused for no one, so you may as well lay down in it, on the couch, on the floor, as all the ridiculous people outside wage the unwageable war against it. Life is hell, but at least there are magazines on the nightstand. She indulged her new condition, stopped washing her hair, read about the great celebrity divorces of 2007. In a wicker basket in her closet, under an extra set of sheets and a stuffed bear missing his left button-eye, she unearthed further reading materials. Her mother's, perhaps: tabloids she'd pick up at the airport or brought home from the hospital in 1999. This Amelia loved to consider: there was such a day as New Year's Day, 2000, the dawn of what should have been the end of the world. In the winter of 1999, Doomsday-preppers were handing out flyers about the Second Coming; people evangelized in the streets; the tech gods in California warned that their machines, ill-equipped to enter a new millennium, might malfunction beyond repair. They had brought into being creations that even they did not fully understand. The evening news predicted mass power outages, computer glitches that would disable security systems, open bank vaults, cause governments to crumble and chaos to reign. Imagine the collective embarrassment after midnight. Imagine the morning, when those who steeled themselves for the apocalypse woke up in their bunkers, walked outside, and found that the rest of the world had also survived the fated night: they were driving to work; they were waiting at the bus stop; they were sleeping off a hangover.

There is time, and then there are the things we do to mark it. Not fast living, not sex, not work—but those markers, those appointments and deadlines and events that gave structure and rhythm to a life. The last calls at the bar, the seasons: those were things that fell away when she returned to Hoboken, to her bed. Anything—anything to take her away. She began to yearn and suffer, or hoping to suffer some recognizable suffering, some suffering with a name. In their middle

school years, when beautiful and necessarily artistic Sally Edelman's mother died, Amelia was overcome with envy and longing. It was the fate that perfected her immense endowment. Sally had everything a lover or poet needed plus a dead mom. Amelia was dreamless, absentminded at best, and her parents were alive. Yes: anything to signify time and break it.

The bed months were a retreat to the previous state of mind: an embrace of the hard toils of the adolescent soul, the soft bloom of a girl's body housing boredom, housing rage. The old effusive songs, the cowboy-poets, a mere flower of a boy singing *Baby, baby do you love me*. Boys were timid then, embarrassed like the rest of us: they finished too fast and were too ashamed to make it up to you, so they took it out on you later, watched porn and went to college and fucked like animals the ones they couldn't get before.

In late spring when her dad's day in court came around, she put on a dress and, almost giddily, got into the back of her mother's sedan. Her father left with Frank Ingram earlier that morning to practice his remarks.

Hal's absence in the court did not, at first, alarm his wife and daughter. They were both looking at the back of the defendant's head. One assumes there is little to be discerned from behind a seated figure in a courtroom, yet there it was, everything. Her posture showed confidence. Her movements were purposeful, designed: no restless limbs, no nail-picking, not even a hand plucking at a loose thread in the seam of her pants. That was another thing; she was wearing pants. It was at once practical and glamorous, an intentional choice to appear casual. Having nothing to hide, but hiding her legs, of course, from the prying eyes she was up against. How do you dress a woman for court? Her hair was twisted and pinned into a low chignon, modest, but it revealed the nape of the neck, an innocent but not sexless place. Should a woman wear makeup on such an occasion? Amelia thought not. All the dressings and undressings, the doing up and undoing, the drawn-on expressions, the practiced face—it made women frivolous, made them vain, and vanity was out of fashion. If

makeup was heavily set and powdered, she came off as insecure, self-hating, too much time with the bathroom mirror. A bad mother, a mistress, a bad wife—a woman who spent her mornings preparing herself for consumption. She should look composed, but not proud; ready, but not rehearsed. And even this, her honed and deliberate indifference, would not win over public opinion unless she could sell it. She must appear never to have spent time on herself. She should look like she has mothered the world and is grateful; she looks only into the faces of children and men—not too many men, but a few significant ones, and admiringly—and has never seen so much as a photograph of herself. Her good looks must be no fault of her own, the blameless woman in court. She may be beautiful, but only by accident.

Now it was fifteen-past and the judge was tired of Mr. Ingram's excuses. But the plaintiff has met the burden of proof, Frank begged. He and the defense attorney approached the bench, where they talked in hushed, severe voices, each pleading his and her case. Her mother had fled the courtroom to find him, the man of the hour performing the absurd little disappearing act; she walked with those short, determined strides you hated to see approaching you. Her stout heels punctuated her steps, that sharp urgent sound on the marbled floor in the lobby, the granite steps. It was a clamor Amelia once found elegant: the noise of a glamorous woman pacing an empty corridor, out to intimidate, out for blood. Occasionally, Frank would glance back at the court, as though Hal might materialize, having got caught up in traffic, in conversation, in worry. ("Your client has left the building." "But your honor—" "Mr. Ingram, that's enough. The complaint alone doesn't suffice. If you can't wrangle him in the next five minutes, I'll consider him a no-show.") And the judge set a timer on her phone. Funny thing, to see a judge in the old robe with the old gavel, perched on the old pedestal, pulling a cell phone from somewhere in the immense folds of her ministerial gown. The power of a uniform cannot be understated. The judge dismissed the case with prejudice and without the option to refile. The defendant shook her head in disbelief, or was it just the opposite:

she saw the behavior as so fitting, so in line with the man's flimsy nature, utterly believable. That was the first time Amelia saw her face, such an ordinary one, the face any defense attorney hopes to represent. Sympathetic features, sad eyes, a resting frown that was serious but not hostile. It would be an unlikely triumph to catch such a face in a lie. Witnessing the brief gesture, it occurred to Amelia for the first time that this woman, the former Jane Doe, knew Hal Macpherson better than anyone in the courtroom. Better, probably, than anyone in the world.

He did, at first, do what he said he was doing, and what he said he was doing was looking for the men's room. He tired quickly of going over his remarks, the facts of the complaint: stick to the facts, Frank said, as though there were lies to which he might stray. Stick to the facts, well, the facts are not always the facts. They were at a conference table in some conference room of the courthouse, he and Frank, waiting for their excess of time to run out. Go over your remarks; remember to stick to the facts. The judge heard other civil cases—or was it a criminal court? Did killers sometimes roam these halls—of course, killers roamed anywhere, on any street. Hal's father had killed: he struck down a cyclist with his car. It was not raining, it wasn't night; it was a bright and clear morning on a residential street in Bethel. Hal was a child: he played on that street. He played detective, gave orders into a walkie-talkie, found bodies in the woods with his friends. Now there was a real body, a man's, taped off, splayed and bludgeoned. There was blood on the front bumper of his dad's car. No charges were filed, nobody brought down to the station. Hal, not yet twelve, walked outside to witness the commotion at the end of his street, where a woman was crying over a gurney, which made no sense to Hal, for on the gurney was not a man but a man-sized plastic bag. It came out later, according to his mother, the man had been biking to see his mistress. A mistress is one thing, but biking to her? Hal felt sorrier for the mistress than anything else: of course, the

sidelined woman would not be invited to the service, left to grieve only in private, out of respect for the ones the dead man loved by blood and law.

But a father to a boy, to a rowdy and detestable boy, a son in whom the father saw his own face, his own errors: now that was a man you could fear (or, as his dad would have put it, respect). That was a man after whom a boy could model himself. What was Hal, for a daughter? What a shame she had no Pa Macpherson, never met the guy, never heard him whistle an old song about the mountains. What mountains, he did not say. The Smokies and the Rockies, it was all the same. He whipped Hal with a belt when the boy acted out or got improper, talked back to his mom, and the beatings were never mysterious, for Hal always knew when he'd done wrong. In fact, he thought it a great romance, that the son should be smacked by his father for a bad word he'd spewed at his mother. It was the way things went. What troubled him was not the beatings but the belt, the undoing of it. How conspicuous, how perverse, to remove the belt he had on instead of picking another from his closet, picking anything else with a long heavy swing to it. But the belt's removal: it evoked everything at once, the beatings and all the rest a man could do. Better to spank the child with a paddle, evoking nuns. The hand, the open palm had to be the worst for disciplining. But the belt! To unbuckle it, to take the stance, take the time. To make him watch—no, there was no other way, was there. A parent cannot account for his child's sexual fantasies, nor should he.

From the men's room, Hal left the courthouse, at first under the pretense of needing a breath of fresh air. Next came the pretense of walking up a block for a good cup of coffee. Couldn't stand that bureaucratic stuff, breakfast at a trucker motel off the interstate. It was not premeditated, his absence; it was the fault of man and his reason. A necessary fault. Standing at the urinal, alone at last, sweating in his good suit, Hal tried to think of nothing. He knew that on the other side of nothing was peace, clarity of mind; nirvana, if you prefer. Most people never achieved the state of nothing. He certainly hadn't, and it did not occur to him until then, urinating in the courthouse, that

he never would. It would be another non-achievement among many, no better or worse than the rest, if only because there was no method, no measurement for that kind of thing. What should a person achieve? A person should clear his name, to be sure. And at what cost? There are places (in the psyche, these places include the embodiment of the *nothing*), from which a man must not be distracted—by women, by the times. Go there at all costs. His wife and daughter would arrive at the courthouse soon, assuming the wife had it in her to pull the daughter from her bed. To make her bathe and dress...these days he hated Amelia for what she'd made of herself and for all that she hadn't. No peer of his youth, no offspring of his parents could expect to be afforded such a luxury as this: to throw away her one life in what had become an all too sympathetic world. They kept different hours, he and the child. He saw her only in the early morning hours, before dawn, when the faintest stir of birdsong caused him to wake in a panic. (He was dying, he knew, though his housemates had yet to notice.) These days his fingertips were numb and his muscles seemed to atrophy in sleep; he woke and counted to ten, as many rounds as it took for the body to catch up to the fever of the mind, until he could haul himself up with the quiet aching, his sleeping wife unmoved by man's strenuous efforts, and put his feet squarely on the floor. Then he sat, bent over his knees, easing his weight onto the feet with a slow shift of pressure that caused the mattress springs and the floor, at different stages of the endeavor, to squeak. Still his wife slept, and when he made it to the stairs, he could see lamplight under the door of a bedroom belonging to his daughter, who had a habit of closing the blinds and switching off the light only as the sun came up; a parhplgy, he assumed, designed by the impotent mind to keep out the visual cues of regular life. What reason did a girl of twenty-two have to shrink away from this life, the life that went easiest on her kind? They might run into each other in the kitchen at that hour, the hour of his restless waking and her midday slump. These were complementary states: lethargic, oppressive hour, morning to the old and, to the young, the beginning of night. When does a great man, a bright man wake? The

popular lore says he rises early and with a ready mind. Should a genius require rest? Should he adhere to proper ways of being? Hal could not help himself: he was lured back to the waking state by natural causes, like the natural causes of a timely death. The clogged heart performing its labor without passion or purpose, the push of its fatty arteries failing to get blood to the far extremities, the lungs sore and sick with apnea. The sinus headache he'd had for months and had begun to accept as a fact of the body to which he now belonged—how he cried out from within these deformities. What reason did she have to give up? Oh, but he loved her, the kid. In the kitchen where his daughter roamed, drowsy and disturbed in the ex-lover's T-shirt, the father still softened, unspooled that sick heart of his enough to see that this child ached like he did.

Only Hal had earned his aching; Hal had built his own unhappy nest of a life. Who was she to recoil, and from what? He was sixty-eight now, his muscles spasmodic, his gut prominent. He did not sleep the whole night through, and it had been a presidential term since his last meaningful erection. What did she know, what did she know of man's plight?

Well, he was not his father. If his father had been handed the task of raising a woman like Amelia, he would have done it with that hardheaded Protestantism, those early waking hours; she'd learn to work, in some fashion or another—Hal's father might not have been the type to teach a girl to labor at the land, but he might find a place for her beside her mother in that sunny corner of the house with the ironing board and his dad's white shirts. She would learn to sew: by hand first, tending the knotted spool, and later to bow over the machine, maneuver its pedals, make the time move. It was not, Hal knew, an *equal* way of being, as far as wives and daughters were concerned. It wasn't as though he thought it *right*, but wouldn't it give the girl purpose, impose a structure upon the long day? He never heard his mother complain of it, though it could not have been comfortable, sitting all day, bent over a fraying hem and a pin cushion, myopic with her glasses and utterly blind without. She did not carp and whine like today's women, the bleating sheep. A female sheep is a ewe,

isn't it—hard to imagine any sheep as a male. Was the male sheep horned? Did it have a name? It was not his sector of academia—and sheep in the Bible were just called sheep, sometimes flocks with their shepherds the prophets—or was he losing his mind? Yes, that would be the next to go, the natural order of things. Would his father, with Amelia as a daughter, have beaten her the same? No: not in the name of equality, even, which girls pretended to want, would he beat her. It would be profane, of course, the undoing of the belt. One thing to a son, quite another to a daughter—but of course, Hal had no sisters, his father was long dead, and there was no one to ask. Good thing the man was dead before he met the world as it was. His complaints were loud and unsparing, his catalogue of needs and demands long. A ram—of course, a ram was the male sheep; it was there in Hal's mind, the good mind whose fervor consoled him and caused him to prosper, syntactic, kinetic, the old mind whose synapses fired, the mind that worked reliably and now began, like the mere organ it was, to fail him.

Well, he was not his father. He was meek. He would not threaten the kid who ruined his daughter with heartache, laid a hand on her and broke her in, causing her to buckle, to sob; he could not even conjure a hatred for the boy. First heartbreak was a wonderful opportunity to learn about the world; why couldn't his daughter take it? If he was being honest with himself (and he liked to think he usually was), Hal understood the guy. He looked at this daughter and saw plenty of reasons good enough to make a young man leave her. She was contagious with self-serving grief, inflicting this heroic depression on any object, any sentient thing that might listen. She could be lazy; she could be delicate; she did not meet the needs of ordinary life. The tasks of a simple day overwhelmed her, his child—but was she pitied? Was she spoiled? Not exactly: it seemed in her nature to cry and wail, the way she came out fighting from her mother's body, premature, demanding of such constant care. He even envied her, in that infancy: all the attention, no love left for anyone.

Well, she did a bad job making herself into a desirable object of anyone's care. Most people were not easy to love. Strangers were easiest. Hal walked up the block from the courthouse, then another, into an alley to a parallel street, until he no longer recognized where he was. Strangers were easiest to love: no opinions, no arguments. The first time you saw a face, that was the purest thing. Before time and proximity perverted it into its uglier expressions, you saw in the face what a mother might see: a state-of-the-art original, the factory model, so clean and impersonal, onto which you could project your own self, your own needs. Lovers were harder to love; they made caring for them a ritual one had to sustain over many months and years, and if one failed to sustain his care, he was a bad lover, a bad man. Then family, and family was impossible to love. You could not live with or without them, but that didn't mean you had to live with them.

Over those high-rises, those buildingtops grouped like forests, he watched the contrails of airplanes go by. He found himself out of breath and in need of a bench. (He'd discovered lately that he was now the sort of person whose appearance might cause a young man on the subway to give up his seat, proudly, usually with a girl to impress. Oh, he minded, but how could he mind? He got to sit, rest his legs, take the boy up on the offer and help him get laid; to rest, yes, let them see him for what he was, if only he could rest.) He found a bench in an urban park, a playground with a basketball court where teenagers yelled profanities and jumped, easy on the quick young feet, big for their bodies—at that age boys were always outgrowing their shoes. He watched, discreet as the pigeons in their squalor, pecking at the gravel, at the sandwich bags and the lunchboxes, seeking crumbs, those clubfooted things spreading disease, dropping infectious plumes, what strong little bodies they had, what resilient lungs, what tiny thumping hearts—to endure the grime of a city, to consume its debris. No one appeared to drop bread for them as they did for natant mallards, but the scraps were there; they were not picky, these pigeons, so they did not go hungry. There was always bread, somewhere in the grit, the gum wrappers, snuffed cigarette butts, loose cement—to city

pigeons, what was the gravel floor but the cultch of an oyster bed, a place to roam and rest. All this life beats within, and one would not know the difference if you snapped its neck. It might thrash, but it would not fight mightily against death, not like you might think. Once you had it, it was done, and it seemed, in its desultory flailing and flapping, to concede. It would yield to death (so Hal speculated, having never wrung more than an imagined neck), and so should anything else.

They were alike—so often alike, the father and child, but chiefly in this respect. She would not stay to make her peace, or sit with him in his persuasions, hear him out, remove all mystery from the event. The daughter was an art too proud for artifice: she would take his exit to mean an admission of guilt and accept the guilt as a fact of criminal and universal law. She would have nothing more to do with him—they are righteous, girls at that age—she would say there is order in this world, or there could be—perhaps there was a sound, a sound yet to be made or heard, that traveled faster than light, and perhaps they did have immortal souls; it didn't matter. Without proof of the exception, a person lives by the rule: if you happen to be looking in the right place, you will see the flash before you hear the gunfire. The others, reacting to the sound, comprise man's essential mediocrity, running late. Her dad left the courthouse because he did not deserve to clear his name. These were the interpretations that gave meaning to their little lives; these were not dispensable laws. When the headlights on Frank's car flooded kitchen window and a man pulled his shadow through the door—when Annie longed for a quiet place to scream how she hated him, a release, a place that swallowed human noise, a place like that city where he took refuge—when she called him an idiot, a blind self-serving coward, a jester and a pig of a man—when she said “Haven't I been good to you? When have I complained? When have I told anyone how you hurt me?” and he yelled “I never touched you!” in protest but not with passion, because he was not terribly sure of his answer, whether it was true, whether it mattered, whether it answered her question—when she swore to

God—when she did not forgive him—when their child packed up her things—hating him, Annie remained as firm as she ever was on the issue of his innocence. Like loving him, hating Hal was delirium-inducing, an exercise in joy and purpose; forgiving him was not. To get on with him, to keep things moving almost as they had, marked her last great failure to enact an obvious response to human experience. Changing nothing, the world repeats. The wife is the steep incline and the boulder. Annie was the sun and the tired whore, rising, saddled and sinking again. The absurd pattern remakes itself for the sake of the struggle. The struggle itself—of course, one must imagine Sisyphus happy!

XII.

She drove for hours through wet snow on what the radio was calling the first day of spring. She sat in the Heathrow parking lot, waiting for a lover to appear. She'd been seeing a barrister's son who was now not a son but a man, and a man of independent means at that, a sort of nobody who could be anything—a beekeeper, a lighthouse keeper, a bookkeeper at the corner bank, but someone who kept something; that suited him. They met in a bar where he'd gotten into a fight, and because he knew the owner and because he had a pretty face, it was not the man but his victim who was escorted from the premises. It was last call and the place stunk of pilsner and cigarette butts when the lights came up and Amelia kissed him, the underhand hero of the bar fight, his temper wearing thin—think of a man's temper, thin as the stocking of a hooker by the road—that's why her mother was always tired and trusting of cures for diseases of the mind. Now she slept in his arms more nights than not. She called her father from the airport, her father who told her *everyone who tells you what to do is a tyrant* as she held the phone away from her face. The cellular company charged by the minute. The sun was a weapon, still, its barrel long. It held her in movements like the movements of the high arts. She backed into the curb. Her lover arrived with criminal haste. She saw him hauling his luggage in the direction of her waiting, saw that he had seen her first, and collapsed from the subject of her life into the object of his gaze, the young boy, he ensured her fall from grace. In his flat, there was liquor sloshing around and pockmarks in the plaster where he might have punched a wall in fights with the women before her, the ones who knew him before she talked him down and made him a better man. He was younger than she was, but mature with money and neglect and an ambitionless life. He'd had his own place since he was eighteen, and he was not much older than that when she met him. He cleaned up after himself and could work an old mattress into a fitted sheet. *American Psycho* was on TV. Calling her father relieved Amelia of visiting him in Hoboken. She kept

him at a continental distance, calling the house at unscheduled intervals when she found herself in traffic or waiting for a seat at the bar, with time enough to look after him and always an end in sight. There were always reasons not to call—money, the city, jetlag, the time—so it was a generous thing, taking up the habit after how many years. (“Are you sleeping?” she asked, and she did not listen to his answer, which he gave not in the form of language but in a series of asthenic unpunctuated grunts. He asked about the rain in London; she said it rained, all right. “People are not looking for divine signs,” he told her. “You are no exception.” He spoke, she paid by the minute and, loving him this way, she did not need to go home for the holidays to lay eyes on him again.)

Sometimes the new lover read poetry in bed, on cold nights reciting verse aloud to her, to his woman—a habit that would, under ordinary circumstances, cause the ordinary woman to recoil from man’s arrogance, his immodest affect—the self-respecting woman does not succumb to it, will not be wooed and aroused by a common poet with a nightvoice; the good woman is disenchanted; the good woman recedes and puts on her clothes—but these were not ordinary circumstances, and this was not a self-respecting woman in the bed of an ordinary man. This was Hampstead, these were the beginnings of gray spring in North London; this was a woman who read downmarket tabloids at the pharmacy and a man with no ear for meter who read poetry in bed. He was young, his righteousness forgiven. A common street, always some awful daily human things going on outside, cheap curtains, lives pecking and picking like hungry sparrows, children quarrelling and being slapped, bank holiday picnics in the suburbs. One recognized everything, and everything was as everything is. There were sunny harbors, a woman’s breast, a housefire; there was America at the movies; there was swell of tide and peal of bells, a record on the gramophone, saddled horses in those poems he liked. *Bestons one final patronising kiss, / And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit...* There was death, and there was dying with a little patience; the Isle of Dogs, where the boy used to live; Prufrock’s disturbed universe, where the woman once did. Cities, alive and coarse and strong and cunning: *I have seen your*

painted women under the gas lamps luring the farm boys. Would she be a city, alive and coarse and strong and cunning? Not she, *She / simpering in her / ideological pink.* There were wilds of spruce and unforecasted frost; there was war in those verses. An anatomical man, the lyric went, has no notion of offering other than the bended knee. The bended knee, yes; if he wanted to marry her, he would have to beg. If she misunderstood poetry, she did so with conviction, and there was rigor and rigor of beauty in the lyrics she took simply and literally. More beer, the lover said; a typist, more finches, more green-eyed whores. She slept to recitations of things neither the orator nor his audience would remember by morning's cause for alarm, and she took pity on him, yes, and was a Lady in the City, and was his. When he went away, she might dance in his bedroom mirror, catching sight of herself, an iteration of the present body in lamplight, end of day—the younger self, a fool, wanting after all to be free.