

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE OTHER SIDE OF THE LAKE

Anna Carolyn McCormally, Master of Fine Arts,
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Tag and Laure are young adults on the verge of the rest of their lives. In these stories, their recollections and imaginations mix together to complicate the already complicated question of what and who they will let define them. In “The Other Side of the Lake,” a visit to her childhood summer home recalls Laure to a relationship from her teens left behind at the advice of a therapist. “The Ghost Bike” shows Tag negotiating his identity as he is swept up in a relationship with the deterministic Laure. In “The Rope Swing,” a childhood memory gets blurry in the retelling when he shares it with her. Finally, “The Hunger” depicts a young Laure struggling to understand her parent’s divorce. Fragmented and asynchronous like memory, these narratives show characters struggling to unpack their pasts and understand their presents as they try to figure out what comes next.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE LAKE

by

Anna Carolyn Cole McCormally

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Maud Casey, Chair

Professor Emily Mitchell

Professor Howard Norman

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Chapter 1: The Other Side of the Lake

Laure navigates even though she's not sure where she's going. It's been years since she's come this way. She printed directions from the library computer before leaving campus but there are no streets signs here and the turns listed so confidently are useless. It's the middle of January and landscape might have been carved out of a single slab of cold marble. There is the rhythmic crunch of the borrowed car's tires on the gravel and nothing else but the shimmer of snow when the trees shake their shoulders. But it's good it's frozen. Nothing has changed since she was fifteen years old. She forgot but now the road unfolds like the pages of a story she once knew by heart. With each turn she remembers something new.

Are you sure you know how to get there?

I'll know it when I see it.

Her father's house is on the outskirts but there should be a sign soon for the town. She doesn't want to tell Jacob she recognizes that that dip in the road, that creek, that clearing. I walked this way once when I was younger. I carved my initials into that tree. He rolls his eyes when she says things like that, and she doesn't want to annoy him.

His presence in the car feels like a thing she is lucky to have. When she first asked him if he would come with her to the wedding he didn't immediately say yes. He said, it's a long drive. I know, she said, I just really don't want to go alone. She wanted to him to come because he was her boyfriend and being your date to a wedding is a thing that boyfriends do. He will see the house she spent time in as a child, meet her father, her uncles, her aunts, her cousins. This is my boyfriend, Jacob, she'll say, and they'll all love him. They'll whisper about what a nice couple he and Laure make. Because it's a wedding maybe someone will ask if they have thought about getting married.

Laure will pretend to be embarrassed, but she'll be able to sneak a look at Jacob. To see what his eyes reveal when he's asked.

Sometimes when she's falling asleep she indulges herself in a fantasy about their own wedding. She imagines herself in a white dress with pink and yellow flowers embroidered on the hem, saying vows in a barn in Indiana like where they first met.

Do you promise?

I do, Jacob would say.

Do what? Laure interrogates him, pushing her veil up, putting her hands on her hips. What are you going to do?

Not leave.

He hasn't brought up staying together, but he hasn't brought up breaking it off. When he said he would be her date to the wedding it felt like he was agreeing to something else, too. Not that she knows what it is. The unknown is dark, deep water. If they aren't careful, they will drown.

The sign for the town is the first real landmark since they turned off the highway. It comes into view so solid, so verifiable, that she feels silly for doubting it would be there.

They turn from the asphalt onto the back roads. Pine branches scrape along the side of the car. Laure puts down the window.

Hey, it's too cold for that.

Look, there's the gas station! I told you there'd be by a gas station. There's a gas station, a post office, a little market--that's pretty much it. I used to get that old-fashioned stick candy at that market. Did you ever have that stuff?

I think I know what you're talking about.

She leans her head against the window frame and takes a deep breath. Pines and fresh air. Just smell that fresh air! That's what her father would exclaim, every time they turned up this way. He repeated himself a lot. She loved that. It was like listening to a record play and play without flipping it over. If you've found something you like, why change it?

Laure, come on, put it up. I'm freezing.

She rolls up the window. There is the bridge across the stream. There is the house where Mr and Mrs. Davidson used to live. She recognizes their mailbox, a funny wooden one shaped like a little chalet.

I had a friend who lived there. We're just the other side of the lake from my dad's house. We could walk it from here. Rosie. Rosie Davidson. I was, like, fifteen. She was a little older. We hung out on the dock and drank vodka and lemonade from a water bottle.

Rebels.

Once we kissed to see if we'd like it.

You never told me that! Was that your first kiss?

No. I think my first kiss was in truth or dare.

That doesn't count. Did you?

Did I what?

Did you like it?

She liked it for the wrong reasons. That's what the therapist said, anyway. It was a few months later. They were supposed to be talking about the divorce but Laure's mother had called the therapist and told her about Rosie and now they had to talk about that. Laure always told that therapist the truth. No one can help you if you don't tell the truth.

There's a lot of feelings, when your parents separate. I can imagine why you might not feel like you have a lot to hold on to. I'm sure this girl is really nice and kissing her sounds like it was really comforting. But it's important we don't confuse that with other feelings, like love, or real attraction. So that's all we're here to do. Just tease your feelings apart so you can see them better.

So many kisses that didn't count. Now the smell of the forest brings Rosie into the car with them, blonde hair and blue eyes and a silver bikini like mermaid scales. It's too cold to have the windows down now but it was August then. They took off their bathing suit tops while they lay on the dock to get an even tan, and Laure tried not to look at Rosie's nipples. They shared a Twizzler for an afternoon snack, the Pull n Peel kind where you get your fingers around one of the strands and strip it away from the rest of the candy like a piece of sticky spaghetti. They ate the strands one by one until they had eaten them all. It seemed like there should have been something at the center. But when everything was pulled apart like that, one strand at a time, there was nothing left. It wasn't a surprise or anything. Still, it was a letdown, every time.

That's where she lived.

What happened to her?

What do you mean what happened to her?

I mean where is she now.

Oh. I have no idea. We lost touch. We got in trouble, for the drinking. My mom said she was a bad influence and didn't let me visit her or anything over the school year. We wrote letters for a while but then we stopped.

She stopped writing you back?

I guess. No, it wasn't like that. We just stopped writing.

It was a wooden mailbox, that chalet, with a painted redbird on the side. But if the redbird is still there Laure can't see it. They have passed too far up the road.

She looks over at Jacob, his profile. Ski-slope nose, curls hanging in his eyes, mouth with the corners that tend towards a frown. She doesn't often look at him from this angle and it's odd how different he looks, almost unrecognizable. Or maybe it's that she's looked at him too much, like a word said over and over that loses its meaning.

She reaches over and puts a hand on his knee. I'm glad you came with me. She's hoping he will say, of course, or, I really wanted to. What he says is, Sure. Which isn't really the same.

Before the divorce Laure spent summers at the lake house with her parents and after, with her father. But she has never seen it in winter. The trees are naked and shivering. Jacob pulls up and parks on the lawn next to the other cars. When he cuts the ignition the sudden quiet reveals the low chatter coming from inside the house.

With her duffle over her shoulder Laure leads the way up the wide steps to the wooden porch that wraps around the house. The house is unlocked. In the entryway women she has never seen before rush up and down the stairs in bathrobes with their hair wrapped up in towels and Laure sees catering staff in black and white carrying plastic covered trays from the door to the kitchen out to the back deck. Setting down her bag in the foyer, she walks down the hall to the back door to see. When she passes the kitchen she peeks in and sees rows and rows of crystal champagne flutes so fragile it seems like they might break if she looks at them too directly. Through the sliding glass door she can see a semicircle of chairs arranged on the lawn around a wooden arch with roses and greenery strung through the lattice, and an enormous white tent. Inside

she can see a bar has been set up, along with scattered oaken cocktail tables that look like tree stumps. Figures in heavy dark coats wind golden lights up the tent poles and around the roof.

Sure looks like a wedding, Jacob observes.

He has practice, says Laure of her father.

Excuse me, says a man carrying a silver tray of crostini. They step aside so he can slide open the grass and descend down the lawn.

Laure!

Her father is red-cheeked, dark hair slicked back. Laure feels herself go red too, and hopes he didn't hear her jibe. He is in a white shirt and black suit with sprig of green and a white rose pinned in a buttonhole. A dark green bow tie is undone around his neck. He has a finger of something amber in a crystal glass in his hand and when he hugs Laure she smells whiskey.

Hi.

Glad you made it! How was the drive?

Long. Dad, this is Jacob. My boyfriend.

Jacob! Theo Marshall. Welcome, welcome. Drive was okay? It's great to meet you.

Thanks for having me.

The women are upstairs getting beautiful. How about you come with me and have a drink? We're about an hour and a half from showtime.

Sounds good to me, Jacob says.

We need to take our stuff upstairs, Laure says quickly. She wants to keep Jacob by her side.

Sure, sure. Go get settled. Cecilia's upstairs, Laure. She's dying to meet you.

They hoist their bags and make their way up the staircase at the front of the house. It is a quieter up here. Voices drift from the open door of the master bedroom but no words.

You've never met her?

Nope.

She leads him down the hall into the bedroom that used to be hers and sets her duffel down in the middle of the pink oval rug.

Wow, Jacob says.

Nothing has been done to the room since Laure was here as a little girl. Pink rug, pink curtains, pink flowers on the wall trimming. China dolls line the shelves, smiling vacantly at nothing. They are all part of a set: ballerina, princess, bride. There was a while when she was young where she got one for every birthday, every Christmas. They were too fragile for a little girl to play with and went up on the shelves, the top of the wardrobe. By the time her mother decided it was safe for her to hold them, she had stopped caring about dolls. Their glassy eyes are bright, their cheeks pink even though the room, tucked away in the back corner of the house, is cold. She and Jacob will keep warm in their sleep under a floral duvet under a gauzy canopy her father must have thought when she was younger was a thing a little girl wanted. She always had trouble sleeping in that bed when she was a kid. She lay awake, body tense, in the dull greengrey half-light. Summer darkness never could quite snuff out long summer days and all those summer sounds, crickets chirping, teenagers' shouts echoing from the other side of the lake, her father and then-stepmother's bickering, rose up from the back porch through the window.

Jacob is digging in his bag, dropped on the pink and white striped chair in the corner, and reaches over to the dresser to turn on a light. The grey room floods golden.

Looks like it's going to be a hell of a party. Hey, I forgot to tell you-- he holds something up, a crumpled white cylinder. Was worried for a sec I lost it. For later, if you want.

She can smell the weed from where she is by the bed and it makes her go cold.

I don't know, Jacob.

It might be fun.

I don't think it's that kind of party. She stares at the joint in his slender fingers. She and Rosie Davidson had walked in their bathing suits and terrycloth coverups down the long driveway from the Davidson's house, past that mailbox with the redbird, to the path that led to the lake. Rosie motioned to a clearing in the trees, but it wasn't the well-worn path that marked the way down to the water. Laure hesitated. But Rosie took her hand and pulled her off the path. Crouching behind a thick pine she pulled up her cover-up and took a joint from the elastic waistband of her dry swimsuit bottom. Like this, Rosie said, putting her head back to exhale. Laure remembers looking up, the stream of smoke curling against the tops of the trees, how bright it was, bright against the dense green forest as the Rosie's loose blonde curls. Those trees were so tall and so thick and so dark that they blocked out the sun, making Laure feel farther than she really was from anything she knew.

No, you're not doing it right. Here. She inhaled deep before reaching for Laure and putting her mouth on hers, blowing the smoke gently into Laure's lungs through dry lips. Then Laure felt it, the world was spinning too fast around her. She steadied herself, one hand on the pine and the other on Rosie's shoulder. It wasn't until later, when she and Jacob got high in the dugout on campus and she felt like her brain was drenched in molasses, that she hadn't probably hadn't managed to pull any of the smoke into her lungs, that she probably hadn't been stoned at all. The spinning was just being around Rosie.

Sorry, Jacob says. Laure blinks. They are in her childhood bedroom. On top of the wardrobe the dolls are watching with their heads cocked slightly, like they know what Laure is thinking about.

She turns away from him and goes to her bag to take out her shoes, her dress, her hose. She's itching with irritation. What's wrong with him? Adults don't sneak joints at family functions. That's a thing teenagers do. Why can't Jacob see that? She doesn't understand why it's not obvious to him who they are supposed to be.

He comes up and puts his arms around her from behind.

You okay?

Yeah, of course. Why?

It's intense that your father is marrying someone you've never even met.

I'll meet her now.

You're not upset about it?

Not really.

Really?

Why do you want me to be upset?

She feels tight, like her skin is a rubber band pulled too tight, at risk of snapping. It's just so frustrating. She wants to be poised. She wants to be okay. Why does he have to act like she's not?

You're parents are worried about you. The therapist said everything gently. You could never get in trouble with a therapist. That was the whole point, that you were already in trouble and needed help getting out. Laure hated being in trouble. She still hates it. She just wants to be the right person. She just wants to do the right thing. The trouble is, you can't always tell in the moment what the right thing is.

Laure knows what she looked like to the therapist. Troubled teenager smokes pot and experiments with her neighbor after her parents get divorced. It's obvious looking back. The trick to doing the

right thing, she's learned, is just to see yourself now the way you'll see yourself in a decade. That's all. When you know who you want to remember being it's easy to become. At least it should be.

I guess I just thought it would help you chill out, Jacob says. He takes his suit jacket out of his bag and slips the joint into the pocket. We don't have to. Just in case.

Laure turns around. Her mouth is dry but she touches it to his mouth.

I'm sorry. I'm fine. It was a long drive. Let's just get dressed.

In the master bedroom the women are playing dress-up. Blemishes are smoothed, cheeks rouged, eyelids lined, lashes made longer. They blow-dry and powder and zip up. Suck in, hold still, don't flinch at fingers tugging her hair into curls and bunches. Before the mirror that used to be Laure's mother's, Laure meets her new stepmother. Cecilia is holding very still while her friend who owns a beauty shop in the city pins and tucks her hair. Laure carries the dressy dress she packed for the wedding over her arm, grateful for something to hold onto in the current of women moving back and forth between the bureau and the dressing table and the bathroom counter. She is a new lady in waiting, brought before the queen for approval. She makes sure to stand a few paces back so Cecilia knows she knows her place.

Oh, you must be Laurie!

Just Laure.

Laure. Laure. That's funny. I'm so glad you made it. Sorry I'm not hugging you. I can't get messed up. Not too much--I want people to recognize me in the photos, you know? Do you need to put your face on?

She pats the space on the counter beside her.

In the floral makeup bag Laure rarely opens at Woolman: eyeliner from the drugstore, a mascara that might be a couple years old, lipstick in the only shade she's ever felt she could wear. Everything is a little dusty from where face powder spilled a long time ago. When she picks up the black eye pencil the powder coats her fingers.

So. Cecilia holds still while her beauty parlor friend blends pale gold with cream at the corner of her eyelids. You brought your boyfriend with you, right?

Mhm. Laure pulls down the skin under her eye to line the bottom lid.

What's he like? Are the two of you pretty serious?

Laure does her other eye. A few months after they first started dating she told Jacob, in response to something funny, that's why I love you. She can't remember what she was responding to but she remembers knowing immediately that she did something wrong. Somehow their bodies stopped touching even though they were pressed together in the bed. The next day he said, hey, I'm having a great time dating you. But you know I'm not looking for anything serious right now, right?

Her friend told Laure she'd broken the first rule of getting a guy to like you, which was that you had to act as though you liked them less than you really did. You have to never ask for the thing you want outright. Guys are like gentle woodland creatures that will turn and flee at the slightest provocation.

I didn't mean to say I loved you. You don't have to freak out. How could that be the right thing to say? But it was true. She didn't love him then. Or maybe she did and maybe she didn't. It doesn't matter now. They had said I love you the previous winter, or, Jacob said it and Laure said it back. She wasn't about to fuck that one up again. At first she had counted. He has said he loves me two times. Three times. Four. But now they have said it so many times it has become salutation,

punctuation, routine. Okay, I love you. Have a good class, I love you. Goodnight, I love you. It's not that she's stopped believing him. It's that there are certain things you start to expect. It's not exciting when your house key opens the door to your house. It's your house. What would be startling is the other thing.

We're pretty serious. We've been dating since our sophomore year.

You're a senior now, right?

This is my last semester.

Well, I know your dad is just so proud of you.

Thanks. Laure's eyes are rimmed in black with spider leg lashes. She reaches for the blush to add pink to her cheeks so she can be rosy like the dolls in her bedroom.

Lips, the friend says. Cecilia purses like she's blowing a kiss to her reflection. Since she can't talk there is a string of silence until the friend picks up the thread.

Do you have plans for after graduation?

Laure practiced answering this question. We have to know what we're going to say when people ask us what we're doing after graduation, she'd said to Jacob in the car, around Pittsburgh. She'd hoped he would take the opportunity to say something definite but all he'd said was, Guess we can always just make something up! Cheerfully.

I'm not sure. I'd like to live in the city.

New York? What do you want to do?

I'm not sure.

Well, your father has so many connections. I'm sure you'll find something. What about your young man?

He's a music major, Laure says. Is that a stupid thing to say? At Woolman people are what they study. That won't be true anymore after graduation.

Oh! Cecilia says. That's perfect! Yeah, the color is great, thank you so much. Well, there's tons of opportunities for musicians in the city. It's the best place you guys could go for that.

Yeah.

What do you think? Cecilia's friend steps back to take in Cecilia from a greater distance, looking for inconsistencies in her face.

Laure hadn't been talking about Jacob when she brought up New York but it's a good point. Jacob would love New York. It sounds so easy. It makes so much sense, the idea of the two of them living together. Move to New York. Get a little apartment, a third or fourth floor walk up. It will be cramped but cramped is cozy if you're with someone you love. Laure reaches for her lipstick and paints on her mouth and when she looks in the mirror sees Jacob eating a bowl of cereal on a futon with a torn cushion. Their books stacked on the coffee table. The smell of coffee brewing in the kitchen as she gets ready for work. She'll wear pencil skirts and button downs and commute on the subway, her eyes and mouth and face painted perfectly. It's reflected so clearly, the life and and Jacob will lead in the city.

I love it, Cecilia says.

The ceremony is small and short. Cecilia and Laure's father make all the big promises they are supposed to make. Laure expected to feel skeptical but she is oddly touched at how her father looks at Cecilia when he says his vows. She wonders if it makes a difference to Cecilia that he has said them before. When the bride and groom kiss Laure reaches over and takes Jacob's hand. When she gets married it will be different. She's going to get it right on the first try.

Afterwards, guests graze hors d'oeuvres and order drinks in the tent while the wedding party takes photographs. Jacob goes to get them drinks and Laure stands and watches as the photographer pulls and prods them, arranges them like dolls. He kneels and stills. It is a well composed scene: the bride, exquisite in a white dress with a ballgown skirt and a white fur capelet, stands against a background of snow frosted pine trees. She cradles a bouquet of amaryllis and waxflower, limonium and Queen Anne's Lace. The diamond on her left hand winks like a star. She is framed under a wooden arch wound with fairy lights. The shutter clicks and she is captured. It's not the same photographer from either of Laure's father's previous weddings, and there is a new leading lady, but the photo is basically the same. Cecilia looks solemnly at Laure's father, who is grinning like an ad for whitening strips. The photo is a declaration: we are so happy now we have found each other. Our happiness is not even a question. We are the most happy.

Beautiful, the photographer says.

It is beautiful. The photograph will hang in the foyer of the lakehouse. There is always a photograph there. When Laure's father was married to Laure's mother it was their wedding photo that hung there and when he was married to Elsa it was one of her. Both of those photographs came down well before the next woman came into his life, gone when the wives were. Laure is the only one who has seen all of them.

After a few minutes of stamping her feet and rubbing her arms to stay warm, watching Cecilia and her father pose insipidly, she has just about decided to kill time by going up to the house and looking for Jacob. But when she turns to go Cecilia squawks.

No, Laure, you can't go -- we need you for the shot with all the girls!

Laure understands Cecilia is being generous. She won't match the other women in the photograph. Her dress is the wrong color, and she doesn't know them. But Cecilia pulls her

close and the flash goes off once--twice--three times. Laure blinks. Cecilia grabs her hand and says: Now one of us! The other women melt away and Cecilia wraps her arms around Laure's waist and presses their cheeks together.

That's sweet, Cecilia's mother says approvingly, looking at the screen. The camera snaps again.

And now--oh, can we take one with your father?

Laure's father steps forward obligingly, puts an arm around Cecilia.

A great idea. C'mere, Laure. My two favorite girls.

Again and again the camera flashes. New subjects are added and taken out, friends and family members of varying importance. Laure looks here, there, moves three inches to her right. She smiles. She says cheese and here comes the bride and happily ever after. Just tell me where you want me. She starts to enjoy it, how easy it is to relax into a pose. Just stand there. Look pretty. It is easy. Comforting, to be clay, molded and flattened out and molded again.

Very nice, the photographer says approvingly.

Photographed subjects are murmuring and shifting foot to foot, a little restless in their high heels, ready to loosen their ties, enjoy the party. Jacob emerges from the tent holding a glass of scotch in one hand and a glass of white wine in the other. When he sees Laure in the clutches of the bridesmaids he raises his eyebrows as if to say, get a load of you.

I think that's all, the photographer says. We're about at the end of the light.

Thanks so much, Cecilia says and then: oh! Wait! Can't we do just one last one, of them together?

She means Laure and Jacob. She has spotted him too.

Laure looks over at Jacob. His face is unreadable.

Come on, come on! Cecilia tsks Jacob. Laure understands this is one of those things you're supposed to pretend you don't want in order to trick the the other person want it more. She shouldn't have looked at Jacob. She didn't get it. Cecilia does, which is why she's helping set this trap.

But Jacob just shrugs. Sure. Why not.

Cecilia claps her hands, jumps up and down.

Laure's palms are sweating, her dress won't fall right. She tucks her hair behind her ear even though it is already behind her ear. She swallows.

The photographer pushes Jacob under the arch and backed up, lifted his lens to evaluate the two of them together and the light. Everyone else shuffles obediently out of the way.

Arms around his neck. One, two--the camera flashes, snaps like a gunshot.

Now, boyfriend, can you--why don't you lean in give her a kiss her on the forehead?

Wet lips on her temple. Arms like puzzle pieces. This is her boyfriend.

Beautiful. Really lovely. How about you look at each other?

They stand face to face, chest to chest. Laure's heart is beating. She can't feel his.

You look just perfect, Cecilia says from the sidelines. This will be so nice for you to have in a few years.

Yes, it will. It will hang in the foyer of their New York apartment, over the couch or between the bookshelves where Laure's copy of *The Beauty Myth* sits next to Jacob music theory textbooks. When people come over they will see the picture and ask, where were you? My father's wedding, Laure will say. She will remember how sweet Jacob was to ask if she was okay, if she was upset about her father getting remarried. She will remember how he brought a joint and told jokes to lighten the mood because he knew she felt tense. It was thoughtful, really. That was the

first wedding we ever went to together. Their fingers will twist together in a remembering of how their fingers are twisting together now.

Jacob is looking ahead at the photographer and there is his profile again, just like it was in the car. She wants him to look at her. She wants to know if he is thinking these same things. The photographer couldn't have known what she was thinking but he must have thought that eye contact would make the picture better because he says, come on, now, try to look at each other like you like each other!

The watching wedding party titters.

Oh, they're just nervous, Cecilia says.

You look so grown up, Laure's father calls.

Laure and Jacob look into each other's eyes; Laure and Jacob kiss; Laure and Jacob laugh at something the photographer said that was intended to make them laugh.

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I think that's a wrap, the photographer says.

Jacob steps out of the frame, reaches for the drink he set down. Laure follows him, craning her neck to see the last photo on the camera screen: she and Jacob, he gazing down, she gazing up. Any stranger who saw that picture would have agreed that they looked like they were in love. You can't tell by looking at the picture that they're smiling because someone told them to.

At the reception, like the signature cocktails served with flaming rosemary, like the centerpieces made with imported out of season flowers, Laure is on display.

Now, I know I've heard, but remind me, where are you getting your degree?

It's called Woolman. It's a small liberal arts college in Indiana.

And who's this?

This is my boyfriend, Jacob.

Well, it's good to talk to you, Laurel.

Nice to talk to you too, Mr. Robins.

Hors d'oeuvres circulate. Guests hug, clap their hands, raise toasts. Laure gulps her wine, trying not to mess up her lipstick.

Could that be Laurel? It's been such a long time!

Hi Mrs. Kusters.

And this must be your young man. Now, how did the two of you meet?

We go to college together.

Oh, how lovely. And what year are you?

We're both seniors.

So, so lovely. And after graduation?

I'm not sure yet.

Well it's just lovely to see you. You're looking so grown up.

A break. Laure sinks into a chair. She remembers to cross her legs. She smiles at a passerby but looks away quickly. She doesn't want them to come over.

Standing beside her, Jacob is jittery. His gaze wanders around the party, noticeably jittery.

You okay? she asks, because she herself is exhausted.

Sure. I'm fine. Want another glass of wine? Jacob offers.

Sure, she echoes. Sorry I have to talk to all these people. You know how it is. Family friends.

Yeah, of course. I get it. I'll be back.

Laure watches him make his way across the tent to the bar. In his suit he blends in, she decides. He looks like he belongs here. She can imagine them at parties ten, twenty years from now, watching Jacob in a suit like that go to get her a drink.

Laure! It's so wonderful to see you. You look lovely. Now, remind me --what's the name of that school again?

Woolman College. It's in Indiana.

Oh yes I've heard of it, it's supposed to be very good, isn't it, quite competitive?

Yes, I've had a wonderful experience. I'm very lucky.

Jacob is at the bar. He orders a drink and downs it, sets the glass down for a refill. That smile, the one that always seemed to her like it belonged on a character from a movie about college, must be charming the bartender too, because he laughs.

And next year?

He's so certain, so steady. She's jealous. She's always been jealous of people like Jacob, people like Rosie, who move so confidently through the world. She wants to be like that. She swallows.

Sorry?

What are you planning to do after you graduate, dear?

That New York apartment pops into her head again. Just make something up, Jacob said in the car. Why not?

I'm moving to New York, she says. She's been thinking about it since Cecilia planted the thought in her head but she's surprised at how weighty the words are when said out loud. Jacob--my boyfriend--Jacob and I are getting an apartment and we're going to see if we can make the city work. He's a musician.

The words surprise her, but the more she thinks about it, the easier it is to imagine. They already have the photograph of them. Everything else they can build up around it.

Well, it's good to talk to you, Laurel.

Nice to talk to you too, Mr. Wiley.

She spies Jacob talking to the bass player while the string quartet takes a break. She thinks she can hear him laughing and follows the sound, breaking into the conversation with a big smile like she's part of it.

Having a good time?

Sure, he says, drinking his drink.

Did you get one for me?

Huh? Oh, sorry, babe, I forgot.

Laurel!

Hi, Mr. Olson.

So good to see you! About to graduate, aren't you? And what will you do after you graduate?

Jacob is no longer beside her. He has drifted away again.

I'm moving to New York, Laure says.

And what will you do there?

I would like to work for a magazine. Maybe get into editorial, like my dad. And my boyfriend is a musician. So there's lots of opportunities for us there.

Oh, your boyfriend who's here tonight? I saw you having your picture made outside. That's nice. Has he lived in New York before?

No, he's from Michigan.

Well, I'm sure he'll love it.

Yes, Laure says. Yes, we're both really excited.

I'd love to meet him.

Where did Jacob get to? Laure does a quick scan of the room. There he is, getting another drink. His loose-limbs are sprawled across the bar. He grows six inches when he's drunk and Laure would swear she can see the bartender raising an eyebrow.

I'd love that too, Mr. Olson. Actually, excuse me--I need to see where he's gotten to.

She tries to cross the room. But before she can reach Jacob, someone else steps into her path.

Laurel! It's been so long, I hardly recognized you!

At first she really does think it's Rosie. There are Rosie's blonde curls, Rosie's lilac irises, it is Rosie's long fingers closing around the top of Laure's arm. Rosie's hair, Rosie's eyes, Rosie's hands. But of course her mother had them first.

There was striking similarity between mother and daughter. Laure remembers it, Mrs. Davidson on her front porch, squinting under her hand at Laure and Rosie sloping up the driveway at sunset with towels wrapped around their waists, arms thrown around one another's shoulders. Rosie's mother waving to them: come in, come in!

Laure and Rosie, legs twisted together as they watch television on the couch with their feet up on the coffee table. It gets cold in the mountains at night, even in the summer. Sweat cools.

Do you girls need anything?

No thank you, Mrs. Davidson.

Good night, mom!

Warm fingers grazed warm wrist under the loose knit blanket.

Do you want a drink?

Won't your parents notice? Won't we get in trouble?

Rosie just laughed.

It's been years, Mrs Davidson says. Hasn't it been years? Aren't you just so grown up?

They're the same words everyone has said but Mrs. Davidson is alright with them, leaning forward a little on the balls of her feet, hands clasped together, imploring. It's so good to see you, Laure.

You too, Laure says, and for the first time that night she means it. How are you? How's Rosie?

Oh, Rosie, Rosie. She's the same. Grown up too, but the same. Doing just fine.

What is she up to? Laure asks. She can't imagine Rosie outside of that summer. Her freckled limbs and too-loud laugh are incongruous with the real world, school and jobs and paying rent.

Well, you know. She didn't want to go to college. I know you went somewhere out west, isn't that right?

Yes, Laure says. It's a small liberal arts college in Indiana. I'm a senior this year.

Congratulations, dear, really. I know your father is so proud. He's told us all about it.

So, Rosie--

Yes, Rosie, never really liked school. But she wound up out west too, actually, in Chicago. That's not too far from your college is it?

It's not. Laure's breath catches. Rosie in Chicago. A four hour bus ride away this whole time. Laure has visited only once and she'd been overwhelmed by it, the grittiness of the city, the merciless grey, the wind that swept through her like it knew something she didn't. Of course Rosie was in Chicago. What's she doing there?

She works at an art gallery. And a restaurant, sometimes. It's a bar really. But it's a nice one! We went last time we visited. So she just saves up here and there and takes these big trips. Her partner is a photographer, and they go on these big trips overseas, and Ellen comes back with the most incredible pictures. But your partner is an artist too, isn't he? I think I heard from Cecilia--a musician?

Partner isn't a word Laure has ever used to describe Jacob. But now she is bowled over for longing for it. What was Ellen like? Immediately Laure knows: full-bodied and dark-haired, with a laugh to match Rosie's.

Have you ever kissed somebody before? Rosie asked. It was late, and dark. Night came without them noticing while they were watching television, and they didn't turn on any lights. The house was quiet, her parents asleep upstairs. Laure is sleepy.

Only in truth or dare.

Who was it?

Laure shifts so they are looking at each other. Keith, she says. It was at the seventh grade dance.

Can I kiss you?

Static electricity. Warm and sticky mouths. The hum of the television. Then: knocking on the door. They spring apart, Rosie biting her bottom lip, smiling. The knocking doesn't stop. They turn and look. Elsa, peeking around through the window.

It's time for Laure to come home.

Yes, Laure tells Mrs. Davidson. Jacob is majoring in music at Woolman.

I'm just so proud of you, Laure. I hope that's okay for me to say. Mrs. Davidson wrinkles her nose exactly the way Rosie did. You girls got up to so much trouble. I know it just about broke Rosie's heart when you stopped writing to her.

Laure stares at her.

Is that what happened? We just stopped writing, she told Jacob in the car. It wasn't a big deal. It was so long ago.

Your parents asked me to talk to you about your friend you made over the summer, the therapist said.

I, Laure starts to say to Mrs. Davidson. But someone takes her arm.

Hey, Jacob says.

What? she says. As soon as the words is out she realizes it sounds harsh. She had almost forgotten he was there.

Sorry. Laure, can I get you over here for a second?

Laure looks from Jacob to Mrs. Davidson to Jacob again.

Laure? I need to talk to you.

Sure, she says. Sure. To Mrs. Davidson: would you excuse me? It's really good to see you.

Jacob pulls her into a corner of the tent farthest from the dance floor.

I was having a conversation, she says.

Did you tell your father we're moving to New York together? he asks bluntly.

Where have you been?

Laure.

What?

Your father just congratulated me on our decision to move to New York together.

New York. The apartment. I, yeah. I did. I guess I did.

Laure, we never talked about that. Why would you tell someone that when you know it's not true?

She feels dizzy. She puts a hand to her head. Why had she? It made sense at the time. It seemed so easy, so natural. But now she's not sure. In front of her, her boyfriend is waiting for an answer. His eyes are narrowed like he's trying to figure her out. But she hardly recognizes him. Who is this?

I thought maybe we could, she says.

Laure, no. I hate New York. I don't want to live there. I have no idea what I'm doing after graduation.

Laure pulls out a chair and sits down. Jacob remains standing.

Look, he says, I'm sorry--

She cuts him off. It's fine.

Jacob looks uncertain. Oh.

There is a pause in the music and then it starts again. Frank Sinatra. They both look over. It is time for the first dance. Another ritual, like the photograph, another incantation to will the bride and groom into the life they hope they'll lead. Cecilia and Laure's father glide, smiling, onto the dance floor.

Are we staying together after graduation? she asks him, looking up.

What?

Do you see us staying together after graduation.

He shifts from foot to foot. I don't know, Laure. I mean, I don't know where I'm going to end up, or what I'm going to be doing, or--

People do it, Laure says. Are we? Are we going to, like, move to the same city? Move in together? Be a real couple? Be partners?

She hopes he understands she's really asking. She wants to know. She can't guess any more, can't imply. You just have to decide.

Jacob looks guilty. I haven't really thought about it, he says.

Laure feels relieved. She sinks back into her chair. Why did you come with me this weekend?

Jacob looks unhappy. I thought it would be fun, he says. Why did you invite me?

She wishes she she had a copy of that photograph Cecilia made them take, the two of them posed as a couple. She wants to show it to him. It is not just a picture. They posed as a couple

because they are a couple. Can't he see it? Doesn't he understand? All they have to do is decide and then it will be decided. The college couple in the photograph grows up and turns into a wedding photograph and that turns into a house and a kid and before you know it you're eighty years old and isn't it sweet how you grew old together.

Because I wanted to be a real couple, she says. It meant--I thought it meant we were deciding.

I didn't know it meant that, Jacob says. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, Laure, but I don't think I ever said I wanted to do all that stuff you just said. I didn't know that's what saying I'd come to the wedding meant.

It is so cold in the tent. The air between them is frozen. Laure looks down and away at where a blade of grass is poking up through the tiled floor the tent people put down. Jacob is still looking at her.

Excuse me, she says, standing up. I'm just feeling a little bit claustrophobic.

She needs her coat. She heads out of the tent and up to the house. Jacob follows her.

Laure, come on.

It's really fine.

Laure! Are you mad? Laure, wait.

Yes, I'm mad. Please don't follow me. I just want to be alone.

He grabs her shoulder and she spins around to face him. She can't wait. She can't breathe.

Don't touch me after I tell you I want to be by myself.

He lets go, holds both his hands up like she has a gun on him. They stare at each other for a second and then Laure plunges her hand into his coat pocket and swipes the joint and the lighter he was carrying there.

Enjoy the party, she says.

The sounds of dancing, music, shuffling feet, follow her down to the trees. But by the time she is stepping onto the path that leads through the pines down to the lake, she is far enough that she can barely hear it anymore.. The woods are dark. By the time she can't see the house when she looks back she knows for sure that Jacob has not come after her. She's glad. She doesn't want him to.

Don't worry, the therapist told her that fall after the Rosie summer. No one's angry at you. I'm just trying to get you to see that if you keep on this way, you're not going to be able to successfully transition into adulthood.

Because I kissed another girl?

What? No. No, of course not. There's nothing wrong with that, please don't interpret my words that way. That's a fine lifestyle. But this older girl. And the drinking. And the drugs.

Laure stretches out her hands to drag along the rough bark of the pines.

She stopped drinking. She stopped smoking. See you in the summer? Rosie wrote, and Laure never wrote back. She had turned it around. That's what the therapist told her later that year. You've really turned it around.

The path splits at the edge of the water. A trail extends around the shore but straight ahead the dock juts out into the water. Laure walks out until she can't walk any more and then sits down on the dock. She takes off her shoes and lets her feet dangle. They are already numb from the high heels and the long walk, and the cold feels good. In front of her, the lake's wide lap a darker shape in the darkness. The only light is the faint glow of the house on the other side of the lake. The

Davidsons must have left a light on when they left to come to the wedding. Laure wishes it were Rosie. But Rosie is far, far away.

Laure lights the joint she took from Jacob.

When I grow up, said Rosie, I am never getting married. I'm going to live alone in the city and do the walls with finger paints and walk dogs for a living.

It was that day they were tanning on the dock, breasts bared to the sun. Laure's eyes were closed. Her memory of Rosie's voice is the memory of the sun wrapping its arms around her.

Why don't you want to get married?

I don't know. I don't want to do just the same stuff over and over again. That's what getting married and having kids is. You get stuck.

What if you fall in love with somebody who likes dogs and fingerpainting?

Rosie laughed. I guess then I would think about it. She rolled over. Don't get stuck, she said. Promise.

When she dove into the lake she went so deep and held her breath for so long that Laure got worried. She sat up, clutching her hands over her bare chest, anxiously scanning the water for a sign of Rosie emerging. Rosie always waited long enough that Laure's heart started pounding. When that blonde head popped up out in the middle of the water, she let out a long, slow breath.

You did it, Rosie, Laure thinks now as she looks out across the water. You didn't get stuck. Laure did everything she was supposed to do. She followed the path. She went to college and was going to graduate with a degree. She found a boyfriend. But she hadn't realized that there was another path, running parallel to the one she had taken, leading another way. She imagines Ellen looking through her camera at Rosie standing in a picture window with the Chicago skyline behind her. She imagines skin and finger paints and two glasses of wine on a hardwood floor. She

imagines having someone to call her partner, someone who wanted the same things she wanted. It's such a simple thing that she can't believe she never thought of it before. She spent so much time trying to fit Jacob into the image of what she thought she was supposed to want that she had forgotten to make sure it was what she wanted in the first place.

Movement behind her.

Laure?

Cecilia moves out of the night like someone has lit a candle. The beading of her dress rustles on the wood when she walks out onto the deck. She has her shoes in one hand and in the other a glass of champagne and gathered hem of her skirt, lifted to keep it up off the grass. A man's sports coat is draped over her shoulders.

What are you doing down here? they ask at the same time.

Cecilia grins. I needed a break from my fucking mother. You know how they tell you your wedding will be stressful, and you'll have wished you eloped, and you won't get a chance to eat the food you paid for, and your family will find all kinds of excuses to be angry at you? It's all true. Shit.

This last was directed at the champagne sloshing down her skirt as she arranges herself to sit down beside Laure.

You're not down here because of me, are you?

What?

I guess I just assumed this is fucking terrible for you, Cecilia shrugs. She scoots forward so her feet are dangling off the edge of the dock next to Laure's. Your dad getting married again and you have to come from school in the middle of your last semester to go to a party with all these stupid stuffy people. Sorry, I'm drunk. Is that pot?

Yeah, Laure says. There is no way to lie. She's not sure there's a reason to, either.

I didn't take you for that type, Cecilia says. Can I have some?

Laure passes her the joint. Cecilia inhales deeply and passes it back. God that's nice.

Jacob brought it, Laure says, blowing a column of smoke up with her head tilted back. Her brain feels like it's full of tiny hooks attached to balloons that are floating up, up.

That's your boyfriend?

Yeah. I got pissed at him about it.

Why were you pissed.

I don't know. I didn't want to get in trouble.

Cecilia takes the joint again. Aren't you, like, twenty-one? she asks. Trouble with who?

Isn't that the question.

They are quiet for a minute and then Cecilia says, So, is it me?

What? Oh. No.

I know it probably isn't easy.

I'm used to it, Laure says without thinking.

Cecilia laughs like a bark. Okay!

I didn't mean it like that.

Yes you did, Cecilia tells her. How else could you have meant it.

Yeah, you're right, Laure says. Sorry.

They are still passing the joint back and forth.

Okay, so, not me, Cecilia prompts.

Laure lays back on the dock. She forgot how bright the stars were out here, or maybe she never knew. Maybe she's never been out here at night.

Jacob and I had a fight.

About the weed?

No. I don't think we're going to stay together. After graduation. Maybe not after this trip.

Did you want to?

I don't know, Laure says. To tell you the truth I never really considered breaking up. But it just would have been nice, you know. To have one thing figured out.

In Cecilia's hand the tip of the joint glows like a painted nail at the end of a long white finger. She inhales, exhales.

I hate to be the one to tell you this, she says. But even if you think you have something completely figured out. The truth is you still have no fucking idea what's going to happen.

Laure doesn't answer.

You know what my mother said to me? Cecilia says to the lake. She said, you're twenty-eight years old getting married to a man twice my age who has a grown daughter and doesn't want any more children because for all his good intention he's--and I'm sorry--a shitty dad. She said that to me. At my wedding. But I can't blame her. It's not what I wanted for myself. I had wedding fantasies, Cecilia goes on. Don't all little girls? Mine didn't include a man who's been married twice before, and never faithfully. Sorry! Sorry, sorry. God. I'm still in my wedding dress. Don't worry, Laure. I love your dad. He's not who I thought I was going to love. But my point is.

Well. Yeah. You just have no fucking clue.

They are quiet. Music drifts down from the hill, calling them back up to where they're supposed to be. Cecilia must hear it too because she stands up.

Thanks for sharing, she says. It'll help with my mom.

Sure.

I hope you and your boyfriend work it out.

Laure looks up at her. She is shining in her white dress. Some of her makeup has faded from the hours of dancing and laughing and eating, and Laure sees now that she has a friendly face.

It was a beautiful wedding, Laure says, and she's telling the truth. The photos are going to be great.

Fucking better be, Cecilia says. Are you coming up?

In a few minutes, Laure says.

She sits for a long time on the dock after Cecilia leaves. Just a few more minutes. Just a few more minutes. But she sits until the light on the other side of the lake goes out. The Davidsons must have gone home and turned it off. Or maybe it was never their house at all, but some other life entirely. It doesn't matter.

Without a fixed point to look towards on the other side of the lake, she's uneasy. It's very, very dark. She stands. Up at the house Jacob is probably drinking alone at the bar, waiting for her to apologize.

A cold wind sweeps straight through her coat, her thin dress. The water moves against the dock, crooking its fingers at her.

She isn't going to apologize. Laure strips off her coat. With numb fingers she fumbles for the zipper at the side of her dress and lets it pool at her feet so she is standing there at the edge of the water in her hose and underwear. She reaches behind her back for the bra clasp, lets it fall away. Her hose rip, caught on a splinter, when she takes them off. Kicking her clothes back Laure takes a deep breath and dives into the wide dark lap of the lake.

It is as deep as she remembered. The cold water is like diving into glass, the shards scraping at her hair and face and limbs. Fighting back, she kicks and kicks and pulls and pulls, swimming underwater as far out as she can before coming up for a breath. Breaking the surface of the water again is like breaking through ice.

She rolls over so she's floating on her back, looking up at the sky. She is shivering so hard she can hardly control her arms and legs and has to fight to keep her eyes open. The water is much too cold. There's no way she'll make it to the other side of the lake. She should start back to the dock, go home, dry off, get warm. But all those stars! She couldn't see them until all the lights went out.

Chapter 2: The Ghost Bike

Laure rides a bike so Tag decides to buy a bike. He scours Craigslist and when he finally finds one that looks like what he wants and that he can afford and arranges to meet the seller after work that day. He spends the next six hours at his desk in the dentist's office with the ad open in a tab so he can admire the the curve of the handlebars between patients' arrivals. At five o'clock sharp he powers down his computer and stands up.

Got plans? The dentist asks.

I'm going to buy a bike, Tag says, and then to meet my girlfriend.

The dentist hired Tag six months previous as her receptionist at the recommendation of his brother-in-law and he has never had somewhere to be. He has never revealed anything about his life outside the dentist's office. There isn't much to reveal. But he likes saying bike. He likes saying girlfriend. It feels like he's saying, see?

Where are you getting it?

The guy's in Wicker Park.

You know how to get there?

Kind of.

He has an idea, but it's a part of the city he hasn't been to before. When he mentioned his plans to her over text Laure offered to go with him, but he said no.

Outside the silhouette of Chicago rises up around him, blocking out the sun. Tag only visited once before he moved here, during his last year at Woolman. His brother-in-law arranged an interview with the dentist. He has lived here for six months but he still hasn't been to most parts of the city. He sleepwalks through his daily routine, apartment to bus stop to dentists' to bus stop to apartment. It's gotten better since he found Laure. The routine has broken a little. But still he

will look up during the day and realize he has no idea what he's doing or how he got there. Tag has to put down a hand on to root himself. It's a feeling he remembers from trying to fall asleep when he was little. Laying horizontal in the soft bed, head heavy, drifting into a dream, the warm peace of sleep--when suddenly the edge of the bed drops away and he is not horizontal at all but bent at the waist at a right angle, hanging over the edge of a cliff. He screamed once and sat straight up. His mother came running to see what was wrong. But there was nothing. He wasn't falling. His organs, which he'd felt sliding down through his legs and out his toes all seemed to be in the right place. There was nothing wrong at all. That's what living in Chicago is like. It happens walking southwest on Grand to the dentist's. Eating lunch alone in the neighborhood taqueria. In bed in the apartment he shares with Keith. Once he woke up from a dream that he was seven again and could have sworn he heard his mother's voice. It must have been a neighbor.

He told Laure about that, even though it happened months before he found her. They were laying in his bed in the Humbolt Park apartment where it happened, listening to the neighbors fight on the other side of the wall. It was March then, still winter. Sleet licked the window. Laure wore a huge sweatshirt and her nose was pink, brown hair tense with static.

I woke up and I heard her voice and I reached with for the lamp that was in the bedroom I had as a kid and when there wasn't anything there I had this moment of panic. Like I forgot the last nineteen years of my life happened. I forgot moved away and got my own apartment. I forgot I grew up. Do you know what I'm talking about? he asked her.

Laure frowned, forehead wrinkled, lips pursed. I think so, she said. Maybe. I don't know. I couldn't wait to grow up.

That's one of his favorite things about her, how excited she is for adulthood, that the things that terrify him energize her. She only moved to the city recently, to take a job in the marketing

department of a magazine. But even though he has lived in Chicago six months longer than she has, she knows it better than he does. Laure is the same age as Tag. They graduated the same year. But she is a grown-up, her apartment a grown-up's apartment, full of grown-up things. She drinks wine from actual wine glasses and has things like throw pillows and a refillable pepper grinder and a lace nightgown. Her books in the living room are alphabetical and she is never out of toilet paper.

You would love her, he told his mother on the phone.

What's her name? Laura?

Laure. There's no 'a. Actually, she went to Woolman.

What's she like? Did you know her at school?

In passing. We knew some of the same people.

Their past at Woolman is a jumble of puzzle pieces spread out on a table in front of him. He still isn't sure how he didn't know her better then. He gets flashes of memory: Laure in a group of freshmen at a party back campus. Her face in a circle sharing a cigarette on a cold night outside a party. Her long form draped over a chair in a classroom. That red coat, seen across the quad. She was the girl who cried at parties because her boyfriend ignored her. He had friends who liked that, liked that she was fragile, had crushes on her. But if someone had told him that someday he'd be clinging to that girl, that one, over there like a life raft, that someday he'd know what it feels like to have her palms on either side of his face, he wouldn't have believed them.

His mother never liked that he moved to Chicago.

It's too dangerous.

That's racist, mom.

No, it's not that. It's just that it's so big. You'll get lost.

Tag was too embarrassed to admit he felt that way too. He figured he could pretend to like it until he did.

That's what I do, Laure said when he confessed that.

He laughed.

No, seriously! I never like anything at first. I never understand anything until I'm looking back on it. And I hate not understanding. But it'll be okay. You just have to wait until it works itself out.

It was winter when he found her. Winter in Chicago is a good time to be somewhere else. Tag spent a lot of time in the library. The smell and stature of the building were comforting, like being back at Woolman, where he had the habit of hiding in the fiction stacks when he needed to be alone. One evening he pulled out the novel he wanted and saw a flash of red in the space behind it, on the opposite side of the stacks. He thought it was a book spine, some new addition to the collection, color not yet dulled by hundreds of hands. But it was a coat sleeve, reaching through to take the book opposite the one he had taken. A sleeve, a hand, an eye. Then, a voice, one he recognized, one that took him back.

Hey, didn't you go to Woolman? Tag, right? Tag Miller?

The relief of being recognized. When she said his name it took a minute to find his voice say, yes.

His mother would like Laure's apartment. Everything in its place.

The seller is mid-forties, greying. He brings the bike out to the street.

It's a good bike, he says. I just don't have time anymore.

Tag kneels down. This close the bike is not a bike at all but all the parts that make one up. This close he can see where the red paint of the frame is scratched, revealing the silver bones beneath. Headset, downtube, bottom bracket. Quiet squeaks from the fork when he swivels the handlebars. Grease on the chain when he inspects it for rust. When he turns the bike upside down so he can spin the pedals the gears' ragged breath seems to catch like it is excited at the prospect of movement.

It's a good bike, the seller repeats. It should be on the road again.

It's hard for Tag to connect this piecemeal skeleton with the brightly colored road bikes that whizz past him while he's walking or waiting for the bus on Division. City cyclists are deadly fast, like comic book images of the Flash or Superman, moving faster, seeing things a normal human can't. After their first date Laure had stuffed her long hair into her neon yellow helmet and shouted, call me! As she pedaled away, weaving in and out of traffic in the watery winter light, she was the brightest thing he had ever seen.

Tag asks the questions the Internet cautioned him to ask while buying a bicycle from a stranger over Craigslist. Do you know if it's been in any wrecks? Any problems with the brakes? How old is the frame? No. No. 2010. Nothing wrong with it.

He's half-hoping to find something obvious he can use to negotiate the price down, but he doesn't really know what to look for. It does seem like a nice bike, or at least he thinks it does.

Wanna take a test ride?

The bike quivers like it can't sit still. Tag, tentative, swings his right leg over, bends forward to wrap his hands around the handlebars. He rides in circles around the block to test the stopping power, the shifters. At first it is awkward. The geometry of this bike is different from the

one he rode as a kid. The seat presses up uncomfortably and he is not used to being bent so far forward. He feels a little unstable. He can't tell he likes it or not.

Laure takes Tag to her favorite bike store so he can buy all the things he needs to ride a bike in the city. It's a store he's walked past a hundred times but never stopped in. Inside it smells like rubber and money. Shiny new bikes with four-digit price tags hang from the ceiling in a neat row on one side and on the other are arranged more bike accessories than Tag knew existed. While he considers the merits of LED versus halogen lights and whether or not he can afford thirty-five additional dollars for a USB rechargeable model, Laure goes to look at one of the bikes in the store window. One of the store employees, a muscled mechanic who is for some reason wearing lycra, starts talking to her and Tag hears her laughing. He picks up two U-locks and goes over, seeking her opinion for an excuse to interrupt. The mechanic is talking about a long bike ride he went on the weekend before with a group-- eighty miles on country roads.

You should come next time, the mechanic is saying to her as Tag approaches, and Laure says, Sure, yeah, let me know when you're going. She turns to smile at Tag. You should come too!

Tag smiles and nods. He holds up the two U-locks.

That one, definitely, the mechanic says immediately. Way better.

It's heavy, Tag says.

You could kill a guy with that thing! The mechanic assures him, like it's a selling point. Nobody's gonna cut through that.

You know that guy? Tag asks Laure when the mechanic returns to work.

Oh, Laure says, he did some work on my bike one time.

Tag buys the lock, lights, a helmet, puts it all on the credit card he had sworn not to use, the one his mother took out in his name for emergencies. On the way out he gestures to the bike in the window Laure was looking at. Is this the bike you want?

When she starts pointing out the details she loves she is like a kid in a candy store.

He wishes he liked anything as much as Laure likes bikes. I love it, he says, looking at her.

It's true that he's closer to Chicago, on the bike. Something has been peeled back, something has been cracked open. He sees things he didn't see before: taco stands and window displays, a gallery of graffiti tucked into an alley. Outside Joe Boston's Italian Beef on Grand there is a bike chained to a street sign, every inch the grainy white of spray paint. The tires are flat. The chain, looped around the frame, over and under, has a big padlock, the keyhole visibly rusted. There are dead flowers across the handlebars, woven through the spokes. Pillar candles line the pavement.

It's a ghost bike, Laure says when she sees him looking at it. They are stopped at a red light, traffic raging perpendicular. People make them when cyclists die, chain them up where they get hit.

He sees them everywhere. Intersections, narrow shoulders, harp turns. White paint bleeding rust, pedals stiff and frozen, warnings in the corner of his eye.. He has never seen a cyclist get struck but now every time he merges into traffic it occurs to him that his mother is right. The city is dangerous.

If I get hit by a car on my bike will you make me one? Laure asks.

Tag can't tell if she's kidding. She says things like this sometimes. Big, sweeping what-ifs.

If we're still together in the summer do you want to take a trip to Montreal? If my dad has that big birthday party he's planning for my stepmom's fortieth will you go with me? If we ever have a kid, I want you to be the one to read to it.

He doesn't know how to answer. He never does. Laure is traveling at hyperspeed, barrelling through time and space, and he still has trouble thinking a week ahead. He sprints after her through intersections, slides through red lights. He is barely able to keep up.

In the bike lane he mirrors how she signals her turns. She teaches him how to change lanes. She shows him backroads and shortcuts like she doesn't understand she's revealing a secret that he never would have uncovered. One weekend they go down Lakefront Trail all the way to the Museum of Science and Industry and on the path without stop signs Laure takes her hands off the bike and sits back in her seat with her arms stretched out like she's flying.

Try it! You just have to lean back.

He is shaking as he takes his own hands off the handlebars. He only lasts a second before the panic is too acute and he grabs at the headset like a fish out of water.

I feel like I'm going to fall.

That's what the helmet is for, she says cheerfully.

She teaches him how to fix a flat. The Tuesday afternoon after their ride to Hyde Park Tag came down from the dentist's to unlock his bike only to find the back tire sadly flaccid. He had to put it on the bus.

Why did it happen? he asks her.

Laure shrugs. Tiny piece of glass? Dry rot? Maybe you got a slow leak and the air pressure got low and the tube got pinched in the rim. Sometimes it just happens.

They are in her living room, his bike upside down so it's standing up on its saddle and handlebars. Laure is on her knees with a multitool taking the wheel off.

You use the levers to unzip the tire from the rim. You pull out the tube. It will probably have some air left in it and that's good because it's important to find the leak. You hold the tube right up to your ear, listen for the air. Sometimes you can't find the hole and you have to get the biggest mixing bowl you have and fill it with water, submerge the tube a couple inches at a time, working your way around the circumference. If you see bubbles, that's the leak. Now you know if it's worth patching the tube. This time, though, get a new one. Unwrap it and unfold it, find the valve. Inflate it just a little and put it back in the tube. Now's the hard part: getting the tire on again.

Tag does okay at first but no matter how hard he tries he can't get the last two inches back in the rim. Laure takes the tire and braces it against her thighs, pressing up with her thumbs. He can see her quivering. The tire pops into place. To finish the job she bears down on the bike pump, turning red from the effort, long hair sticking to her neck. She has bike grease on her cheek from where she wiped away sweat with her dirty hand. She gives a little grunt as she pumps away at the tire and at that moment Tag swears he remembers watching her do the exact same thing at the Woolman bike-coop. It's a sunny day in the parking lot and she's rosy-cheeked in a white tank-top, sweaty brown underarm hair tantalizingly visible on the upstroke but hidden on the down like a strip tease. When she knelt down and felt the newly-inflated tire, saying hard as a rock, he blushed.

I never worked at the bike co-op, she says when he brings it up. I don't think I ever went there. I didn't start riding a bike until that year I was abroad in Europe.

He is such an asshole. She is every girl he was ever in love with, or any of them.

What happened to all those girls he was in love with? Where did they go? Amanda Locke, the dreadlocked, lip-ringed Peace Studies major two years above him at Woolman, for whom Tag had shown up to protests and rallies and social justice info meetings every weekend of his freshman year in the hopes she would notice him. Lucy Chen, who, when they were naked for the first time, pushed his head down between her legs, something he didn't mind but didn't know he was supposed to do. Ellen Cooty, who he had a crush on in high school, who cried on the bus after he started a chant making fun of her last name. Every woman he made eye contact with across the bar those first six months in Chicago but didn't approach because what would he say? He had no idea how to approach women in bars. What would he say? Hi, I'm Tag. It sounds like a question when he says it.

I'm not trying to mess around, Laure told him early on. I want something serious. Something real. I'm ready.

Me too, he told her. I want that too.

He does want it. He wants it so badly it feels like holding his breath. Laure understands so much, has her life sorted and put away so she can take memories down from the shelf and open them up at will.

Do remember that party where the pipe in the basement burst? Do you remember the time that Olivia started a naked dance party on the quad? Did you have Professor Kearns for Contemporary Social Thought? I loved that class.

He says he remembers. Sometimes he really does. The truth is he has trouble understanding things even while they're happening to him.

I saw that exhibit last weekend with my partner, he hears her say across the room at a house party, and for a minute he has to wonder who she's talking about. It doesn't sound like him.

The mechanic from the bike store is leading a group ride on backroads.

Do you want to come?

Be careful, the dentist says when he tells her his weekend plans. I've seen people who wiped out and got a mouth full of cement.

He's not sure that he'll be able to keep up. He's only been biking for a few weeks. But he pushes it away. He is Laure's boyfriend, going on a group ride with Laure for fun on a weekend. The group, six of them, including Tag and Laure and the mechanic, are going to bike up out of the city and through the suburbs to get to the winding rural roads they will ride through the cornfields.

There is no destination. They'll ride until they're hungry, thirty-five or forty miles, take a break for lunch, and bike back to the city. He knows he's made a mistake before they even get out of the city. Everyone is in spandex except for him.

So, Laure's mechanic friend calls back to him as they ride single file on the shoulder, Laure says you guys met in college?

Tag can't find a comfortable gear. His legs spin uselessly.

Yeah. Yeah, we went to school together.

That's cool, the mechanic says.

What's cool? Laure calls, dropping back to ride beside him. From Tag's vantage behind them she and the mechanic make a tidy pair, their perfectly round butts a matching set, their legs spinning in unison. It looks like they are the couple, the kind of couple who goes on rides like this every weekend.

You went to college together.

Oh, yeah, she says.

The mechanic says something that gets lost in the wind. Tag strains and strains to catch up. He hears Laure laugh.

No, not really. It was just college.

Tag's stomach clenches. What had the mechanic said? The group pulls ahead, nearly out of sight, all gliding through a busy intersection just as the light changes from green to yellow. It's red when Tag gets to it but he grits his teeth and pedals harder, trying to catch up.

The car that catches his back wheel is a dark blue subaru. It honks when it hits him, and Tag lands in the gutter with his bike on top of him, helmet cracking against the curb. He makes eye contact with the driver for a split second before the subaru drives off. His impression is of a white guy in a Cubs hat, features blurred by wind and speed.

Tag stares as the car disappears around the corner. He should get the plate number. But the rear license plate is missing, or blank, or maybe it's just that his eyes can't seem to focus. He lays in the street for a minute. His knee is bleeding through his jeans and it feels like the world is spinning very fast all around him. It is only a minute before Laure and the mechanic and their friends, who heard the honk and the crash, are all there around him but it is long enough for him to reverse-age, becoming younger and younger until he is six years old on the gravel outside his house, falling off his bike after trying to ride for the first time.

Oh my God. Laure dismounts her bike smoothly, lays it on the sidewalk. She rushes to him. Oh my God, are you okay?

Just scraped up. Tag is hot with embarrassment and is more aware than ever that he is sweaty, that his inner thighs are rubbed raw, that he would never in a million years wear spandex in public.

The driver didn't even stop, Laure marvels.

One of her friends says: Welcome to being a cyclist.

It's a fast intersection, someone else says, and nods at a white bike chained up across the street. It hasn't been visited for a while. The flowers spun through the spokes are black and twisted. Tag shuts his eyes and leans back against Laure, who takes his hand. He imagines his bike painted white, locked up and left at the corner. Was he a enough of a cyclist to get a ghost bike?

Man, if it were me, I would have gone after that asshole, the mechanic says.

Tag wishes he would shut up. He feels like crying. He didn't know he signed up for this. He takes his hand away from Laure. Having her hold it makes him feel even more like a child.

The mechanic picks Tag's bike up and looks at it. The tire and the rim are both fucked. You're gonna need a new wheel.

A new wheel? I just bought the bike!

The mechanic shrugs. Should only run you about a hundred dollars if you install it yourself.

Listen, Laure says soothingly, and links her arm through his. The important thing is that you're okay. And it could have been much worse. It's an easy fix.

Her spandexed bike friends all nod enthusiastically. But Tag feels like an idiot. Laure's pity makes him feel sick to his stomach.

It's not, actually, he says. It's not an easy fix, because I'm completely broke, and I don't know anything about bikes! He jerks his arm away from hers, and the force of it knocks her backwards. She sits down on the asphalt, hard.

There is an awkward silence that makes Tag realize just how loud he was. Laure's eyes harden.

Whoa, man, the mechanic says. Be cool.

Tag and Laure ride the El in silence back to Laure's neighborhood.

Do you want to get a drink or something? Tag asks finally.

I actually have a lot of work to do, she says. I think I'll spend the rest of the day with myself, just, you know, taking care of things around the house.

Right, Tag says. Me too. I'll go fix this wheel.

After she disappears into her apartment he takes the bike to a shop, where he buys a new wheel.

You want me to show you how to do it? The guy offers. It's just a couple screws.

That sick-stomach feeling again. Laure would say yes. Laure probably already knows how. How do other people know so much?

Nah, he says.

In the morning he calls to apologize.

I'm sorry I lost my temper. I was just. I was upset.

It takes her a minute to answer.

I guess I just wish you hadn't yelled at me, she says.

He knows, and he tells her.

If we're going to do this thing then you can't yell at me, Laure says. Her voice is stern. I know you were upset and that's okay but you can't take it out on me, okay?

He knows, and he tells her. Will you come over tonight? I want to make you dinner.

She hesitates. But accepts.

Tag takes the train to the big grocery store in the suburbs where he buys a Swiffer and a gallon of counter cleaner and the ingredients for chicken parmesan and a thirteen dollar bottle of wine that is ten dollars more expensive than any bottle of wine he's ever before purchased. He doesn't even blink at the expense. Up until now he has been drifting along, letting things happen to him, but he is going to take control of the situation. He can't believe he lashed out at Laure. That isn't the kind of partner Laure needs. He is the kind of serious man a serious woman like Laure deserves, or at least, he can be.

When he gets home he goes to work. He scrubs the counters, mops the floors, dusts every surface. When everything is clean and the chicken is in the oven there is half an hour until Laure is supposed to arrive. Tag sits down and takes a breath. His apartment is cleaner than it's ever been. His mother would be proud. He pictures Laure coming in and looking around. He imagines himself pouring her a glass of wine, something college Tag would never have done. He imagines himself handing it to her. Sorry, baby, I know I was an asshole.

Except he doesn't own any wine glasses.

Tag looks in the cupboard. Before started spending most of his time at Laure's he was happy to drink out of old pickle or jam jars rinsed from the recycling bin. But he can't serve wine to Laure in an old jam jar.

He looks at the clock. There is a thrift store a mile away that will have glassware.

The bicycle, leaning against the wall by the door, cocks its head. If he bikes, he can make it.

He buckles his helmet and sticks his U-lock into the waistband of his jeans. His injured knee hurts on every downstroke and the wind is uncomfortably cold on his face and knuckles. He

tries to remember that he is saving the planet. He tries to remember how endearing Laure's pink wind-chapped cheeks can be. He is thinking about the look on Laure's face when she tastes the dinner he's made for her when, stopped at a light, he glances right and sees it: a dark blue Subaru, missing a back license plate.

It's the same car. It's the same car. No back license plate, and he swears he recognizes the Cubs sticker in the window, so close Tag could reach out and touch it.

He moves forward in his lane a few feet to peer up and into the drivers' seat, to see if it really is the same guy who hit him -- but the light turns green and the blue Subaru accelerates, pulling forward. In that second the driver looks over and Tag knows it is the same person from the day before. They make eye contact and he is back on the pavement, Laure patting his arm like a mother would a child's.

HEY, Tag yells. His heart is pounding. HEY. The driver still doesn't see or hear him, or, if he does, doesn't care. Tag grits his teeth and leans forward and pedals harder. He pedals as hard as he can, huffing and puffing. He can feel himself sweating through his shirt. But it doesn't matter. He is Laure's boyfriend. He is a cyclist. This is what cyclists do. This is what men do.

It's at the next red light that he catches up to the car, careening in dangerously close between two lanes of traffic, thumping the back of the subaru with the palm of his hand. The driver looks up. Tag is so angry he doesn't stop to think. He pulls up alongside, reaches back into his waistband and pulls out his U-lock. Holding it by the crossbar, he raises it high above the driver side window.

A face blinks up at him, terrified: a petite woman, staring at him in horror. Beside her in the passenger seat is a man Tag's age, the guy Tag thought he recognized. He can see now it's a completely different person.

What the fuck, man? What the fuck? What's your fucking problem?

Tag stands there as the light turns green, the U-lock hanging from his hand, the bike between his legs. All around him cars are honking. The couple in the car is still gaping at him. Then, from the sidewalk: Tag?

It is Laure, coming out of the liquor store on the corner. She is holding a brown bag with a bottle of wine poking out of the top and her mouth is hanging open in horror. Tag is standing there, useless, U-lock still poised to smash in the window of the subaru. There is no way for him explain himself. He doesn't know what to say. He doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know what his fucking problem is.

Chapter 3: The Rope Swing

Dark December, the kind of weather that feels like a warning. The school bus creaks to a stop at the end of the side road that leads up through the fields to the next handful of Iowa farmhouses. They are visible from the road but just barely, scattered like toys someone forgot to put away. Barn doors splinter. Paint chips. Children spill off the bus, bright puffy coats in drugstore candy flavors like fruit punch and strawberry shortcake and lime. When they are safely on the shoulder the bus pulls away again, dust rising in its wake, wheels crunching loose asphalt.

It is too cold for playing outside to be any fun without snow, but the clouds overhead have so far refused. Children wander home in huddles of two or three up the long road with their heads down, peeling off at the ends of longer driveways. Only three boys remain, undeterred by the cold, refusing to give up an afternoon of freedom no matter how unpleasant the weather. Seven years old, they bolt into the fields, stomping down the dry brown grass to leave footprints in the frozen soil. The most definite thing on the horizon is a quarter mile away, a woods they call a forest. They plunge in, follow the well-worn path as it narrows and twists, jumping, echoing shouts shocking wrens and waxwings into flight.

There is a clearing where they play, by the bank where the creek widens. In the spring and winter all the children run wild in these woods, using fallen trees for cover during snowball fights, wading in the creek when it is warm. From one naked maple hangs a frayed brown rope. It has been there for so long no one remembers who put it up or when, but when the water is deep the braver ones swing and drop. Today the water is only a few inches deep and frozen over, but Joe and Luke shed their backpacks and fight over who gets to go first on the rope swing. Joe, shorter and quicker of the two, gets a hold of the rope, gears up, leaps. He lets out a whoop that cracks the

cold afternoon as he arcs over the ice and releases the rope to land neatly on the opposite bank. The branch that holds the rope bends, relenting, yielding to his weight, creaks back into place. Luke scrambles to retrieve the rope, wobbling on the edge of the creekbank. He joins Joe on the other side.

Tag!

Tag, come on!

But the third boy shakes his head. He is drawing in the dirt with a stick, imagining a secret symbol that, when the light touches, will transform him into a hero with powers of flight and strength or itself into a portal to a spaceship or the future, something, somewhere or someone else. He hopes that if something like that happens to him he is brave enough to go. He knows it's made up but he can't shake the fear even when he's playing that he won't be heroic enough or that even if he makes it through the adventure he'll get stuck on the other side of the portal and won't ever be able to get back. Lots of things could go wrong. He has never been on the rope swing. His mother says it is dangerous, put up by teenagers who didn't know what they were doing. The rope is frayed, knots haphazard, tree brittle and too old, Tag too young to understand.

Are you sure?

Yeah.

The truth is Tag is scared of the rope swing, of the fall into the creek if the branch should break or his grip on the rope give way. Sometimes he wants to join his friends and swing across, but most of the time he is happy to have the excuse of his mother. She has made it clear that something incredibly unpleasant will happen to him if he ever does, and Tag has no doubt that this is true. Joe and Luke respect that. They have mothers, too. Besides, they like Tag. They have all been friends since the beginning of elementary school when they met on the bus. Tag is happy to

go anywhere or do anything, willing to share his lunch, willing to break a lull or silence with a joke or at least pull out a comic book they can all look at. Later, when they are grown up men their seven-year-old selves would not recognize, after Joe has moved to the West Coast to gain a following as a right-wing talk show host, at Luke's wedding to a girl from Cedar Rapids, they will remember Tag. They will wonder what became of him in the way you always wonder about things from your childhood you can't really remember but recall, sometimes, when the light looks a particular way on a particular tree that looks just like the trees did that afternoon. Neither will be able to remember the last time they saw him. The whole Miller family stopped going to church, stopped showing up. Maybe it was high school graduation, or the winter after, when he was back in town for the semester break from that college he went to, in, where did he wind up? Today, if Tag doesn't want to go on the rope swing: more turns for each of them.

Joe and Luke take turns swinging back and forth across the bank, Tag watching from the sidelines, until the sun starts to set. These days the afternoons start to end as soon as they begin. It is only four but the light is half-hearted, the sun exhausted from the effort of struggling to be seen through the clouds. The boys gather their backpacks.

When he gets home his father's truck is in the driveway beside his mother's van. His father isn't usually home this early. The back door is ajar. Tag takes off his coat and boots in the mudroom. There is something wrong with the house, a quiver in the air and in the walls. His parents are on the other side of the mudroom door, in the kitchen.

...please. Don't. I can't--

You can't? You can't? You think you get to ask me for anything?

They look up when Tag enters. There is no beginnings of dinner anywhere in sight, not even a snack on the counter. Tag's mother is on one side of the kitchen table and his father is on the other. He takes a deep breath.

Hey there, buddy. Where have you been?

His mother doesn't say anything. She doesn't even look at him.

Outside.

Why don't you go upstairs and do your homework, Tag's father recommends. He has never been home at homework time. If he had, he'd know homework doesn't happen upstairs.

Tag knocks on his older sister's door. He knows she's in there because he can hear her stereo. When she doesn't answer he goes in anyway. Tabitha is sitting on the floor with a book in her lap and the dog beside her, but she is not reading. She is looking straight ahead, chewing her lip.

What?

What's happening?

He has never seen this look on Tabitha's face before. Come in, she says.

Dad's home. Tag sits down beside her, legs crossed. The dog adjusts so his head is in Tag's lap and Tabitha shifts so the side of her body is pressed against the side of Tag's.

Will you be quiet? The kids are upstairs!

You think I don't know the kids are upstairs?

Tabitha shuts her book shut the same time someone downstairs slams a door.

You wanna pick a new CD?

She has never offered to let him pick the CD before. Now he is really scared. She is being so suddenly, so obviously nice to him that he is embarrassed for her. He wants to look away. To

make it end he nods and she stands up to get the plastic milk crate she keeps her CDs in. A car pulls into the driveway outside. The whole house feels like the kettle Tag's mother uses to boil water for tea, right before the whistle sounds. The dog, anxious but too old to do anything about it, gives a mournful, high-pitched whine without opening his mouth or raising his head from his paws.

You can pick anything you want.

The door opens and their grandmother comes in. Both Tag and Tabitha look up, surprised. They didn't know she was there.

Why don't the two of you run out the back door and go play outside for a while?

I just got back from being outside, Tag says. He does not want to go.

Grandma waves this away.

That dog needs a walk. You better work up an appetite-- I'm taking you out to dinner later! How does pizza sound?

Her voice is not her voice. Pizza sounds terrible. Tag and Tabitha rise dutifully and go downstairs. In the kitchen their mother grips the pinewood kitchen table, white-knuckled. Both parents are silent as their children file past. Then their mother turns and stomps out of sight and their father follows. Their conversation is low, too soft to hear very well, but their voices are quick and sharp.

In the mudroom, Tag and Tabitha put on their puffy jackets, waterproof gloves, mismatched hats and scarves. Their winter layers are so heavy that in the half inside, half outside mudroom Tag starts to sweat between putting on his coat and giving his scarf the final twist around his neck.

Through two walls and a door:

...your responsibilities!

Responsibilities! Maybe she should come here and make the kids dinner, maybe she should drive them to piano lessons and soccer practice, maybe she--

Tag and Tabitha make their way down the long driveway, past their mother's van, their father's truck, the new addition of their grandmother's car. The sight reminds Tag of Christmas, which is when his grandmother usually drives down from Des Moines. Is Christmas close? He can't be sure. It is cold enough to be Christmas.

The dog is sniffing along beside them down the dirt drive and now pads over to where the field starts, looks back hopefully.

Go ahead, Tabitha says, and he takes off. Tag and Tabitha follow him, wandering through the fields Tag came from.

Years from now, driving home from Chicago with Laure in the passenger seat, Tag feels heavy driving through those fields. Quiet boy became quiet man. He is thoughtful, tries to think before he speaks. But in these moments he's even quieter. The country highway is the portal he wished he had when he was a kid, but in the wrong direction, swinging back, back, back. He's as afraid now like he was then that he will be stranded on the wrong side.

You do this sometimes, Laure will say, reaching over to put a hand on his shoulder. You go cold. It's like she is comforting a child, and maybe she is, maybe she can reach all the way back. It is her first time visiting the place where he grew up and her presence feels at odd with what surrounds them. Outside the car Tag is seven, walking the dog with his sister. Inside it he is twenty-nine, on his way home with the woman he is going to marry.

Where are you? Laure asks.

In the woods, pine needles crunching under his boots. The dog darting in and out of trees. He and Tabitha follow the frozen creek, back the way Tag went with Joe and Luke, back into the woods.

Come back to me, Laure will say, wrinkling her nose, smiling.

Seven, Tag asks his sister: Who's mom talking about?

Who? Tabitha squints up at the tree's bare arms.

Tag doesn't know how to answer. He doesn't know who the woman his mother had shouted about is. That's why he asked.

Dad's friend. You know.

Tabitha shakes her head. Her hair, crimped and brown like a woven basket, is spilling out of her hat. She yanks it down so it covers her eyebrows.

I don't.

They have come to the clearing with the rope swing. On the other side of the creek the trees thin and thin and the neat backyards of the development are visible, or at least the ones that aren't fenced off. His mother calls those houses McMansions, and they are nicer than Tag's family's house. He knows because he has been there, for birthday parties or end of the school year celebrations. Events where the whole class is invited.

Take off your shoes, his mother reminds him when she drops him off at parties like that. They have white carpet.

Twenty years later Tag and Laure pass the highway exits that lead to those same developments and they can see the tops of the houses sticking over the noise barriers. They look photoshopped, unsuited for the landscape.

Those suburbs are terrible, he'll say to Laure. Cookie-cutter houses.

He doesn't know what Laure expects his father's house to look like--she grew up in a suburb, one on the East Coast, the kind these Midwestern developments are based on.

Cookie-cutter lives, Laure will say lightly. I never want to live in the suburbs.

Really?

I don't think so. We moved to Scarsdale from the city when I was eleven and I hated living there. The city just felt more real to me.

I guess suburbs are supposed to be a better place to raise kids.

Yeah, I guess. I don't know.

There's a house Tag's mother visits sometimes on the way home from grocery shopping or soccer practice. Tag playing Gameboy in the backseat of the minivan notices a sudden quiet and look up, expecting to be home only to find that they are stopped in a pipestem outside a house that doesn't belong to them. It looks like all the other houses on the street but he recognizes the flowerbeds, the sign over the door with letters big enough that Tag can read from where they park near the curb: Welcome to Our Happy Home. He recognizes the woman who lives there, her shiny black car, the big sunglasses on top of her head. Tag watches his mother watch her carrying in her groceries, cell phone trapped between her ear and her shoulder, a big smile on her face.

Tag goes to the rope swing and gives it a tug, sends it across the creek.

Tabitha is kneeling in the dirt making a bouquet of dead leaves but looks up when she hears the tree branches creaking overhead. What are you doing?

Their mother said she always would know what he did, no matter what happened. That she could always see. But he walked right past her in the kitchen, twice, and she did not even look up.

The rope has swung back to him and Tag takes it in his hand again.

Tag, no. Tabitha stands, dusts off her jeans. The dog's ears prick up. Come on. Don't touch that.

Tag backs up as far as the rope will stretch.

You know you're not supposed to. Taggert Miller, don't you dare!

Tag does know he's not supposed to. But he wants to stand on the other side of the bank. It's right there. All he has to do is jump.

He runs and leaps.

There is an incredible whooshing in his stomach as he pulls his feet off the ground, knees to his chest. Tabitha is yelling, but he can't hear her. The wind against his ears applauds his daring and bravery. For a second he is flying. But mid-air he looks down.

He forgot to be afraid, but if he falls, he will surely drown. The creek bed, which had looked so narrow, has widened into a canyon, the trickle of moving water that had escaped the freeze now a raging rapids. Then brown water gives way to brown bank and he is on the opposite side of the creek.

He is supposed to let go, but he can't. Joe and Luke never told him but this is the hard part, deciding to fall to the ground. Tag's fingers are locked around the rope, knuckles white like his mother's on the counter. The rope swings back again, taking Tag backwards over the center of the creek. He is over the water and the rope is slowing and the wind is louder, laughing at him. Then he is over the side of the creek he started on.

Let go! Let go!

Tag hears his sister, but he can't, he can't. The rope swings forward a second time and he knows he has to let go when he is over the ground--he will not swing far enough a third time.

What did I do? What did I do? What did I do? What he did, he can't take back.

He lets go. But it is a moment too soon. The rope didn't carry him far enough over the ground. His feet slip on the frozen grass where it slopes down to the creekbed. For a minute he tries to find footing, but there is nothing to hold and no treads for his feet. He lands on his hands and knees in the icy creek.

Tabitha screams. The water is so cold he doesn't notice he's hurt until a red tinge in the water makes him look more closely and realize his palm came down on a sliver of broken glass nestled between two rocks, disguised under ice until he slammed into it. Blood and water everywhere but neither seems to be a part of him. Tabitha is still screaming. The dog barks.

Tag swipes at the cut on his palm, trying to clear it of blood and dirt so he can see how big the wound is. It's hard to tell because it's bleeding so fast that as soon as he wipes it off more blood has covered it.

Mom is going to kill me.

He climbs out of the creek with one hand and an elbow, dripping. The dog licks blood off his shoe.

You have to go to the hospital. We have to call 911. We have to tell grandma! Tabitha is breathless from the effort of being so bossy.

But if he goes to the hospital there is no way his mother won't find out.

No! It's just little. Tag turns away from her, holding his hand close to his chest. He sees his gloves on the ground and grabs them, puts his bleeding hand in, starts towards home. His cheeks are burning with embarrassment and his hand in the glove is throbbing with the prospect of his mother finding out he went on the rope swing. He'll go in through the mudroom still wearing his coat and his gloves, beeline for the bathroom where he can wash the cut, put on a bandaid. Then he can go set the table. By now his mother will be finishing dinner, surely. Everything will be back to normal.

Tabitha's legs are longer but Tag is quicker. His sister struggles to keep up.

Let me see it!

No! They pass the treeline, like breaking the surface of dark water, into the cold winter sunset over the fields.

Let me see it!

He just has to get to the house before her. He starts running. His hand throbs with every step and the cold hurts his lungs when he breathes deep. The dog runs with him, barking joyfully, and Tabitha follows, one hand on her hat. Tag turns onto road, bolts down the gravel road towards the long driveway up to the farmhouse. Behind him Tabitha is shouting, Mom! Mom! even though they can both already see the minivan is gone. It is just their father's truck, their grandmother's sedan. Their grandmother herself appears at the window, having heard Tabitha's shouts, and when Tag sees her long face peek past the lace curtains he veers left and heads into the fields behind the house, ducks into the barn, pulls the door shut behind him. He climbs up into the hayloft, lays down so he won't be visible from the door. The dog is running frantic laps from the shut door to the ladder, whining, occasionally pausing to look up at where the boy disappeared.

Nestled in the hay, Tag pulls off his glove and blood pours out like it's the bathtub faucet. His head spins. His vision goes cloudy. He rests his head back and shuts his eyes.

He can't believe what he did. His mother will be even angrier than she already is. He can almost hear it: what were you thinking? What were you thinking?

What were you thinking? Laure asks, when he tells her.

I don't know. I never went on the swing before. She told me not to and I didn't. I was that kind of kid. But that day I just. I just really wanted to, I guess.

No. I meant, why did you hide?

His face and his arm are wet from tears and blood and it feels like he is dripping away down a drain, like maybe he will disappear, hidden from the remainder of this terrible day. When he stops bleeding he will go inside. His mother never has to know.

It is the dog that gives him away. He has a habit, has had ever since he was a puppy, of singing along with sirens. Tag opens his eyes to the the crunch of gravel and the plaintive wail of the ambulance, tugging at some instinct, some deep buried knowlege long remembered but not understood in the dog and he is stirred to join in: he howls, wolf-like: I hear you, I hear you, I'm here.

Laure will take his hand in both of hers like it belongs to her. She will run her fingers over the scar on his palm, Trace the rough skin regrown over Tag's lifeline.

I have a theory.

They will be parked in the driveway outside that same rambling farmhouse where Tag's father still lives. The sagging porch is a slow smile, the shutters tired eyes. Inside, Tabitha and her husband have already settled in, Tabitha taking charge of their father's house, preparing dinner while her daughter helps grandpa decorate the tree. No one inside knows Tag and Laure have pulled up yet, and they will savor the last couple minutes of quiet.

What's your theory?

You must have known something was wrong. Between your parents. At least in the back of your head. Maybe you fell on purpose.

Tag will understand what she means. You might accuse a child of doing something forbidden, something dangerous, for attention. Kids act out. Try to regain control of situations swung out of their control. It is a relief to have Laure's steady voice unpacking and sorting his memories for him, reflecting it all back. And maybe she's right; maybe he fell on purpose. But if

that's it, he didn't know it then and he can't say now. What he remembers is knowing that his mother would explode when she found out, rage at him, envelop him in it.

Right, Laure will tell him, as though this proves her point, as though it's obvious. That's what you wanted.

What's odd is, Tabitha does not remember that day at all. Tag will bring it up at dinner on Christmas Eve of that same trip, Laure's first trip to Iowa with him.

Do you remember the time the time they had to leave the house because their parents were fighting, and I went on the rope swing, and cut my hand open?

We were sent out to walk the dog, Tabitha will frown, but that wasn't the day you cut your hand on the rope swing.

Yes it was, argues Tag. It definitely was.

Their father has gone to bed. Tabitha's husband is putting their daughter to bed. She and Tag and Laure remain at the dinner table among the dirty plates and food scraps, sharing a second bottle of wine.

No, no, no, she'll say, shaking her head. You're remembering wrong. The rope swing was a different day.

Laure watches, eyes flicking from Tag to Tabitha as they each speak. It started out funny but Tag's voice gets loud. I think I know what I remember.

You were only seven!

Huh, Laure says lightly, stepping into refill their glasses. Tag will grip his so tightly it quivers. His teeth will be clenched and he won't know why.

The dog barks. Footsteps. Grandma's voice. The EMTs find him cowering in the hay, covered in his own blood. At the hospital, Tabitha can't stop crying. Tag himself is cried out. His

face is hot and dry and puffy, like a scab. He wishes he could pick it off. He wishes he could go to sleep. When he lays down on the paper-covered bed in a room to wait it is not nearly as comfortable as the hayloft. The nurse touches his hand very gently, asking him if it hurts, telling him he's brave. He doesn't feel brave. The hand might as well belong to someone else. When the doctor comes in to look at it she tells Tag that there is still some glass in the cut, that she will have to remove it. Then there will be stitches.

Tag's heart pounds. He has never had stitches but he's had friends who have and he knows it means someone sewing your skin. Tabitha, who is standing in the corner with their grandmother, knows this too. She cries harder. I hate you, she screams. I hate you, Tag, I hate you, I hate you. One I hate you for every one of the four stitches he gets before the nurse tells their grandmother they have to go out to the waiting room. As she drags Tabitha down the hall Tag can still hear his sister crying harder about his wound than he did when he got it. After, when their grandmother drives them to Pizza Kingdom, Tabitha is silent in the backseat, arms folded tightly over her stomach like she is trying to keep herself from flying into pieces. Tag gets the front, the dog curled up at his feet, hand bandaged to twice its regular size. On the way out of the E.R. the nurse gave him a balloon shaped like a dinosaur head and he can't even enjoy it because of him hard Tabitha is fuming behind him.

But at the restaurant their grandmother lets them order three three-topping pizzas because they can't decide what they want, plus the extra big pops that come with curly straws and unlimited refills. Tag has already finished his first one when his father comes in, looking exhausted.

You were brave today, buddy. His father ruffles his hair.

It seems like he is not in trouble after all. In fact, maybe the opposite: no one is mad except Tabitha, who is calmer now anyway, and everyone is being very nice to him. The waitresses brings

him a Jurassic Park sticker to match his balloon and he is allowed to eat as much pizza as he wants. The dog gets to stay, too, sleeping under the table.

Where's mom? Tag asks the table. Where was mom? he'll ask Tabitha. If it was different days then why didn't mom come to the restaurant with us after the hospital? The dining room will be tight, the same feeling he remembers from when he got back from playing in the fields with Joe and Luke the day he later fell of the rope swing.

Because it was after the divorce, Tabitha will tell him forcefully. Laure puts a hand on Tag's knee under the table. It was after the divorce. She had already left. I'm positive.

In Pizza Kingdom, Tag's grandmother is busy consolidating pieces of pizza onto one plate. Wipe your face. She attacks his cheek with a napkin.

Mom might come later, their father says in answer to Tag's question.

Grandma says we can have dessert, Tabitha says to Tag. Everyone's face is smiling.

They stay at Pizza Kingdom for a long time. He remembers that outside the sky shudders and relents and snow starts to fall soft and silent. He remembers that every time he hears the bells above the restaurant door jingle he looks up. I remember, he'll tell Laure after that dinner with Tabitha, after the dishes have been cleared and everyone has gone to bed except Tag and Laure. They are on the couch in the living room. Snow will fall then, too, but snow falls every winter Iowa. It doesn't necessarily mean anything.

I know what Tabitha said. But I really do remember.

I know.

I know I was seven, but I know what happened.

I believe you. If you say that's how it happened then that's how it happened. I believe you.

Tag will clench his fist to cover the scar there. Laure will unfold his fingers and kiss his palm. I remember. I remember. I kept looking up, but she never came.

Chapter 4: The Hunger

I just want to go home.

All the other campers are at dinner. Laurie was crying too hard to eat her turkey meatloaf.

Nell pats her back. I know how you feel, she says. But home will still be there when you get back, Laurie!

Camp is one of those rare things that she feels the same way about when she's grown up as she did when she was a kid. Sometimes you look back on the things adults said to you when you were younger and realize they were right. This is not one of those times. When she's older Laurie will remember camp and think maybe she should become a camp counselor and find a kid who hates camp and say what Nell should have said: camp is the fucking worst.

Eleven years old. Summer before middle school. There was real life and then there is camp. Her parents are in the middle of getting divorced, amicably, which is maybe worse than the other thing because everything gets talked about over and over and over. It might have been easier if he just left.

The summer before she spent in the city and it was one long picnic in Prospect Park, watching the paddleboats and tourists, days stretched out like taffy, long and sticky and slow. At camp everything is on a schedule, which at least makes it easier to count down until it's over. Eighteen more breakfasts, eighteen more lunches, eighteen more dinners. Eighteen days of reciting the camp promise to Listen, Engage, Ask, Respect, Never Stop Having Fun! Nine more art projects that Nell will say are good even though they've turned out badly, twelve excuses for not swimming in the booger-green lagoon, forty-nine songs she doesn't know the lyrics to, a hundred and forty-four hours of sleeping in a bag. Countless mosquito bites. This is camp. I didn't enjoy anything. I ticked off everything that happened on a big calendar in my head of everything that had to happen before I could go home.

In the Main Lodge she hears Morning Announcements and does Community Building. She eats at long communal tables that stick splinters in her thighs. During Afternoon Active Time in the field up on the hill she tries to catch things that are thrown at her until she just stops trying. At night on the way back from the All-Camp Sing-A-Long her flashlight only shows three feet in front of her and up above there are a million stars to remind her how small she is.

No light pollution means you can see the Milky Way, Nell told the whole eleven-twelve girls' unit on the first night. It means we are so in touch with Nature.

But that's wrong. No light pollution means they are far far from everything, as far as the darkest part of the sea where there are fish with mutant fangs scuttling around trying to eat each other. Laurie learned about them on the Nature Channel before her parents sent her away from New York for camp. There were no pictures of those fish because no one has ever seen them, just footage of the deep water with scary music playing. Laurie didn't mind that when it was behind the television screen and she could hear the trucks five floors below delivering to the bodega on the corner. But at camp the nature is not a safe distance away. The cabins are deep in the woods and the trees and bugs and who-knows-what in the brush are never quiet. Be careful of poison ivy. Stay on the path. Always take a buddy. Can't you sleep better out here away from the sounds of the city? But pretty much every leaf grows in threes. They're all green and no one wants to be Laurie's buddy. She can't blame them. Who wants to be friends with the kid who cries all the time? Laurie doesn't like Laurie either.

In the dark, trying to fall asleep in a sticky nylon cocoon, every mutter and rustle pricks like a thorn. Whoever said woods are peaceful has never been to the woods.

I would really like to talk to my mom, Laurie says to the camp director. All the other campers are eating dinner, but Laurie couldn't. The turkey meatloaf didn't taste like turkey meatloaf. Not the kind she's used to.

Is something wrong, honey? We really don't encourage campers to call home in the first week unless it's an emergency.

I think a mistake has been made.

She means, about coming to camp. The mistake was agreeing to come. The person who made it was her. And, actually, she doesn't think this. She knows it. She also knows she has to ease the camp director into this. She knows a lot of things, more things than grown-ups think she knows.

The camp director clucks.

You know, Laurie, lots of campers get homesick their first few days at camp. But we're so happy to have you here! I know it can be hard but if you get out there and make friends and participate you are going to have such a good time here.

I am eleven, Laurie says. She knows this is young enough that they have to let her talk to her mom if she wants to. Eleven is on the kid side of the kid/adult divide.

In order to use the phone she has to punch in a series of numbers from the calling card her mother gave her for emergencies. It only has twenty-five minutes so she has to be careful how she spends them. When they are all gone she will have no way to reach the outside world.

Are you having fun? her mother asks on the phone. Laurie can hear the movers in the background where her mother is, shuffling boxes. On Laurie's side the camp director is sitting at the desk pretending to look at some papers but she is listening in on the conversation. Laurie gets tangled up in the phone cord turning into the corner so she can be more private.

No.

Are you feeling a little homesick? her mom asks very patiently.

Did you talk to the camp director about me?

She said your counselor says you're having a hard time adjusting.

I'm not homesick, Laurie says. I just don't like it here. I'd rather be with you.

That's what homesick is, her mother explains.

What I have is different.

How is it different, Laurie?

Laurie opens her mouth to answer. But even though she knows she's right, she can't say why. The big bell rings overhead.

It's almost time for Cabin Quiet Time, says the camp director.

Isn't there a one week camp option here? Laurie asks her mother.

We paid for the three week camp.

Maybe you can get your money back.

Uh, the camp director says.

Laurie glares at her. She knew she was listening in. She turns deeper into the corner. I really just want to be home, she says low. She can feel tears pooling in her throat, rising up into her eyes.

I think the one week camp option is just for little kids, her mom says. Just give it a chance, okay? Besides, sweetheart--you know I can't drive out to get you this week.

Maybe I could take a cab, Laurie says. It's just a couple of hours. How much would that be? A hundred dollars?

It's not about money. You need to stay at camp. It's just a little while. I'm in the middle of the Big Move, okay?

The Big Move is the whole reason they sent her to camp. Laurie's mother and father are selling the apartment where they all used to live together so Laurie and her mother can live in a bigger house in the suburbs. Elsa was the one to suggest Laurie would have more fun if she was at camp and didn't have to deal with the Big Move. Of course Laurie's dad agreed with her, yes, it would be much more fun for Laurie to be at camp. Laurie didn't particularly think it was going to be fun but she heard her father tell the truth about it to her mother when they thought Laurie wasn't listening, that not only would it be better for Laurie to be out of the way, it would be better for all of them, too. Killing two birds with one stone, that's what he called it.

The calling card is for emergencies, okay? her mother says. Can you save it for an emergency? Can you try to have a good time?

Laurie doesn't say anything. She doesn't want to let go of the phone. It's her only lifeline. Without it, they'll drown.

Laurie? I love you. I'm hanging up now, okay?

Laurie presses her face into the phone, pressing and pressing, like maybe she can squeeze herself through the holes and into the telephone cord and crawl through the phone lines back to the city.

The camp director is still blocking the door. She smiles and it's horrible, her white teeth against her broad, sun-burned face.

Do you want a hug? she asks, holding out spotted, muscular arms. Laurie is terrified of those arms. She doesn't want to say yes to the hug but she doesn't know how to say no.

Camp is still happening. Talking to her mother was like putting her head above the surface for a few minutes. She had a chance to look around and take a deep breath. But now she has to dive back in.

Back in the cabin everything is business as usual. The other girls are getting ready for bed while Nell finishes painting her toenails.

Well hi Laurie! Are you feeling better? We're just settling down in here.

Amy is already in her sleeping bag, reading a chapter-book that has a girl with a long ponytail and a big dog pulling its leash on the cover. Maya is braiding Clemmie's long blonde hair. Watching them feels like looking a camp brochure. Laurie can hold it right up to her face but there's no way to be part of it.

What was wrong with you? Maya asks.

I needed to make a phone call.

I needed to make a phone call, Maya repeats, and giggles.

The Lights Out bell from the Main Lodge echoes through the woods.

Okay ladies, lights out. The night counselor will be doing rounds in fifteen minutes.

Clemmie and Maya separate. Amy puts away her book.

Rest up! We have another big day tomorrow!

Laurie wiggles her toes to warm them up. Camp is hot all day and cold all night, which she didn't know was possible. The things you learn.

As soon as Nell is gone Maya sits up in her bunk. Okay, Amy!

Laurie can't see Amy, whose bunk is directly above hers. But she can hear the bed creak as she shifts around and knows what is coming. Amy and Clemmie and Maya have done this the three previous nights as well. Nell isn't allowed to know, but Amy is writing a secret romance

novel about Lady Ruby, a beautiful girl with a mean caretaker who was engaged against her will and last night learned her lover, the man she really wanted to marry, was already married to the cruel Duchess Elizabeth. Laurie is very interested in the story. It has been the only good thing about camp so far. It is easy, laying in her bunk, listening to Amy read, to pretend she is somewhere or someone else.

There was a knock on the door, she opened it and it was the Duke, Amy reads in her best voice. 'I don't want to see you,' Ruby shouted. 'You're a liar! You lied about your name! You lied about being married! You lied about being in love with me!' The Duke fell to his knees. He was wet from the rain, his hair falling into his eyes, but he didn't even bother to brush it away. He only cared about Ruby. 'The Duchess and I have been apart for a long time,' he said. 'I only pretended to be a poor poet so I could see what it felt to be something other than my title! When I met you I knew I should tell you the truth but I was afraid that I would lose you!'

What a rat! Maya announces into the dark from the bunk over Clemmie's. What a rat!

Shut up! says Clemmie.

'Ruby turned away. She put a hand to her breast, which was heaving. Her tears fell like the rain outside. 'Ruby,' the Duke begged, his eyes shining with tears. 'I know I hurt you. I know I deceived you. But you have to believe me that when I said I loved you I meant it!' She couldn't bear it any longer. They had waited so long. Ruby flung herself into his arms and moaned at the feel of his mouth on hers. He kissed her pearly neck and his fingers went to the buttons at the back of her dress, and it fell away, freeing her quivering bosom from its constraints. Their bodies were pressed hard against one another. The Duke lay her down on the bed--'

I can't! Clemmie shrieks, putting her head under her sleeping back.

Amy! You are too much!

Is it good? Amy is breathless.

I can't. I can't.

Laurie can't, either. Her breath is caught in her throat. The other girls would think she was even weirder if they knew how much she liked Amy's story. It is really hot. It's supposed to be but Laurie thinks it's really hot, like, hotter than she should admit. Hot isn't a thing she's ever called anything before but now she knows exactly why it's called that--she doesn't have to wiggle her toes to get warm anymore because they're all tingly. It's just that Amy is a really good writer, and she has a really nice voice. Laurie can picture everything perfectly, how the Duke takes Lady Ruby's face in his hands, how he undoes the buttons down the back of her dress one by one. She can imagine what it would feel like to run her fingers through Lady Ruby's cascade of curls. She can even imagine what comes next and Amy hasn't even written that part! The Duke will peel off Lady Ruby's dress...

I see the night counselor coming!

Amy's flashlight clicks off and the cabin goes dark and silent except for Clemmie and Maya trying not to giggle.

Everything okay in here, girls? Ready to go to sleep?

Yeah, Maya answers for all of them.

The rest of her cabin falls asleep but Laurie is wide awake. Now that Amy is no longer reading it's harder to pretend she's not at camp. It's so hard to sleep in the cabin, and she missed dinner and now her stomach is gnawing at her.

Being in the dark might be better if you didn't have to do it alone. Laurie has been thinking about that a lot recently, because since her father moved in with Elsa the apartment has felt darker and more lonely. When Laurie was little and couldn't sleep she would get in the bed with both of her

parents and lay between them. It was too hot sometimes but she would stay there as long as she could bear it. Too hot was a small price to pay for all being together.

Her mother hates being alone in the apartment, too. Hating to be alone in the apartment is why they're moving. In the meantime, in the weeks before Laurie left for camp, she and her mother had to make the nights really short by staying up late and getting up early so there was less time to be alone in the hours when, before, Laurie's father would have been there in the dark with them. It's been years since she got in the bed with her parents but it still breaks her heart to think about her mother there by herself. She had always thought her parents had a love like Lady Ruby and the Duke's. But she was wrong.

Laurie rolls to one side and then the other. Isn't it easier to sleep out here, away from the sounds of the city? Nell asked. But the sounds of the city are grounding. At least you know where you are.

She flops over on her back. She is so, so hungry. She squeezes her eyes shut and imagines pizza and Reuben sandwich and egg and cheese bagel and all the things she is going to eat when she's home, all the city foods she can't get at camp. She is just so empty, like there is a black pit inside of her. It feels like it will never fill up.

Every time she manages to fall asleep at camp, she wakes up again. Every morning there is a moment right before her eyes open that she forgets where she is. But then the bottom of the wooden bunk above her where Amy sleeps reminds her.

Laying there, listening to wet leaves dripping and insects scuttling around, Laurie wishes for a Tesseract. She read about them last year, a magic thing that can condense the days and nights so that when she wakes up she is sometime else. She would like to open her eyes and be ten years

from now so she can be a grown up and decide where she does or doesn't go on her own. She's not sure exactly where that is but she does know what it looks like. Sometimes last year on the days her father dropped her off at school instead of her mom, they would go to a cafe in Midtown beforehand so she could have hot chocolate and he could have coffee, and Laurie would watch out the window the women rushing to and from the subway. They wore business suits and dark colored dresses belted or bowed around their tidy waists, high heels like spindly alien legs, hair like the cover of a catalogue, pressed their cheeks to cell phones and clutch slim leather purses. Elsa carries a purse like that, holds it under her arm while she gestures with her perfectly painted fingertips. Laurie imagines it carries nothing but a credit card with no limit and single tube of lipstick in Red Alert like the one her mother won't ever let her try in the drugstore.

Someday she's going to have a bag like that. When she's watching out the cafe window and sees a woman with her same hair color, or a dress she particularly likes, she thinks maybe it is her in the future, that she has time traveled, getting a peek at her future self. If only she could be there already. In the mornings when she pops awake she squeezes her eyes shut and thinks maybe it's happened, the Tesseract. Maybe camp is over, the Big Move is over, being a kid is over. She's grown up and knows how to wear high heels and lipstick and has somewhere very important to be, and something very important to do that she's very good at. Maybe she is twenty-five, remembering being at camp, and she can laugh about it, the mosquito bites and the strict schedule and how bad she was at sports.

But no. Tesseract isn't real. Right now, though, camp is still happening.

At the sound of the bell she peels her sleeping bag off her legs and gets right out of her bunk.

How are you awake, the lump that is Maya groans from across the cabin.

Rise and shine, ladies! Nell says cheerfully. She is up too and gives Laurie a big smile. Laurie, I love how you are always so eager to start the day!

Just one step closer to the end.

The bathhouse is busy. The campers all get undressed and hang their clothes on the wall hooks and wait in the line wrapped in their towels. Laurie catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror, her reflection next to Clemmie's. Clemmie is humming to herself and cleaning her nails.

Clemmie could be a model. Next to her, Laurie looks like a cartoon character. It's like she is a whole nother species from Clemmie and Maya and Amy.

Once she asked her mother if she was pretty. Looks aren't important, Laurie, her mother said.

This is so obviously untrue. Laurie feels bad for her mother, who she has a sneaking suspicion isn't very good at being a girl. She isn't supposed to think this kind of thing but she kind of gets why her father fell in love with Elsa: Elsa is beautiful. Laurie's mom is just Laurie's mom. She wears shoes that don't hurt her feet, which Laurie has learned means ugly shoes, and forgets to shave her legs. Laurie has a bad feeling she is more like her mom than like Elsa.

Why are you looking at me? Clemmie says loudly.

Laurie was staring. She blinks. I'm not.

You are, you're like, staring at me in the mirror.

I was just looking in to space, Laurie says. Her face is really hot. The other girls behind Clemmie in line were talking but now they've stopped.

Can you just go? Clemmie asks.

For a minute Laurie thinks she is giving her permission to leave, like Lady Ruby would one of her maids in waiting. She is so relieved and so surprised, like drinking a big glass of water

when she didn't realize she was thirsty. She can just go. Leave the bathroom, leave the unit, leave camp. Walk right out the door. She doesn't have to stay. Like some different life is just waiting for her. But then she sees that it's just that there is an open shower.

She makes the water as hot as she can and scrubs at her chest and thighs until they are red and raw. She scrubs her legs until little creeks of blood run down her shins because she has scrubbed off the scabs that formed over her bug bites. Maybe if her mother had cared a little more about her looks Laurie's father would still want to be married to her. Maybe if Laurie was more like Amy and Clemmie and Maya, she wouldn't have been a bird for Elsa and her father to kill by sending her to camp.

Laurie stays in the shower longer than she should. She can hear the other campers start to complain. But Laurie loves watching the water swirl away down the drain. If she could, she would scrub her whole self away.

I just don't feel good.

It is Unit Time and Nell is taking the rest of Laurie's cabin to look for blackberries.

Are you sick to your stomach? Nell asks. Did you eat too much breakfast?

She ate a lot of breakfast. She was so hungry from having missed dinner the night before. But she wasn't the only one who took seconds of scrambled eggs. Clemmie and Maya did too. And Clemmie and Maya are both skinny, so it can't be bad.

Maybe the hike will help.

I'd really rather just stay here and read my book.

Nell looks sad. Alone?

I'll stay too, Amy offers. I want to work on my story I'm writing.

Laurie would have rather had the cabin to herself.

Amy settles onto her bunk and opens her notebook. Laurie opens her book too. It's one she brought from home, an illustrated book of fairy tales that Elsa gave her before she left for camp.

So you have something to read while you're away!

Laurie is too old for fairy tales, her mother said.

These are illustrated, Elsa said.

Laurie mostly reads chapter books.

Elsa rapped her fingernails on the book cover. Not illustrated like a picture book. This is art.

Laurie doesn't really know about art except that it means it's okay to be naked. The girls in the fairy tale book aren't but it's easy to imagine it in the arms of the Duke or the Prince, their dresses falling away to reveal their perfect, slender bodies as they get pushed up against the wall of the library or the stable or wherever they are when they finally realize they are in love. She stops reading the stories and just flips through the pages looking for kissing. Maybe it's Amy's story that got her thinking about it, but now the idea of kissing is the only thing more interesting than how much she hates camp.

Birds chirp. Trees scratch behind their ears. Amy is scribbling frantically in her notebook overhead on the top bunk. Laurie wishes Amy had done the words in the book to go with these pictures so it would be interesting. There's hardly any kissing at all, though at the end of nearly all the stories the girl gets married. That part usually gets two pages for its illustration, and the girl gets a new dress that looks like the ones in the magazines Elsa carries in her tote bag. Once when Laurie went to meet her dad at his office in Union Square for lunch he was running late and Elsa took her out to lunch instead. They walked past a wedding dress store and Elsa wanted to go inside.

She touched the skirts and beading. Laurie was fascinated but didn't want to touch anything in case her hands were dirty which she was sure they were, compared to how white and beautiful everything was. But then Elsa led her to the back of the store, past the field of flowery bridesmaids dresses in shades of pinks and purple and blue. She sat down on the red velvet chaise by the dressing room and patted the seat next to her. When Laurie sat down Elsa turned her body to her and clasped her hands like she was going to confess. Laurie's heart pounded. She worried she had done something wrong.

Listen, Elsa said. I know it must be hard for you with your parent separating and me showing up and everything. But I want you to know that being with your dad has been the best thing that's ever happened to me. I've been waiting my whole life to meet someone who makes me feel the way he does!

How old are you? Laurie asked. When she remembers asking that her face burns. You're not supposed to ask that. She knows that. But Elsa had just smiled, so graceful. She smoothed her hair back.

Twenty-six, she said. And I know I can never replace your mom, Laurie. But when your dad and I get married you have to be part of it. And you can get any dress you want.

Laurie can't help but feel happy for Elsa, who is so beautiful, and who had waited so long to fall in love. But at the same time something about the story doesn't feel quite right. If Elsa is the princess who gets the happy ending with Laurie's dad, what does that make Laurie's mom? What does that make Laurie?

Do you want to hear the next part of my story? Amy asks from her bunk.

Laurie hesitates. Are she and Amy friends?

You don't have to.

I want to hear, Laurie decides.

Amy comes to sit criss-cross next to her with her notebook propped on her feet.

Lady Ruby is in distress. Her lover has disappeared again. She is desperate, abandoned, tormented. But where has Christopher gone? Why did he leave her?

He's either betrayed her or been murdered by their enemies, Amy confesses.

Which one?

I don't know yet. Amy waggles her eyebrows when she says this.

For a minute they're quiet. It's a content sort of quiet that makes Laurie feel like maybe they are starting to be friends. Laurie studies Amy as she turns to a new page in her notebook and starts to work on an illustration of Lady Ruby to go with her story. She's pretty, just like Clemmie is pretty, just like Elsa is pretty. The kind of girl Dukes and Princes want to put their bodies on.

Are you feeling better, Laurie? Amy asks.

What?

You don't seem sick. I thought that's why you didn't want to go on the hike.

If not liking camp is a sickness then she definitely has it.

Don't you ever miss home?

Not really, Amy says. Home is kind of boring.

I just haven't felt good since I got here. I can't tell if I'm sick or not.

Camp is so fun, Amy says. I bet you'll like it more when you get used to it.

Amy stays there, writing and drawing. But Laurie can't concentrate on her book. The moment of contentment is gone. She forgot for a minute but now all she can see are the days of camp stretched out ahead of her. It's exhausting. She looks out the mesh cabin window. Outside the afternoon sun is warm on the tree leaves and leftover rain is sparkly. It's not that it's not

beautiful. It's just that there is a tree on the corner of the block where her apartment is and she can see it from her bed if she is propped up on the pillows. There's an ice cream stand on that corner in the summer and you can get a dipped cone and eat it, chocolate running down your face while you sit under that tree. The trees here just make her miss that tree more. It hurts that there can be more than one beautiful tree.

That night at dinner Laurie can't stop thinking about Lady Ruby, seated at the mahogany table dressed in her best emerald green dinner dress but too sad to touch even a single bite of her own engagement feast. The servants whispered about her behind her back. She's wasting away!

There was something to that. Laurie has been thinking about it, and most of the princesses in that book Elsa gave her had to suffer one way or another before they could fulfill their destiny to marry a prince and be beautiful and happy. Cinderella had to be a servant. Rapunzel was locked away in a tower. Snow White had to live in a cabin in the woods. Even Elsa had been sad before she met Laurie's father. Maybe you just have to be sad before you can ever be happy. Maybe you have to suffer. And maybe camp is Laurie's suffering. Think how her mother will feel when she comes to pick Laurie up and finds her daughter wasted away, so pale and thin from melancholy. It will be too late to help her. At home, traumatized from the loneliness of camp, Laurie will probably spend the rest of the summer unable to work up an appetite. She will waste away to nearly nothing and when she starts seventh grade at her new middle school everyone will whisper about how fragile and mysterious the new girl seems.

She's so changed, her mother will say to her friends in a low voice when she thinks Laurie can't hear. That camp was really hard on her.

She won't eat another bite until she's back in the city. Laurie makes it through the rest of the meal without taking a bite even though her stomach is grumbling. She shakes her head when the serving platters are passed around. It's hard to sit there while everyone else eats. But she will be so sad and become so skinny and then she will be so happy. She sits on her hands. At All-Camp Sing-A-Long she turns down the S'mores.

Really? Nell is wearing an orange and pink tie dye wrap-around skirt that looks like a flower. When she frowns it's like wilting. I thought you loved S'mores.

She does love S'mores. It's the only good part of camp. But she shakes her head. Laurie's wasting away, the camp director will have to tell her mother. You have to come get her.

She is so hungry it is hard to fall asleep. Every time she gets close her stomach growls so loud she can swear the rest of the cabin can hear it too, and every time she closes her eyes she sees the hot dogs dripping with relish that her father bought her outside his office in Union Square. When she finally does fall asleep, she dreams she is home in her apartment, searching for something to eat. She opens one kitchen cabinet and then another and then another. But they're all empty. There's no food in the apartment. Then she realizes there's no furniture, either, no pictures on the wall, just rooms on rooms on rooms full of boxes, and all the boxes are empty too. She tears them open, one by one, but never finds anything.

Scrambled eggs from her breakfast place go in the trash without taking a bite. But she'll eat scrambled eggs when they let her go home. There is a diner they go to on Saturday mornings sometimes.

Nell stops her on the way out of the dining hall.

Still not hungry?

I don't feel good, Laurie says. I really don't feel good. She's just going to say it until someone believes there is really something wrong with her.

Campers are splitting off in groups, friends together, to different Morning Activities.

Do you want to go in a canoe with me? Amy asks.

No, thank you. I don't feel good.

Come on, Laurie, Nell urges. Her smile looks strained. Don't forget, you're here at camp to LEARN! Do you remember what L-E-A-R-N stands for?

It's only ten a.m. but the sun is already hot. Laurie can feel sweat dripping down the back of her neck. The heat is making her dizzy. Her head aches.

Listen, Engage, Ask, Respect, and Never Stop Having Fun! Nell tells her. Amy Asked you to Engage with her by going in the canoe! Can you Respect her by taking this opportunity to try to Have Fun?

In a changing stall Laurie wriggles into her swimsuit. The elastic bites into her drumstick thighs. She had tried on a two piece but the tankini top rode up and her belly hung over and it was even worse than the navy blue one-piece Speedo she wound up with, which is pretty bad. She catches a glimpse in the mirror on the way out of the bathroom and her back fat looks like a old woman's. She wraps a towel around herself, pulling it up under her arms so as little of her as possible is showing.

At the beach all the girls but Laurie put their towels on the ground. Boys with ropy muscles from the boy's side of camp eye girls in floral two-pieces bending over to gather long hair into ponytails. No one eyes Laurie. She holds her towel tight. She's knows she's not the right kind of girl for that. She's not a Clemmie or a Lady Ruby or an Elsa.

Clemmie and Maya pull their canoe down the brown beach, Maya wading in up to her knees. Amy wades in too and Laurie leans over to push their canoe in, helping with only one hand. She needs the other to hold her towel up. The water on her toes is colder than she thought it would be. There is a spider where she almost puts her hand and a dirty puddle on the canoe seat.

Are you bringing your towel? Amy asks.

Actually, I'm not sure I want to go in the canoe. Sorry.

Amy is up to her calves in the lagoon, about to swing a leg over to sit at the bow of the boat. Her face is blank.

Sorry, Laurie says again.

She is sorry. She wishes she could be friends with Amy. But she just isn't the right kind of person. There's no way she can get in the canoe.

You can come with us, Maya calls. She and Clemmie are sitting pretty in the shallows, about to push off.

Amy sighs with her shoulders, annoyed but trying to hide it. Laurie wants to apologize again but doesn't. The only way to really apologize would be to get in the canoe and she is sure that if she does it is going to sink.

Can you at least pull the canoe back up the beach? I don't want to make Maya and Clemmie wait.

From the beach the boys are watching, to see what the commotion is. The commotion is Laurie. She knows it is. She wants to disappear. She wants to dissolve and swirl away down some big drain. Walking back up the hill she looks over her shoulder and sees Maya and Clemmie paddling out into the middle of the lagoon, Amy seated in the middle looking long-suffering and so beautiful. In this story, Amy is the pretty girl who is nice to the ugly fat girl which is always

just another part of why the pretty girl is so beloved. In the golden late-afternoon light she looks like the Lady of Shalott, which Laurie once saw at the Met on temporary exhibit. Her red hair is around her shoulders, her arms braced against the sides of the boat, her eyes closed.

Laurie trudges up the hill to the bathhouse to get dressed. She has a headache and her legs ache from going up and down the hill. Her dry swimsuit is stiff and staticky and pulling it off feels like picking a scab. Once she is back in her mildewy denim shorts and blue t-shirt she goes back to the cabin and opens the box under her bed to get her calling card.

It's for emergencies only, her mother said. But this is an emergency. She is so, so hungry. It is like an alarm bell is going off in her head, bouncing off the sides of her skull, threatening to shatter her whole body. She has to hurry. She has to make her mother understand that she has to get home. She can't stay here, where no one likes her and she's bad at everything. She belongs in New York with her mother and father in the apartment and she has to get back, she has to. If she doesn't hurry it will be gone.

She sees the camp director try not to roll her eyes when Laurie tells her she needs to call her mother. They go to the office where the phone is and Laurie types in all the numbers from her calling card.

Laurie, her mother says. I need you to be strong for me, okay?

Laurie cries in the bathroom and is late to lunch.

When she gets there and finds where her unit sitting, campers all up and down the communal table are already scarfing down their enchilada pie. They are laughing and talking with their mouths full. Laurie stares at her plate and it stares back at her. Tears roll down her cheeks. She didn't even know she was going to cry.

Oh, Laurie, Nell says. What's wrong?

I really don't feel good, she says.

Like you're homesick? Nell asks. Or like you really don't feel good?

Laurie doesn't know how to answer that. What would it mean to not really don't feel good?

When was the last time you ate something? Nell asks.

L-lunch, Laurie cries. Yesterday.

That's why you don't feel good! Nell decides. Do you want a sandwich or some pudding?

I c-can't! I c-can't!

Everyone at the table is looking at her and pretending not to. She thought she wanted them to pay attention to her. But she was wrong. This is worse, much worse. Everyone is looking at her and she is more at camp than she has been before. Camp is threatening to swallow her up, drown her in the lagoon. Everyone is looking at her and now she'll never get out.

You think you're sick sick? asks Nell. She looks really worried, more worried than she's looked before. Is that why you're not eating?

Laurie's mother only lets her miss school if she has a fever. But maybe she is sick. There is definitely something wrong with her. It is not a lie. It's the whole thing. Emergencies only, her mother said, but this is an emergency. If she can just make them understand that then they'll have to let her go

I think so, she says. I really do think I'm sick.

Nell rubs her back. I'm so sorry, she says. Come on, sweetheart. Let me take you to the infirmary.

The infirmary is wonderful! The walls are very pale pink and it is air-conditioned and the camp nurse peers tongue at Laurie's swollen red eyes and says of course she can stay there overnight.

Laurie is shown to a real bed, with a faded patchwork quilt on the bed and a flat pillow. It looks like heaven. She lies down and stays very still. People will peek in the infirmary window and see her so serene on the bed, so serene, so pale, suffering so much but being so patient about it. If she can stay in the infirmary long enough to make everyone believe she is really really sick then they'll have to let her go home.

Do you want something for dinner? The nurse asks. Soup? Or toast.

Laurie's mouth waters, but she shakes her head.

Juice? The nurse looks concerned.

Juice could be safe. Laurie accepts a glass. But the pulp is so sweet and good that before she can remember to drink slowly, like a sick person would, she has drained the glass.

That'll help get your strength up, the nurse says approvingly. Hopefully all you need is a little rest and we'll have you back out doing Activities as good as new in the morning!

Laurie shrugs. The nurse doesn't know it yet but she won't be here for long. She is very, very sick. The only option is for her mother to come get her. This time tomorrow. Laurie will be back in her bed in the city, her mother stroking her hair. Her father will come home, too, because Laurie will be so sick, and he will hold her mother while she cries. How could we do this to her? How could we send her away? It's my fault. It's my fault. No, her father will say. It's Elsa's fault. We never should have listened to her.

Laurie regrets that she won't get to find out what happens next in Amy's story. That image of the duke laying Lady Ruby down on the bed is nagging at her. That night, safe in her sickbed Laurie closes her eyes and calls up the image of what comes next but instead she sees Amy gliding out into the middle of the lagoon in the canoe with Clemmie and Maya. Enraptured, that's how the docent at the Met had described The Lady of Shalott. That's what Amy looks like in Laurie's head.

Body tensed, bosom quivering. Bosom quivering, those were Amy's words. Remembering the phrase makes Laurie feel oddly tight all over, from her toes up to her throat. Is she quivering? Quiv-er-ing. It sounds like it should be said with a slow smile, the way Amy smiled at Laurie when she asked if she wanted to go in the canoe. She wishes she had gotten in. She wishes they could paddle out on the water, just the two of them. Maybe someday when she's older she'll meet Amy again and be able to explain why she couldn't go on the canoe. Why she didn't like camp. They'll be grown ups by then, and Laurie will be able to show Amy the tree she could see from her bedroom window when she was a kid, how beautiful it is. They'll share an ice cream, and Amy will understand why she had to go home.

In the morning Nell brings a fresh change of clothes and her book.

I hope you feel better soon! We're going to to hike to a waterfall tomorrow and you wouldn't want to miss it.

Laurie settles back into her pillows, trying to look pale and weak. It's not hard because all she's had since lunch two days ago is the juice and she really isn't feeling good now. It is not as fun to suffer as she thought it would be. She spends the rest of the day in bed reading the same stories over and over. She has always liked re-reading.

Why don't you try something new? her mother always asks. But her mother should know: if you find something you like, why change it?

At lunchtime, when the meal bell rings down the hill, the nurse in the infirmary brings soup with chunks of chicken and soft egg noodles and salty sweet carrots.

It's been so long since you had something to eat, the nurse says. I think that's probably why you don't feel good.

It smells so good. But it's a trap. The nurse is watching her. If she eats, she can't be sick.

I don't feel good. Laurie turns the pages of her book very slowly to show how weak she still is.

The nurse sighs and comes to sit at the foot of her bed. Laurie, she says, rubbing the blanket over where Laurie's feet are, Since you don't have a fever, or a stuffy nose, and you haven't thrown up, Mrs. Mitchell and Nell and I think you should try to eat something and go back to your unit.

Who's Mrs. Mitchell?

The camp director, the nurse says. Can you try to eat some soup and go back to my unit for me?

I don't feel good, Laurie repeats. I really think I just need to go home. To recover, from my sickness.

You know what I think? The nurse says. I think you don't feel good in your mind, not your body. And you can overcome that! Sometimes you just have to face your fears! Tell you what, Laurie. Why don't you spend tonight in the infirmary again and then tomorrow you can come to breakfast and see if joining the rest of your unit makes you feel better. I think it will. What do you think?

It's not a real question. She can't say anything but yes. That's the thing about being a kid. In the end you have to do what they say. Go to camp. Stay at camp. Move to the suburbs. Make new friends. Like they know what she wants more than she does. How is she supposed to argue with someone who is so insistent on being wrong? What the the camp director and Nell and the nurse just does do not understand is that Laurie isn't confused at all. She does not want to be at camp. She wants to go home. She doesn't know how to say what she wants any more clearly than she already has. It's not her fault no one is listening.

This time, they bring the phone to her. First the nurse and the camp director and Nell all talk in the hallway outside the infirmary bedroom, because they think Laurie can't hear them. She can't hear the words, but she knows what whispers mean. Something is happening.

The nurse brings the phone in to where Laurie is still in bed.

Your mom is on the phone, okay? She wants to talk to you.

Laurie takes the receiver.

Hello?

Well hi there, Laurie, her mother says. I hear you're not feeling good.

I'm sick.

They said you won't eat anything.

I can't. My stomach hurts.

Laurie, her mom says, do you want me to come pick you up?

Laurie goes very still.

Laurie?

Yes! Yes. Yes, I want you to come pick me up.

Okay, well. Listen. I would really rather you stay. But if you really, really don't want to stay at camp, I can come get you.

Yes.

I had to rearrange some things, but I figured it out so the movers can take the things we absolutely have to have in the new house there tonight, and tomorrow I'll pick you up. Everything will still be in boxes, but the beds will be set up, and that's all we'll really need. Laurie's stomach has gone tight. She feels like she might vomit.

What?

We'll have to eat takeout for a while, until the kitchen is unpacked. You can help me pick the paint colors for the bedrooms. You can even help paint! How does that sound? So if you really want to come home, I'll come get you tomorrow.

Laurie feels like the bed has dropped out from underneath her.

That's not what was supposed to happen. The Big Move isn't finished yet. Home will still be there when you get back, that's what Nell said. But it was a lie.

Some other kid will be living in her bedroom. Some other kid will be looking at her tree. Some other kid will be naming the buildings, teasing the doorman. Laurie's whole life will be gone. From the infirmary window she can hear the other campers shouting and laughing down by the lagoon. They are at camp, where Laurie can't stay. But she can't go home either. She's nowhere at all.

The nurse sleeps with her door cracked open. So she can spy on the sick kids and report back to the director behind their backs, Laurie thinks. She tiptoes past in her sneakers with the cotton quilt wrapped around her shoulders and lets herself out the front door.

In the dark, the trail into the woods seems like the kind of place you're just not supposed to go. But the longer you're in the dark the more you realize it's not true. Light from faraway seems brighter after a while, whether it's cities or the moon or faraway stars. Every little bit helps. Squinting, she can see just enough. She feels her way down the path towards the cabin, shuffling her feet so as not to trip on roots or fallen branches. The infirmary quilt follows behind her like a train.

Everyone is sleeping, even Nell. The night counselor has come and gone. Only Laurie's bunk is empty. Her flashlight and sweatshirt are where she left them. She takes them, as quiet as can be. But halfway back to the door she hesitates and turns back.

Standing on her bunk she pulls herself up so she's level with the bed on top.

Amy. Amy.

Amy looks at her sleepily. Laurie? What are you doing? Nell said you were sick. She said you were going home.

I'm going home. Back to the city. You have to keep it a secret. But I wanted to say goodbye.

It's too dark for her to see Amy's face.

What?

On the other side of the cabin Nell rolls over, mumbling in a dream. Laurie's heart is pounding. She can't get caught. But she has to know.

Amy, what happens to Lady Ruby?

I think you should wake up Nell.

No! No. Just tell me. What happens? Does Christopher come back?

It feels important. She sees the shape that is Amy's head drop onto the pillow.

I don't know, Laurie. It's just a story.

She'll just have to make up an ending on her own.

Goodbye Amy.

She feels like she needs to do something to make it official, so she leans over and presses her pursed lips to the spot she thinks is Amy's mouth. I'm sorry about the canoe.

Outside, it has started to rain. She needs to keep moving, or she'll get too cold. She doesn't know if she's on the trail anymore, which direction she came from, which way the city is. She

thought she'd be able to see it by now. New York is so big you'd think you could see it from anywhere, the way the buildings stretch up and up, a wall to protect you.

She is so hungry, so, so hungry. What's the first thing she's going to eat when she gets back to the city? Ice cream from the stand outside her apartment, or a breakfast bagel from the corner store, or maybe a big warm cup of hot cocoa mixed up by her mom at the kitchen island. Everything will be fine if she can just find her way home. The doorman knows her name so he'll let her in. She'll be wet and cold, wrapped in her soaking blanket. I came all this way, I couldn't wait, I just had to come. Her mother will be there and so will her father, and there'll be a big meal on the table. She'll lock the door behind her, and she'll finally be full.