ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: SOUNDINGS

Daniel Knowlton, Master of Fine Arts, 2013

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This collection of stories features characters who "sound" their pasts, their childhoods, their families, and their obsessions, sometimes surfacing with gained clarity, and sometimes losing themselves to the depths. The collection takes its title from the opening story where the narrator becomes increasingly obsessed with tracking a group of whales by sound. The title holds the literal meaning of whales sounding (diving), and the metaphorical idea of delving into some unknown or revisited place or memory, sending out a voice or a thought, and listening to the echoes. The ensuing stories further explore this theme in a mix of realistic and fantastical settings, from a cub scout pack and a small town church, to communities inhabited by a Father Time character and miniature doppelgangers. The collection also holds a particularly strong attachment to the forests, coastline, and small towns of New England.

SOUNDINGS

by

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Professor Maud Casey, Chair
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Dive

The Oolik Arctic Outpost sits on a great sheet of ice atop a deep expanse of sea, and just outside the outpost, amidst the white, frozen wastes, there stands a single, solitary man. If I can just stay alive for one more day, thinks the man, bargaining with his bones. Hunger has wizened his stomach and drawn his skin taut like some desiccated fruit. If I can just reach the fishing grounds, he thinks, but his body remains still. If I can just take one more step, he thinks, and finally his legs comply, creaking forward like old, rickety machine work. The small hump of the research outpost, a barely discernible gray against the white ice, slowly recedes behind him. He bares not a stitch of skin. Each breath that leaves him freezes and dusts white across his black mask. Layers of fur, down, and nylon encase his body, an enlarged shadow of himself, hulking dark and sickly over the ice.

He knows the landscape well, where the ice grows fat and where it fades, where it is smooth with new growth and where rough with age. He and his research team – now since departed – drilled cores into the ice and measured patterns of minerals and gas. They dropped hydrophones into the frigid depths and listened to the sea's creaks and moans like a choir of bent horns. In an iron dive capsule, they each dropped alone through a tunnel in the ice, collecting ocean water peppered with life and measuring

stalactites hanging down from the ice shelf, some drawn to a point like teeth, others bent like crooked, grasping fingers. The ice under Oolik is just thick enough to last a season – to the North lies the permafrost and to the South lies the ice floes and the open sea. If I can just reach the thinner panes of ice, thinks the man, where he hopes, with hook and saw, he might cut through to the ocean and catch something to eat.

The pale orb of the sun rises just high enough to clear the horizon. It will hover there, rolling slowly along the edge of the world for three hard-fought hours before it will fall and pitch the sky back to black. The wind lifts great white sails of snow and hangs them like opaque sheets out to dry. The man walks until the open sea lies just a mile from the edge of the ice. Here is close enough. He pulls a pick and saw from his pack and carves into the ice until the sea shines blue beneath him. He unfolds a tripod chair and sinks a hook and line into the blue, holding his arms steady against the shivering wind. His body sags under the weight of the cold.

He waits and listens. Without the shuffling noise of his limbs rubbing nylon against nylon, all is still and quiet. The wind carries what sounds like a faint remainder of faraway screams. Perhaps it is the sound of artillery ripping through the air, thinks the man, or the metal-on-metal shriek of some new invention of death. He takes comfort in the belief that he is at a safe distance. He knows of no other settlement reachable by foot and has counted thirty-three days since he last saw another soul.

Thirty-three days ago, Oolik was home to four researchers instead of just one and the sun was not so quick to rise and set. The man sat at his desk and listened to the sounds of the sea through thick, padded headphones. At Oolik, the sea was mostly devoid of manmade noise from fishing trawlers and transport shipping routes. From his

arctic perch, the sounds were so clear that he could identify each species of marine life as the animals announced themselves to the blue void below. He sifted through that soup of sound, from the noise a mere six feet below his feet to the echoes of life broadcast from hundreds of miles away, searching for the elusive call of the whales. In his previous position aboard a traveling research vessel, he had been tracking shifts in blue whale migrations, thrilling in the massive sounds that bubbled up to the surface, waiting for the occasional tail flip that would break the endless line of sea and sky. Then one day their songs fell silent. Several species of whales, including the blues, disappeared from his charts and maps, his sonar and speakers. The explanation, he proposed, could be found in man-made noise pollution and ice-cap dissolution. This was the research the man promised to complete at Oolik, drawing from his life's work in marine acoustics and the years spent tracking whales across the oceans, earning him the title of renowned cetologist. His proposal won him a small team and a minor outpost, and they had been one of the last groups to travel into the arctic before the epidemic began. It was just another swine flu, they thought, as they packed their gear and said their goodbyes to family and friends. The man, however, held a secret belief that the sea had a kind of natural intelligence, that the whales that had gone missing were somehow aware of whatever sickness was spreading through human communities, and he hoped to discover what the animals were searching for or from what they were trying to escape.

On that morning, thirty-three days ago, the man heard a sound from somewhere much deeper than his usual depths of study, too rhythmic to come from the random movements of ice against ice. A dark, bottomless bellow bored into his ears, a sound born of the sea, too massive to exist in the thin air we breathe, living at the deepest edge

of the audible range. The whales have returned, he thought, as the sound pulsed through his blood. His instruments indicated the noise as a moving point, and that point was traveling toward Oolik.

The man's three fellow researchers hovered nervously behind his back. Months spent in close quarters together had taught them how to avoid the man's violent mood swings. If they interrupted his listening with new observations or laboratory results, he would likely call for a succession of long, follow-up observations requiring hours in the iron dive capsule amidst the brutal cold and pressure, exiled to the depths until they surfaced with answers. It was better to leave him in peace, better not to interrupt his listening unless it was a matter of absolute emergency, but, on this day, after much silent shuffling and whispered debate, they three decided that they had arrived at just such a moment worthy of an interruption.

They had received a communiqué from the International Arctic Research Center ordering all current field teams to abandon their work and return to their home institutions and their families. In darkly obtuse phrasings, they were informed that conditions back home had grown increasingly worse. The message inspired in them an overwhelming dread, and the three assumed some implied message of worldwide plague. They looked about the room, not sure whose home country had been hit the worst. Their collective passion for their work, the importance of their study, their scientific calm and practicalities – all of it shrank to a pitiful speck at the foot of their fear.

The paleoclimatologist was to return to his house in Quebec city, his wife, and his only son. The biologist was to return to Sapporo, her two-bedroom apartment, and her ageing mother. The graduate research assistant was to put the completion of his marine

studies degree on hold and join his parents in Boston. The three held a quiet conference between themselves and decided how best to inform the man. They printed the communiqué, and the biologist, who had the quietest step and the smallest and least offensive hands, placed the printed sheet onto the man's desk and gingerly slid it into his field of view.

The man read without shifting his gaze or turning toward the three. He sat for a time, hefting the solemn weight of the news. He thought at first about how easy it would be to leave behind his cramped university housing in Fairbanks and the infinite and infantile needs of his students at the institute. Then he thought of his ex wife and their children, now grown. He thought of his hollow promise to meet his new grandchild in person over the holidays, and it only gave him a greater sense of urgency to complete his work. If there was even a chance that he was right, that there was some connection between his work and the calamity back home, that he could discover what it was the whales had found, it would be criminal to abandon his post now. He slid off his headphones and turned to face the three.

"We all must stay," he said.

The biologist shifted uncomfortably and looked down at her feet. The graduate student looked to his colleagues pleadingly.

"We must stay because of this," said the man, and he pulled out his headphone jack and let the sound fill the room, an ancient and foreign music, lost but preserved in the depths, like the secret histories they carved from the ice.

"Is that a whale, sir?" said the cell biologist.

"Yes," said the man. "After months of silence, finally, they have returned. This is a Balaenoptera Musculus, largest of the Mysticeiti. And in this season, when it should be heading toward warmer waters, it is swimming instead toward us, toward the ice, and we, as scientists, have the responsibility to answer the question, '*why*.' "

The man looked over his three silent researchers who were already cocooned in worry, too lost in their own private fears to hear the beast's call erupting through the speakers and wonder about its meaning.

"It cannot be a simple coincidence," he continued, "this urgent news and this message from the sea. Don't you agree that we must stay and listen?"

The three looked at the man's wild, unwashed hair, the burst capillaries in his eyes, and his dry, cracked lips. They considered the dwindling stores of food and supplies, the half-empty tank of oil, and the fact that their days at Oolik were only growing shorter and colder. They had no reply except their silence.

"I see," said the man. "Then I will remain alone to continue the work. Please inform the Center that I will need a resupply as soon as possible." With that, he turned his back on the three and placed his headphones snugly over each ear.

They packed their few possessions quickly, leaving half-analyzed ice cores and tiny, as yet unnamed beings swimming in samples of arctic sea water under the eyes of their microscopes. They left their work half-completed in some futile hope of convincing the man and themselves of their intentions to return. The biologist slowly shut the heavy insulated door of the Oolik outpost, and the three abandoned the man to that desert of white. They left in a large, heavy-treaded truck, leaving one snowmobile for the man as a final lifeline back to the civilized world.

In those first few days alone, every hour on the hour, the man would comb through radio frequencies listening for a word from the Center or some snippet about the developing crisis back home. There were no more news reports. Not a single distress call. Only empty static. Once or twice he tried casting out his own voice: *This is Oolik Outpost…is anyone there?* The static was suffocating, and at each mark of the hour, the man increasingly abandoned his radio for the hydrophones, listening again for the whale.

At each sitting, he would move through successive layers of sound as he tuned down towards the low and deep frequencies. The top layer of sound grew thick with the incessant drone of far-off machinery. The remnants of explosions peppered the soundscape. Below that, swarms of shrimp filled his headphones with clicking and buzzing. Underneath it all was the whale's song. In an effort to save his dwindling supply of energy, he left the station's computers off whenever possible and instead turned to the outpost's atlas of sea floor maps. He charted the whale's progress through ocean trenches and around submerged mountains, marking his path in a continuous line of red ink. The great leviathan swam endlessly through the bottom of the sea, never ceasing his call except for twice each day to surface and take new air into his massive lungs.

Then other whales joined the first, adding percussive barks and cries to that single, recognizable call, as if urging him on toward the ice. Some sang with him for miles at a time as they swam in his wake, building a wild symphony of noise. The closer the whales came, the less the man slept, but the song sustained him through hunger and fatigue. If he could just listen long enough, some pattern might rise from the depths, revealing some message or clue. He stretched his food rations thin, eating only a bit of canned tuna or a handful of crackers for each meal. He conserved oil by pilling on his

layers and letting the station's temperature drop to just above freezing, and he pilfered all the remaining gas from the lone snowmobile to keep the generator powering his hydrophones. The daylight hours dwindled, darkness settled over the ice, and the man lived in a half-conscious stupor, thirsty and hungry, his world turned black except for the blinking patterns of blue and green light across the face of his instruments.

He made several dives to check for any visual clue of the coming whales or any sign of what might be drawing them toward the ice. The outpost's dive capsule, a simple egg-shaped pod of sturdy iron, lay inside the back room of the complex, hung over a hole opened in the ice. The simple vessel acted like an elevator, dropping the man through a tunnel of ice to observe its underside. The pod's lights illuminated the surrounding waters and the ceiling of ice. A steel cable kept him tethered to the surface. The man looked out through the portholes at eye level and the viewing glass at his feet. He stared into the blue darkness, cursing the poor range of his human eyes and ears, wishing he could brush aside the iron shield that separated him from the sea. He saw no sign of the leviathan, no rippling currents in the ocean or sounds of its approach, only clicking shrimp and small specks of iridescent life. There were no great schools of krill and no silent mates for the approaching whale, nothing at all except the dark sea, the ceiling of ice, and the man, floating in the cold, watching, listening. With each dive, he sent the capsule deeper, pushing farther into the crippling pressure until he finally reached the last length of the steel tether. The iron creaked under the strain of the sea. He folded his legs under him and leaned down as far as his body would allow, putting his face against the bottommost porthole and straining to see what secret might be there in the depths, but there was nothing but darker and darker shades of blue.

It was finally the empty food stores and his growling stomach which forced the man to unlock the station's door and venture out into the cold toward the edge of the ice. As he sits freezing in place to his chair and the snow, the sun completes its brief, three-hour day and slips toward the horizon, purpling the sky. The temperature will only drop further and the man decides to leave by the end of sunset. He watches the sky gathering blackness and waits.

Through his thick, insulated gloves, the man feels a frantic tug on his line. He pulls and reels up through the water and ice, taking in breath as he takes in line. The water quivers. A fish pierces the flat, blue plane of the sea, silver and striped red under its gasping mouth. The man holds the shivering fish against the ground, and, grabbing a crude rock of ice cut from his fishing hole, he cracks its head. This is, he thinks, the quickest and most humane death, but underneath his reasoning, he enjoys a deep and primal satisfaction in the wet smack of the fish – once living – against the hard ice – now dead, and it nourishes him even more than the meat will nourish his body, this sudden rush of the will to survive, come bubbling up as if from a hidden spring.

He exhales. His body warms slightly at the thought of real food. The wet sheen on the fish's skin is already freezing in the cold air and sticking to his gloves. He packs his gear and his catch and turns back toward Oolik. There will soon be no light left if the grey sky hides the stars, so he rights himself in the direction of the station and begins the long walk home.

If it weren't for the heavy noise of his breathing and the insulated fur covering his ears, the man might have heard the great leviathan breaking through the ocean's surface

off the coast of ice and exhaling a double tower of warm air and sea spray. The whale landscapes the sparse horizon with his mountainous back, rising like a chain of barnacled cliffs, then sinks back under the surface. Again and again he rises until he empties himself completely of spent breath and draws new life into his cavernous body, warming the freezing air in his blood, then diving down into the depths where the cold, thick water carries his song across the sea.

The starved man sits at his laboratory table. Two emergency candles shine a pale light over his hands as he slips a knife along the underbelly of the fish, shaking with hunger, snagging here and there on its scales. He scoops its innards into an empty metal food tin and finds small pearls of roe on his fingers, gleaming wet and golden in the flame light. He licks each finger methodically, and the fish eggs pop in his mouth with bursts of saltwater. He loops a bent coat hanger under the fish, turns on a laboratory gas burner, and holds his meal over the flame. With his free hand, he catches stinging hot drips of oil that fall from the fish, burning like melted wax on his fingers, and licks them clean. He douses the flame just as the skin begins to blacken and pull away from the white meat. Unable to wait for his food to cool, the man pulls bits of flesh from the bones, chews, and swallows, burning his fingers and tongue. He sucks the bones clean. Exhausted from the walk and the cold, the man collapses in the bed-bunked sleeping quarters, covered in blankets snatched from the three other mattresses, now white and bare. He rests with the warmth of food sinking into his bones.

The man wonders about his ex-wife and his children – are they home and are they safe? Perhaps that message from the Center was just a false alarm, and if he were to

return, he would find houses full of warmth and human voices. Yet he can't shake the fears that course through his mind, that he would find house after house empty and barred shut, that everyone he knows is struggling to survive just like him, eating food cooked on bent wires over open fires and going days with nothing to silence the groans of their stomachs. He imagines the collapse of entire cities, pavement overtaken by grass and buildings sunk into the earth. There he would find an endless field of open graves, bodies sprinkled with white embalming salts and covered in thin plastic. He imagines lifting up the veils, one by one, walking between bodies until he finds his family, resting in a neat line, skin pale and eyes closed. The man drifts off to sleep and succumbs to his dark dreams.

Hours later, he hears a loud, clanging noise coming from the door of the station, and he wakes with a start, his catastrophic imaginings slipping from his mind. He checks his watch. He has slept a full twenty-four hours. The man tosses off his covers and walks toward the sound, cringing with each sharp ring of the metal.

"Hello?" calls a muffled voice from the outside.

"Hello?" tries the man, but his voice, unused for thirty-three days, falls from his throat in a low, unintelligible moan.

"Dr. Stevens?" comes the voice.

The man shudders at the now foreign sound of his name.

"I'm here from the Center."

That voice, thinks the man, muffled by the thick, iron door and shredded by the cutting winds carries a shade of dread, not unlike the hollow, taunting static of that

suspicious radio. He could be masked death itself, thinks the man, a carrier or messenger of some far off doom in the form of a weapon hidden underneath his coats or a plague worming through his veins. This rescuer in disguise could be here to infect Oolik and intercept the coming message from the deep. The man reaches the door and leans down heavily on its lock, exiling the voice to the frigid cold. He retreats slowly into the back room of the outpost until the voice fades to vague mumblings.

Another sound, familiar to the man, wells up through the floor and reverberates through the walls. He looks again at his watch, remembering the day spent asleep, remembering the path he charted on his map and the brief remaining distance to the ice. They are here, thinks the man, they have come for me. He closes himself inside the dive capsule and pulls the release lever, dropping himself into the water, sinking down through the tunnel of ice. He relaxes as the banging at the door fades and the song of the whales engulfs him. It sounds clearer now, rumbling through the air and directly into his ears instead of traveling through miles of ocean, conducted up through metal wires, and amplified out through speakers. Here the sound travels through its natural element and rings the iron dive capsule like a bell. Through the small porthole, he begins to see dark shadows approaching.

The sound grows to a deafening pitch and the ocean quivers. He can see their outlines, a whole horde of them now, adding to the steady moan of the great leviathan and releasing their excited barks like cannons into the sea. One whale comes close to the man, brushes a flipper over the dive capsule, straining the heavy, braided tether of steel until it snaps like cheap thread, sending the capsule spinning. The man thrills in the sudden freedom, the cutting of his leash to the surface world. The circle of light cut into

the ice under Oolik hangs distant above him like a full moon, then slips under his feet as the dive capsule turns. There is no more up or down, thinks the man, only dark, weightless space. The capsule slowly settles and halts its spin as another whale swims next to the porthole, searching with its milky grey eye under a ridge of blubber, huge as a mountain cliff perched on its brow.

The other whales fall silent, and the great leviathan takes up his familiar call, plunging further into the depths. They want me to follow, thinks the man, I can stay with them. He pushes down the dive lever, and the capsule's small turbines sink the man down faster toward the whales. The pressure wraps around the capsule and the iron buckles. The moon of dim light above shrinks to a distant star. Now I am with them, thinks the man, cranking the dive lever further. The porthole glass hisses and cracks. The whales point their long bodies downward, diving now with increasing speed. The man matches their descent and pulls up next to the singing whale, feeling its call resonate through his ribs and beating against his heart. The sea wraps around him in a crushing liquid fist, and the man places his hands to the portholes at his sides and his face to the glass at eye level, tasting the icy salt of the sea leaking into the capsule, urging this final iron barrier to fall.

I am here, thinks the man. I am ready!

A Family Portrait in Ice

Henry:

Well isn't this a pleasant winter day for a drive, a great day, in fact, with the clear untrafficked highway ahead of me, a light dusting of snow blanketing both shoulders, the soft rise of sloping mountains in the distance, and me with the catch of the leather steering wheel under my gloves and blasts of hot air sucking off the thundering engine toward my warming face, yes, a good day, a good cozy day. So good that – whoops! – I'm not paying attention again and, yes, there goes my exit passing by on the right. Thank god Farrah is still asleep. If I drive carefully enough, perhaps setting a smooth course on cruise control, then she won't wake to catch my mistake and berate me, as she does, for being a complete spaceman, lost in the ether, as she says. She looks like a baby, adult-sized but newborn-cute, with her head drooping toward the window, and, oh, there's a tiny spot of drool at the corner of her mouth. She's all softness, just like this snowfall has smoothed the sharp pine needles on the trees and covered the jagged mountain peaks with gentle white lines. If I had my camera, I'd take a picture of that sweetness, I'd tuck this vision of Farrah away into my wallet pocket for those moments when the cold black of the world presses down on your chest and wraps a fist around

your heart, when you just need some small reminder of something good in this world to bring the air back into your lungs.

Ah! What a day. A great day, but – whoops! – there I go again past another exit, the one that would have let me get off and turn back around in the right direction, but it's really not my fault when this chain of eighteen-wheeler trucks is roping off the right lane. Oh well. It's a pleasant drive to my father's cabin, and what's an extra accidental hour here and there on a day like this? Though I do wish Samson would stop yipping in the back seat. He's making noises like he needs a bathroom stop, whimpering and pacing around his cage. I shoot him this look in the rear view mirror that says, "Oh please, you're a dog, be realistic." Even I know that the subtleties of my slightly cocked head and raised brow are likely lost on the small brain of a black and white French Bulldog, but I like to think that he understands at least some part of the message because he's shutting up now.

An exit! This time I'm ready. I'll take this ramp slow so as not to wake Farrah, but that cute little line of drool is about to pool on her shirt, so I'll just reach over and clean that up with the sleeve of my sweater. Now she's swatting at my hand and squirming in her seat. She's frowning fiercely against the waking world, and her mouth is opening.

"The gun is in the trunk!" she says.

"What?" I say.

She blinks her eyes and slowly emerges from whatever strange dream she was having about guns and trunks. I wonder if she actually did have a gun in the trunk of her car. She never struck me as a gun owner, and if she is keeping a gun in her trunk, well

that would somehow make her a slightly different person than the one I thought I knew, and just the very idea gives me the eerie chill that I am sitting next to a stranger, driving a stranger's car, and planning on sleeping with a stranger later tonight.

"How long did I sleep?" she says.

"Not long, my dear."

"Are we almost there?"

"Almost!"

"I know this is hard for you."

"What's hard? Spending my Christmas holiday with a beautiful lady and my two kids?"

I bet my kids will get there first, and maybe they'll worry about what happened to their dear old dad, hopelessly lost along the highway, but perhaps they will also get the fire going, and won't that be nice to pull up to my father's cabin and see jaunty wisps of smoke puffing up from the chimney and then step into a warmed sitting room and pull my kids together into my arms? And maybe, if we're lucky, they'll have mugs of hot chocolate ready for us, too. You're never too old for a good mug of hot chocolate in the depths of a cold winter. Who would ever turn down such a singular delight?

Farrah musses my hair and rubs the back of the my neck with one hand. We're heading back in the right direction now, and I keep the car steady at just under 70 mph, center lane, cutting straight down the highway.

Jason:

I'm almost surprised to see my grandfather's cabin still standing. I had this irrational fear that when he died, he would have gone down with his home like an old captain of a sinking ship, that the ground would have swallowed it up and the snow would cover the wound in the earth. The air here is cold and thin. Above, the hard grey shell of the sky seems ready to crack and spill out piles of snow on our heads.

Next to the cabin stands the maple tree that holds up my old childhood tire swing, but the tire is resting with an edge against the ground, its chain gone slack. The tree seems off-balance, listing toward the cabin. I take off a glove and run my hands along the low branches, snapping off a twig – dry, brittle, and dead. One more storm might bring the whole thing crashing down onto the cabin. I could leave it as is. It would be some kind of sweet revenge if my old tree split open the cabin roof, just in time for the appraisers to see the damage and subtract it from the neat sum my father will make when he sells this place. I feel guilty as soon as the thought comes to mind, not for the fact that it would ruin my father's plan or our cabin Christmas, but because I have the strange, overwhelming sense that someone is still inhabiting the cabin, as if my grandfather's ghost is watching me now from the darkened windows.

I walk to the workshop at the side of the cabin to look for an axe. It smells of freshly cut wood, and there are still shavings covering the ground. When I was young and we would all stay for our holiday visit, I would peek in through the holes in the knotted plank wall to watch him work. He'd take a splintered chunk of wood, run his saw through the corners, shape it with a chisel and hammer, and smooth down the edges with sandpaper. He'd emerge with his annual Christmas gifts: wooden soldiers, fire

trucks, and space ships. They weren't intricately carved or richly detailed, but I always loved to watch the shapes emerge under his touch from the unhewn bits of wood.

If he caught me snooping around the shed while he was working, he'd swing the door open wide and look down at me with his famous scowl, frown lines so deep they looked set in iron, his head topped with white hair like curls of smoke. He'd clamp his massive hand over the top of my head in mock anger. The smell of wood on his fingers was intoxicating. He'd peer at me like he was inspecting the grain on a piece of wood. "Hmm," he'd say, flicking my ear with the cold, iron chisel, "I think I'll have to take a piece off here," and I'd squirm out from under his grasp. I always thought I'd grow up to be a woodworker like him, but I suppose I don't have the hands for it. Glasswork seems more suited to thin fingers.

I at least learned how to cut down a tree from my grandfather. I lift his axe from the wall, its handle smoothed over from repeated use, and carry it back to the maple. The steel bites into the rotten wood, and between chops, I hear the sound of an approaching motor. A cherry-red Beetle with rental tags pulls up next to my hatchback. Julie. It looks like her work in San Francisco with pop-up gourmet food events is finally paying off. Her jacket collar is rimmed in animal fur. She's wearing expensive heels. I think she's put on weight.

"Jason, really?" she says, body cocked to one side and hand on her hip.

"Hi Julie," I say.

"What are you doing to my tree?"

"*Your* tree?"

"Yes! My tree and my tire swing. First we lose Grandpa, and now here you are, chopping down my childhood."

"Don't be so dramatic. The tree's dead. It would've fallen on the cabin."

"Ugh, you're always so doom and gloom, aren't you?"

She throws her hands out in front of her, and her fingers mime the exasperated action of strangling my neck. Maybe I'll be able to cheer her up with my gift – a bowl of glass-blown fruits to celebrate her burgeoning new career in food.

She sighs and turns back to the trunk of her Beetle, pulling out her roller bag.

"I'm taking the big room," she says and wheels up next to me, wrapping her free arm around my middle. "Missed you, little brother," she says, and I think it's sincere.

Her luggage makes two clean lines through the light snow as she wheels it up to the cabin. I pick up my grandfather's axe and slice three more times into the trunk. With one, steady kick from my boot on the opposite side, the tree cracks and falls to the ground with a deadening thud.

Julie:

I love a good fire. This one has a bodily presence – wicked red arms running along the logs and a heart of hot coals. The flames search out hidden pockets of sap, bursting with sudden pops and sparks. I still remember Grandpa's fire-building lessons – he taught me how to start with balled up newspaper and matches, to let the flames latch on to a teepee of small twigs, and only then to put on the logs, bark side down to the hungry fire. Grandpa would be proud. He'd stand and watch with his arms crossed against his chest and give me that slight nod so that I'd know it was a job well done. I

reach out to an untouched end of one log and move it closer to the fire, but I leave my finger there a moment too long and it sears a small circle of skin. The shock of pain ripples through me. Burns will soak up heat and remind you of warmth for hours.

Outside I hear voices, almost at the door now. My dad is here, Jason is finally coming inside, and there's a third voice, but I don't recognize the man. And is that a dog? Yes! The door swings open, and the animal comes bounding into my arms, his little paws pressing cool melted snow against my chest. His little body is trembling in my hands, trying to sneak his face close to mine, reaching out to lick at my nose.

"Julie!" says Dad. "How are you? You look great! Isn't this great? We're all here together again!"

"Who's this little guy?" I say. "Dad, I thought you hated dogs."

"That's Samson," says the mystery man's voice, but then the owner of the voice comes through the doorway, and I see that she's actually a woman.

"I'm Farrah," she says. "You must be Julie."

"Here's your dog," I say, standing to hand Samson back to his owner, this strange intruder. Is Dad on to another girlfriend already? Where did he dredge up this one, and why? Has he finally gone all to mush in that funny head of his?

Dad takes a box from Farrah and removes the plastic sections of a manufactured tree while Farrah moves back to the door to pick up her luggage which Jason is lifting from the ground while the plastic tree is snapping into place in the corner of the room opposite me and the warmth of the flame.

"See? I told you that plastic would look fine," says Farrah.

"Oh, and I always thought you might be right," says Dad.

"No, you said it should be 'strictly relegated to suburbia.' "

"Jason, could you find the ornaments?" says Dad. "How does this look, Julie?"

"Weren't grandpa's things packed and sealed already?" asks Jason.

"The tree looks crooked," says Farrah, and she's moving toward me for a better view, her huge boots creeping into my warm bubble of space by the fire.

"I believe I wrote instructions for all things Christmas to be left in their original state and place," says Dad. "So, we should be in luck, Jason, if you could just check those old bins in the upstairs closet?"

"You're over compensating – that's too far to the right," says Farrah.

"Julie, how does it look from your angle? So life-like, isn't it?"

Jason steps out of the room and I hear his footsteps moving back and forth on the second floor above our heads. He comes back empty-handed.

"There's nothing left," he says.

"Oh don't be silly," says Dad. "That's simply impossible."

"Henry, we'll just use mine," says Farrah. "It's nothing to get all riled up about."

Farrah pulls out a length of cheap Christmas lights and now Dad is stuffing the outlets with extension cords and wires, and this strange woman is handing Jason gaudy silver and gold bulbs to hang on the tree when we should be hanging his handmade glass stars and snowflakes instead alongside Grandpa's small wooden sleds and snowmen, and Farrah is complaining again about the crooked angle of the tree, and my little brother is frowning, and Dad is saying, "we need some Christmas music!" and he's plugging in a stereo, and the dog is barking, but there's no smell of fresh pine needles and no sight of Grandpa's books or carvings on the shelves or the mantle, nothing but bare furniture and

walls, and everything feels too light without him, like there's no gravity anymore to this house all this spinning noise.

"Julie!" says Dad, turning while he stands on the tips of his toes to hang another golden orb and yelling above the dog and the Mannheim Steamroller Jingle Bells. "How's work? How's life? What have you been up to in the big city?"

I put my hand in my pocket, and I push into the burn on my finger. The pain flows through me until it rings louder than the noise. I catch my breath. I listen to my pulse.

"I'm fine," I say, "everything is fine."

Henry:

We're all settled in now, and it feels good and cozy, just like it should, with my kids resting in their rooms upstairs and Farrah snoring little piglet snorts while she naps in the chair by the fire. The tree is up, blinking red and green with Farrah's bright star at its peak. Outside, the sun has set, the snow is piling up, and tomorrow we'll have a white Christmas indeed! It will be the picture perfect sendoff for this old cabin, and – wait – what happened to the lights? The tree has gone dark, and now the kitchen lights won't turn on. Ah, well, a blown fuse no doubt. I'll just head down here to the basement and – huh – no ruined wires and no blown fuses.

I race back upstairs and try every switch I can find. No light, no nothing! I switch on each burner of the electric stove, waiting for the power to seep into the coils, but they stay ice cold. Now how am I supposed to have a Christmas without lights, without heat, without hot breakfast? Imagine! Spending our last cabin Christmas

wrapped in blankets and shivering around a lightless, plastic tree while we spoon cold, soggy cereal into our scowling mouths. How horrible!

"Is everything alright?" says Jason, and I realize I must have been making quite a racket to have drawn him down from upstairs.

"Well, Jason, I'll just tell it to you straight. The power is out."

"Yes, I can see that. Should I check the fuse box? Maybe we overloaded the tree?"

"I'm sorry son, the fuses are fine. So it must be something much worse."

And then my son has the nerve to say, "Grandpa used to be able to fix anything in this place."

Jason is always doing that, fitting in these little statements that just suck all the joyous air out of everything. And why should we still be wasting our time missing an old grump like my father? Everyone, including my father himself, knew it was his time to go when he finally died. He called me and said something like, "Son, it's my time. Come pick me up and take me home so that I can die." As far as deaths go, his was really quite pleasant. He sat in his favorite reclining chair, had one last stiff drink, and then his light faded from this world overnight. And I do hope people didn't think I did something ghastly like poison the old man. I mean *really*. I don't have it in me. Although I can't truthfully say that there isn't anyone who might have considered poisoning my father's drink to, shall we say, ease his passage into death. He was a cold, unmoving rock of a man, always spending all that time alone in his workshop, away from my mother and I, leaving us to do all of the real work of the house, keeping things clean and making our meals. His handshake was a steel vice, and on the few occasions when he did hug me,

(my first wedding, my second divorce) it felt like a crushing blow, quick and hard, more like a sign of dominance than a passing of compassionate care. He only got worse when my mother passed and he became even more of a recluse, like some old boulder rolling back into the mountain whence he came.

"Dad," says Jason waving a hand in front of my eyes, and there I go again, getting caught staring off into space.

"Maybe a power line fell," says Jason, "I'll go look for Grandpa's generator."

Jason starts putting on his boots while Julie comes bounding down the stairs already wearing a hat and a heavy jacket.

"The power's out," she says. "I just want to get off one call before my phone dies, so I'm going to see if I can get any signal outside."

Farrah walks into the room rubbing her sleepy eyes and says, "Why is it so cold in here?"

"The power's out!" say both of my children in unison.

Julie pulls opens the door wide and lets snow waft into the cabin. She steps out and sinks almost to her waist. Jason follows behind her and slams the door shut. Through the window, I watch my son head toward the garage and my daughter trudge across the yard with giant flamingo steps, holding her phone up to the sky. We're not even one night into our holiday visit and we're already running apart willy-nilly when we should be sitting warm inside and enjoying Christmas Eve together. What a complete disaster!

Julie:

The cool air feels good on my hot skin as it slips around my collar and down my neck. I just need one moment apart, just a minute with a familiar voice from back home. At the edge of the yard, I still don't have any signal, but there's an open clearing where the lake must be, frozen under the snow. We used to play broomball on Christmas afternoons, slipping and sliding over this frozen lake in our sneakers. Grandpa would get out three old brooms and a soccer ball. He would wrap old shirts around our knees and elbows for padding, and I remember how strong and sure his hands were, tying knots with the shirt sleeves that never came loose, but still covering us gently enough to not be too tight. He'd give us his small couch pillows to stuff up our shirts and behind our backs, and he'd strap bicycle helmets over our knit hats. I was smaller than Jason then, but I could always sweep the ball just outside of his reach while he wobbled toward me on his lanky legs.

My boots make contact with the smooth cover of the lake, and my phone finally snags some reception. I clear a patch of snow with my feet, sliding back and forth until my boots slip out from under me, and I fall back laughing into the cushiony snow. I run through a list of names on my phone, mentally subtracting hours for the time change. Would Steph be free at this hour? Or maybe David might also need a break from his family?

Then, underneath my back, I feel the ice shift. I freeze. The snow resettles under my legs. The ice cracks, and I stretch my arms wide, trying to spread out my weight, and slowly push myself backwards with my feet. "You're an inch worm," I say aloud, "be the inch worm." I make it one foot closer to the shore. Then the lake splits open.

Jason:

Darkness. I flick on my flashlight. The beam passes over my Grandfather's cold, empty garage. Nothing. There's not one box left. Was there a break in? Have his things been stolen? But it looks swept clean, no dust mites along the floor or cobwebs up in the ceiling corners. My footsteps echo in the emptied room without anything to absorb the sound.

Another beam of light bobs in from the doorway, accompanied by scampering paws.

"Anything I can do to help?" says Farrah.

"Not unless you've got a generator in your trunk," I say.

Farrah sweeps her flashlight across the floor and along the walls. Samson whimpers, lost somewhere in the darkness by her feet.

"Your father didn't tell you I was coming, did he?"

"Well, no, we didn't know in advance, but – "

"He didn't even tell you about us?"

"I mean, we knew he was dating, but – "

I scan the area around my feet with my flashlight and Farrah sighs.

"This is a difficult trip for him," she says, and it sounds like she's trying to convince herself, as if she's been repeating the phrase in her mind the whole day.

The door to the garage swings open and cracks against the wall. I turn my light toward the noise and see my father in the doorway.

"Julie?" he says, shielding his eyes from the light.

"No, Dad, it's me. Farrah's here, too."

"Where's Julie?"

"She's only been gone for ten minutes, Dad. She's probably still on the phone."

He backpedals from the garage and slams the door shut behind him.

"Henry!" calls Farrah, but we hear no response. In the haloed glow of my flashlight, I see the outlines of Farrah's face, her jaw gone slack and her eyes opened wide.

Henry:

Maybe I'm a worrywart, and maybe that sound I heard coming off the lake was just a coyote howling in the woods, but my ears are telling me that it was a human scream, and my gut is telling me that Julie is in trouble. The way her footprints in the snow trail off toward the lake seem foreboding. Foreboding what? I can't say, but I know it's bad. I pop open the trunk of Farrah's car, and – my god – she does keep a gun! It's some sort of rifle, and the wooden butt of it feels fiendishly heavy in my arms. Are their bears in these woods? Most likely, yes.

I high step into the snow holes left by Julie's boots. I'm working up a fine heartbeat now, and my lungs are barely able to pull in enough of this frigid, stinging air. I hear Farrah and Jason's voices behind me, and Samson is barking, too.

"Wait!" they call, but Julie might be in danger, so there's no slowing down now.

As I approach the lake, I see a gaping, menacing hole in the ice. "Julie!" I call out to the broken shards of ice. I'm about to dive in after her when I see another set of prints at the shore near the hole, and a long, smoothed trough through the snow. Did she pull herself out? Or was she dragged from the ice? Julie!

I follow the tracks up a short hill and through a patch of trees, and now I can see them taking a straight line toward a house, toward *that* house. Francis. After every other miserable thing that has happened on this trip, now – of course! – Francis had to be the one to have found my daughter first, the man who was always pulling my father away for fishing trips and camping weekends when he should have been spending time with me and my mother, this "friend" whose very name would rip open old wounds over dinner and set off round after round of fresh bouts between my parents, the man who had the audacity to lurk at the edges of my father's funeral while the rest of the family pointed and whispered.

I bang on the door. I point the rifle to the sky, ready to fire a warning shot, ready to unleash an explosion of sound. I squeeze the trigger, but all I hear is hollow clicking.

The door swing opens.

"Henry, I tried calling. Your daughter is fine. Please, come in."

Francis eyes my rifle with his old, withered face, so I set the gun down by the door, still within my reach.

Julie is sitting on a couch covered in blankets and sipping from a steaming mug.

"Dad!" she says, "It's me, I'm ok. Do you know Francis? He was a good friend of Grandpa's, and look, he's got Grandpa's old things!"

To Julie's right stands a tree, a real pine tree, hung with my father's silly carved toys and Jason's glass creations, the ones that we had boxed up at the cabin, the ones that should have still been there, as I had expressly requested through my lawyer, so that just this once we could have a nice family Christmas together, but now I feel Francis' hands all over my father's things, his feet walking through my father's cabin and workshop, his

name hanging over our heads. As I turn toward the fireplace I see two stockings hanging from the mantel and a photograph of two men – Francis and my father – both smiling, their faces pressed together, all that happiness boxed in a frame as if Francis had stolen it, my father's only smile, snatched up from each and every holiday I've known.

"Dad?" says Julie, "it's ok, I'm fine."

There's another knock at the door, and Francis welcomes Jason and Farrah and Samson skitters to Julie and everyone looks so shocked and happy as Francis tries to explain how the ice broke under Julie, and how he heard the noise and came to pull her out, and how he was my father's good friend, and of course we're welcome to stay while his generator keeps the lights on and the water hot, and now everyone thinks that the night is saved.

"Francis," I say, "I'm selling the cabin. I'm selling his things."

Julie and Jason are sitting on the couch now with Samson and Francis, and they are all looking up at me, with Farrah by my side, squeezing my arm.

"Henry, please," says Francis, "we've talked about this," as if letters between our lawyers constituted a real heart-to-heart.

"Henry," he says, "the will. It's all in the will."

But how can words on a page mean anything deeper than blood, when everyone can see that he shouldn't have willed the house to Francis, that it wouldn't have made any sense, that it was always meant to come down to me so that I could do away with it once and for all? Jason and Julie sit still on the couch, and Francis' mouth looks stuck between words, and Farrah's arms seem bolted to mine, as if we're immobile, carved from ice, and all I can see are the lines of fracture.

Scout's Honor

At my son's first cub scout ceremony, we all play our roles. My wife and I are proud parents, smiling, clapping, snapping pictures. There's a man three generations removed from his Native American roots, wearing a full feather headdress, a beaded and painted shirt. There are pack organizers and den mothers, all dressed in khaki uniforms, standing tall, eyes on the flag. There's our son, Josh, raising three fingers and reciting the scout's oath, a child making promises about honor and duty. When we return home, we put away our camera, our nice shoes, Josh's first badge. I take out my shoebox of old keepsakes from the closet. These are the things I am to pass on to my son: silver arrowhead patches unstitched from my first uniform, a metal neckerchief slide worn smooth, a pocketknife from my father. These things are meant to hold a tradition and a story.

When I think back to my time as a scout, I don't remember the badges, the ceremonies, or the oaths, but I remember our number. We were pack 218 of Cub Scout troop 424 as it said in red stitched numbers on the shoulders of our khaki scout uniforms. Every Wednesday after school, my friend's mother became our Den Mother. Elaina Dove. That was her name, but to us, she was always Ricky's mother. She would squeeze all eight of us into her minivan and ferry us away from the coarsely mechanized school

day. A lightness would fall over us in the approach to her home, hidden at the end of a private, gravel road. It was a fatherless, sisterless world. She kept the grass of her lawn neatly trimmed. The surrounding forest of pine trees locked us in.

We began each meeting with football. We were, all eight of us, much too scrappy to play on a school team. Those boys on the pitch, they played with a cool fury as yet unknown to us. They would have destroyed us. The catalogue of our faults began with Mickey, who had a gimpy left foot that required a shoe one size bigger than his right. Jeff's face was marred with a harelip, which had nothing to do with athletic ability, but before the cruel eyes of his classmates, he was too shy to play with anyone else. Scott, Greg, and Tommy were still growing into skinny, insubstantial bodies that weren't much more than skin pulled over bones like knobby twigs. Juan could run, having already settled into a sleek, silver ease with the small animal of his body, but with only a feeble grasp on English, he found an easier acceptance inside our den of outcasts. Ricky's ailment was his complete lack of social grace; if he didn't like you, he'd stare you down in the middle of class while digging a finger up his nose, and then he'd wipe the slime on the side of your desk. And as for me, I still had my baby fat and was as round and as soft as a potato bun.

I feel that I could be confusing their names, or that I could be misplacing their maladies, but what remains in certainty is the boyish, runt-like pack of us, our soft, sweaty bodies and high voices, our wild need to prove the existence of some worth in our bones as Ricky's mother watched us from her front porch, glowing in the afternoon sun, sometimes reading and sometimes taking long, steady pulls of ice water with pursed lips through a straw in a flower-print glass.

We played up against her allowed limit of violence: no tackling, only two-hand touch. Though there were times when Ricky's mother couldn't watch us, and in her absence, out of misplaced longing or the sudden, exhilarating freedom, we would all beat the hell out of each other. Scott, Greg, and Tommy would lunge for Mickey's gimpy foot, tripping and twisting him to the ground. Juan's speed was less formidable when we could grab at his arms and neck, and while Jeff held him steady, I would lean my extra weight on his back until he broke.

Those days are now a blur of bruised fingers and grass stains, except for two games in particular, both from the last month of the fourth grade. It was May. We were about to graduate from elementary school and enter our final year as cub scouts, flush with confidence. During that first game of note, I remember hearing the phone ringing faintly from inside the house. Ricky's mother left her watchful post for just enough time. We all looked to Ricky. His house, his call. "Tackle," he said.

I was on Ricky's team and he was playing captain and quarterback. He looked at me and whispered, "Hold it like a baby. Run until you die."

Scott and Mickey went down the field to distract our opposing team. I wrapped my hands around the worn leather of the football and ran straight toward our goal line. I was soft, but heavier than the others. Tommy and Greg clung to me like wet towels. I slowed as I dragged them through the grass, one on each leg. Jeff wrapped his arms around my middle and Juan tried to pull at my clutching fingers. I hunched down and covered the ball with both hands. The entire defense was hanging off of me as I heaved our collective weight forward. Scott and Mickey cheered while Ricky yelled red-faced down the field: "Eat that, you pussies!" Each extra inch felt like an impossible victory.

Then even the opposing team seemed to be on my side, as we stopped caring about the points and the game and realized a backyard legend in the making, a day that would include all of our names.

I heard the porch door. She heard our grunts and screams. Through a crack in the pig pile, underneath an armpit, I saw Ricky's mother running toward us. The strength in my knees dissipated, and I crumpled like an aluminum can under the deep-sea pressure of all those bodies. The weight held my face against a slick arm. No air.

"I told you boys, no tackle," I heard her say from far away. "If you can't listen, you can't play, understand?" The voice came closer. She untied our limbs one by one. A soft hand pulled at my shoulder and turned me over. I breathed. Ricky's mother's caramel thighs shone from beneath her khaki summer shorts as she bent down next to me.

"There, there," she said. She slipped a thumb in between her lips, pulled it back out, then she pressed it, wet against my cheek.

"There, there."

She rubbed hard against the dirt on my face, making me clean again. She placed one palm over my round belly and another under my back to lift me up.

"Good as new," she said. Her smile burned hot and white. Underneath my skin, all the strings of me loosened.

I don't remember that game for the brief rush of physical violence or for the shock of newfound strength in my round, awkward body. I remember it because of the kiss that Ricky's mother transferred from her lips to her thumb to my hot cheek. Like heavy metal tumblers of a great lock aligning, I had seen Elaina Dove, the other, the woman.

"Go get your backpack," she said. "Your father just called. He'll be here to pick you up soon."

With that, my perfect, fleeting moment with Elaina Dove cracked to let in the night, the reality of my nine-year-old life, and the continued step of time. We all went inside to collect our school bags, and then we stood in the gravel driveway at the edge of that private world, waiting for our families to arrive. I saw my friends' mothers and fathers, sometimes older brothers and sisters, all calling out warmly to the rest of us, all familiar with our pack from the rotating duties of holding sleepover nights or planning cub scout car wash fundraisers. My ride was always our brown station wagon, and it was only ever my father. Looking back on all this, it seems strange now that I never had to explain my lack of a mother or that we hadn't already asked questions about Ricky's disappeared father or the fact that Juan's older brother seemed charged with the responsibilities of two parents combined. I never knew my mother outside of the pictures and the stories my father shared with me, and that constituted my model of a normal home life. Our families were our families, and we were too concerned with earning our silver arrowhead patches to wonder what life was like for any of our friends outside of scout meetings or beyond the edge of that trimmed grass lawn.

My father's car pulled into the driveway and I went to open the passenger side door.

"Wish I could join scouts again," said my father, but he wasn't talking to me. I followed his gaze out through the windshield to where Ricky's mother was talking to another parent.

"Did you have fun?" said my father, eyes still not turning toward mine.

"Yes."

He shifted the car into reverse, and then, as if an afterthought, he rolled down his window and craned his neck out of the car.

"Thanks, Elaina!"

She caught the sound of his voice, and broke off her conversation, waving and walking toward our car. I slid the metal clip of my seat belt into its lock and pulled it tight across my lap.

"I gotta get home, Dad. Homework," I said.

"You're great with these kids," said my father as Ricky's mother stood by our car and leaned down toward the opened window. "I don't know how you put up with them," he said.

"Dad, I've got about a hundred math problems to do. We gotta go."

"Oh your son's an angel. It's my pleasure," said Ricky's mother.

My tucked-in khaki scout uniform bulged over my seatbelt. I pulled the ends out and tried to snap the round lines straight.

"You're the angel, Laney." He was about to roll up his window when he paused and tipped his head back up toward Ricky's mother. "How about we have you and Ricky over for dinner sometime, just my way of saying thanks for all you do for these boys. I make a mean lasagna."

The end of my father's words perked up like a question, and I couldn't then understand why he was speaking so strangely toward Ricky's mother, why, after three past years acting as a distant observer of my cub scout group and our den mother, was he now acting so casually, as if talking to a close neighbor or an old friend? He had never

even invited anyone over to our house unless they were family, and I wondered what it was that had allowed him such ease in breaking his unstated rule.

"Sure," said Ricky's mother. "That sounds wonderful."

"Great," said my father. "And thanks again." He rolled up the window and turned to look at me as he eased the station wagon out of the gravel driveway.

"Did you have fun?" he asked.

One week later, at our next scout meeting, we sat around Ricky's mother's kitchen table with bars of hard, white soap, ready to learn our next lesson in carving and knife safety. At the end of the activity, Ricky's mother would sign each of our scout handbooks, earning us anther silver arrowhead patch.

"Always carve away from your body," said Ricky's mother, pacing around the table. "Look out for thumb and fingertips, and always keep your eyes on your work. I'll have no blood and no stray fingers on my kitchen table." She held a paring knife in her right hand and cupped a bar of soap in her left. A thin layer of white curled upwards like dead skin at the blue edge of her blade.

We fiddled with our borrowed pocket knives, inspecting all the additional tools.

"My knife has a compass on it."

"Mine has scissors and pliers."

"Which way is north?"

"Mom, I want to use Dad's knife." Ricky threw his hand up, carelessly waving a sharp steak knife in the air.

"Be careful with that," snapped his mother. The usually soft line of her eyebrows arched into sharp peaks, looking as if Ricky had just uttered some unforgivable curse. She snatched the steak knife from Ricky's hand, walked over to the coat closet, and began rummaging through a box on the floor.

"I think you'll just have to make do, Ricky. I can't find it."

"Not in there," said Ricky. "I put it in my desk. I'll go and get it."

She looked up at Ricky, thin-lipped and silent. We heard his quick footsteps beating up the wooden staircase and his bedroom door creaking open. She slid the steak knife back into her butcher's block, set her half-carved bar of soap at the edge of her sink, and as she rinsed and dried her hands, the taut lines of her face relaxed.

Ricky pounded back down the stairs and took his seat next to mine. He held the knife out in his palm for me to see. On it was an inscription that read: *To my son. Stay fearless.* He smiled at me and flicked the blade open in a single, practiced motion. I rubbed my thumb over the worn Swiss Army insignia on my father's pocket knife. I had only seen my father use it once before, on a weekend camping trip, when he cut up our apples. He let me eat my slices from the tip of the blade, and the slight thrill of danger as I ate around the sharp point made me feel like a pirate or a bandit on the run. I felt for the ridge where I could pull open the blade with the edge of my thumbnail. It opened in two, jerky motions and I flinched at each movement, eliciting laughter from the table.

Ricky's mother returned to us, wringing her hands dry. "You can begin now," she said.

Eight swiss army blades from our fathers shimmered around the table like silver fish in a lake. I didn't know what I was making. I just cut away at the white and found sharp, jagged lines.

"I'm going to carve a knife."

"North is that way."

"You're stupid."

"I think it's broken."

"Here, let me show you. Give me your hands, please."

Ricky's mother wrapped her palms around her son's fingers. She guided Ricky's clumsy cuts into slow, smooth lines. Then she worked her way around the table, taking each of our hands into hers. By the time she came back around to me, my bar of soap had become a disfigured lump, slippery at its edges where my sweat had worked up a thin lather.

"You're making a snowflake? Here, let me help."

Her fingers wrapped around mine. The smell of a fresh shower rose up from the white shavings. As she leaned in closer, a few strands of her hair slipped into my ear, making scratchy, amplified noise. I remained still for as long as I could, letting her hands play over mine. I felt an excruciating nervousness well up inside me, something my nine-year-old self would describe as a throw-up feeling in the back of my throat. All the warmth drained from my fingers and toes and pulled up around my heart and my stomach.

"I have to pee," I said, and excused myself.

As I walked down the hall, my blood and bile simmered. In the quiet of the bathroom, I rinsed the soap off my hands, and the milky water swirled down the drain.

As I peed, I saw something curious tucked behind the white porcelain – a plain box with the lid cut off, packed with what looked to be thick, individually wrapped straws. I zipped up and peered at the door, checking the doorknob for the surety of its lock. Placed on the kitchen counter or on the coffee table, those white tubes might have looked out of place, but they wouldn't have raised such confused curiosity. There, behind the gaping O of the toilet, they held a hushed, bodily presence. They announced themselves as foreign, as unknowable, and as the clear property of Elaina Dove.

With a trembling thumb and finger, I slid one out of the box and held it up to my eyes. No label. I ran my nose along the wrapper. Only a slight, clean hint of something like baby powder. Then I wet my lips and held it near my mouth. I licked the length of it and slid it back into the box. I couldn't tell which one I had marked. Neither could Elaina Dove.

"Hurry up!" Ricky pounded at the door.

I snatched up another tube and shoved it deep into my pocket. I straightened my shirt in the mirror and then reached for the lock. Ricky flew into the bathroom as soon as I turned the knob.

"Get out already, c'mon!"

I returned to my seat amidst the noise and the white shavings. I picked up my soap. I picked up my knife. Whenever I had a free hand, I reached to my side to make sure my stolen secret was still there. I felt as though it might burn through my pocket and onto the floor where everyone would see.

For days afterward, I kept the mystery object in my pocket or at the bottom of my school bag, as if it were some rare talisman from an exotic land, and I felt that with this theft, I had charged myself with its safety and secrecy. I stole glances of it whenever I could, locked in the bathroom stall between gym class and homeroom. Alone in my bedroom, between math problems, I would stare at it perched across my clammy hand, and it would send that same excruciating nervousness racing through my veins. I grew more and more curious about its purpose, but I couldn't bring myself to tear the wrapper, as if that would crack open the private world of Elaina Dove, bringing her mystery to some ruinous end.

On the weekend following our soap carving activity, Ricky's mother allowed her son to invite the whole pack over for a slumber party. I placed my stolen secret at the bottom of my duffel and covered it with my sleeping bag, my pajamas, and a change of clothes.

"Ready to go?" said my Dad from the bedroom doorway.

"Ready," I said.

Riding there in our car, I felt unusually quiet.

"When Elaina comes over for dinner," said my father, "what do you think we should get for dessert?"

"I don't know."

"You can choose whatever you'd like. Ice cream? Chocolate cake? Ice cream cake? You name it."

"You can pick, Dad. I don't care."

"Why don't you ask Laney what she would like? I think she'd appreciate that."

I wished we lived close enough for me to walk on my own. Even there in our car, still a mile away from her house, my father felt like an intruder in my newfound private world.

"Are you okay about us having Elaina over to dinner?"

"I don't care."

"We won't make you work on any merit badges or do any homework."

"Dad, it's Ricky's mother."

"I'm sorry?"

"You keep calling her the wrong name. It's just Ricky's mother."

"Oh, okay. Sorry. Ricky's mother."

As soon as our car came to a stop on that gravel road, I grabbed my duffel and opened the door. I gave a quick goodbye and didn't turn back until I heard the tires crunching over the gravel, retreating back to the main road. I hugged my bag close to my chest and walked up to the lighted stoop of the house. Ricky came to the front door.

"C'mon, you're the last one here," he said. I followed Ricky in toward the kitchen and he pointed to a pile of bags. "Put your stuff there. My mom got us pizza."

I hesitated for a moment, not wanting to let my bag with my stolen treasure out of my sight.

"C'mon," Ricky said, grabbing my bag and tossing it on top of the others. "*Pizza!*"

The whole pack was crammed around the table with paper plates, paper napkins, and paper cups holding orange and red soda.

"Finally!"

"Let's eat."

"Give me that pepperoni."

"I want the big slice."

We joked between bites of food. Mickey farted loudly just as Jeff took a sip of soda, and when he laughed, the orange liquid bubbled from his nose down onto his pizza and across the table.

"Now boys," started Ricky, in his favorite impression of his mother. "I'll have none of that behavior." Ricky was the only one of us who could approximate his mother's slight accent, the only one who dared to imitate our den mother, and we laughed nervously, peering down the hallways off the kitchen. When we felt we were safely out of ear shot, Tommy and Greg heaped their unfinished pizza crusts on my plate and egged me on to finish. The whole pack starting chanting "eat it, eat it," cheering as I finished the last bites. In our wake, we left the wreckage of crumbs, spilt soda, and greasy napkins, and we heaped the empty pizza boxes into a tower of cardboard.

"Okay boys," said a voice from down the hall, no longer an imitation. Ricky's mother walked into the kitchen. "I set up your sleeping bags downstairs. Now go wash up and head to the basement."

As we filled out of the kitchen, I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned back to see Ricky's mother.

"Could you stay here a minute?" she asked.

A chorus of low "Ooos" rose up from the pack. "You're in trouble," they crooned, almost in unison.

"*Boys*," said Ricky's mother. "*Basement*."

As my friends left me in the kitchen, I felt my blood drain from my face and hands. Ricky's mother sat me back down at the kitchen table, brushing our mess to one side with a sweep of her arm. She waited for the sound of the basement door closing.

"I found something in your bag," she said. "Did you take this?"

She reached into her pocket and took out my stolen secret. There it lay in her open palm, bare and white against her tanned skin.

"I'm sorry," I said, and as I bowed my head low, a stream of snot and tears sprung from my face.

I felt her hand under my chin lifting my gaze up to meet her.

"There there," she said, and wiped at my face with her hand. "You're not in any trouble."

"I'm not?"

"Do you know what this is?"

I dropped my eyes low again.

"It's okay. It's natural to be curious. Here, look." With thumb and forefinger, she pulled open the edge of the wrapper. "This is called a tampon." The word sounded utilitarian, almost silly. She pushed the white tube up and pulled on a string attached to a condensed bit of cotton. My keepsake of that foreign land was laid bare and diffused, finally, of all its mystery.

"See?" she said, holding up the exposed pieces of white. "This is something that women use. It's like a kind of special toilet paper, that's all."

I had lost my talisman, my skeleton key to that private world. What I saw in her hands seemed disposable now, nothing more than a bit of trash, but when I looked up at her again, I saw, for the second time, Elaina Dove.

"Everyone gets curious," she said. "It's nothing to feel ashamed about." She held my face in her hands. "You're a good boy," she said, drying my tears with her thumbs.

"Do you have any questions you want to ask? It's okay to ask me anything."

I felt surrounded by her warmth, secure in her hands. It was my chance. I had been granted a momentary safe passage into a sea of knowledge that spread out far beyond my years. I started small. "What's your favorite dessert?"

She tipped her head back and laughed, and the warm sound of it rippled through me in waves.

"I suppose I like angel food cake the best," she said. "Is there anything else you'd like to ask?"

My mind raced. I thought about her and about Ricky. I looked around at their house. I tried to picture Elaina Dove in my home, sitting at my table with my father and me. When the question hit me, it came blurting out into the quiet space between us.

"Where's Ricky's dad?"

I knew it was the wrong question as soon as it sprung free from my lips. Elaina Dove drew back, looking for a second as if I had slapped her across the face.

"He left a few years ago," she said, her surprise fading. "We don't see him much anymore. Now why don't you go downstairs and join the others? This can be our little secret," she said, standing up to toss the white tube and wrapper in the trash. "Just tell them you're behind on your arrowhead patches."

"Okay," I said, but her back was already turned as she walked out of the kitchen and disappeared up the darkened stairs.

On the following Sunday night, my father and I prepared to have Ricky and his mother over for dinner. I watched as he fussed with the tablecloth, smoothing over the same stubborn wrinkle each time he passed the table, pacing back and forth between the half-made salad and lasagna in the kitchen and the armoire where he kept our fancy, unused dishes. He brought out creamy white plates with wide brims. He set a single white candle in the center of the table, lit it, dimmed the lights, shook his head, blew out the candle, and raised the lights back to full.

"Green or red?" he asked, holding up two colored cloth napkins.

"Green," I said.

He plugged in an iron. "See if you can't work on the wrinkle in the tablecloth," he said ducking back in the kitchen. "Don't burn yourself, it gets hot," he added.

While I waited for the iron to warm, I looked up and noticed something missing from the dining room mantel – a picture of my father as a younger man standing with his arm around the woman who had been my mother. Next to that picture, we used to light a candle each day of April for my mother's birthday month. That year, my father had said that he didn't need to remember anymore. I thought it was a stupid reason to let go of a fun tradition, so I got my own pack of pink drug store birthday candles. I burnt through them in less than a week.

"Dad," I said. "Where's the picture of you and mom?"

"I just moved it, okay?" he said from the kitchen.

"I want to show Ricky."

"You can show him some other time."

"Why not tonight, Dad?"

My father walked into the dining room and grabbed the iron from its stand. His knuckles turned white around the handle as he pressed it into our tablecloth, running it slowly over the wrinkle until we both smelled burning. He placed it upright again in its stand and pulled the cord from the wall in one, swift yank.

"Not tonight, okay?"

"Okay," I said.

I fiddled with the silverware on the table while my father returned to the kitchen, and moments later, we heard the doorbell chime. I opened the door and Elaina Dove stepped into my home. I remember her as looking almost too fancy, more done up even then when we had our troupe-wide meetings and award presentations, looking as if our small house was a five-star restaurant.

My father came to the door. "No Ricky?" he said

"Oh, Ricky is feeling a bit sick," she said "but I didn't want to spoil your dinner."

"More food for me!" I said, but no one seemed to listen.

I was worried at first about losing sight of Elaina Dove, that especially now, without Ricky at our table, I would lose her and my father to the distant, incomprehensible blather of the adult world, and Elaina Dove would become nothing more than Ricky's mother. But as we both sat at the table and my father left to plate our dinners, Elaina Dove looked at me and winked as she unrolled her green cloth napkin and

smoothed it over her lap. I felt bonded then, the two of us, linked somehow by our shared secret of my transgression, made safe by it.

Over dinner, my father talked about work and I probably talked about school, but what I remember most was watching Elaina Dove from across the table, slicing small, clean bites of food and swirling her red wine in her cup. I remember how it came to life in a perfect circular wave inside her glass at the slightest movement of her hand, as if it too was excited by the mere touch of her. When we cleared the salad bowls and the dinner plates and I presented Elaina Dove with a prized slice of angel food cake, she was so excited that she put down her fork and ate by hand. As she bit of each piece of cake, her lipstick stained the white edges red.

When my fork clanked against my empty plate, my father looked at his watch and said, "time to get you to bed little man."

"I should get going, too," said Elaina Dove.

My father held up the half-full bottle of wine and said, "you should stay for another glass."

"Thank you, but I've got to get an early start tomorrow morning. Save it for next time?"

My father herded me upstairs. I dutifully brushed my teeth and washed my face, then moved to the top of the staircase, where I could hide behind the bars of the railing in the darkened second floor and perhaps catch one final glimpse of Elaina Dove.

"Are you really going to make me finish this on my own?" my father said.

"Thank you, really," said Elaina and put her hand on my father's shoulder. "It's been a long time since anyone has cooked me dinner." She was about to open our door to leave when she paused and turned back to my father. "I should tell you something."

"Yes?"

"About your son."

I felt the warmth suck out of the room and squeezed my face between the hard bars of the staircase.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, I just think you need to talk with him. He's getting curious."

"About what?"

"I found a tampon in his bag when he came to Ricky's sleepover."

My father laughed, a cruel staccato pinging in his throat, and he tried to stifle the noise with a hand over his mouth. Elaina smiled back at him and a chuckle escaped her lips. That laugh. I would have accepted any punishment but that easy, thoughtless laugh. Whatever link I had felt with Elaina Dove snapped in two. They had become as two adults again, distant, unreachable.

"Just talk with him, okay?" she said.

"He needs his mother for that," said my father. She took her hand off my father's shoulder and straightened her jacket.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"You're fine. I'll see you at the next pack meeting."

I slipped back into my room as Ricky's mother left our home. That night I dreamed I was running for hours straight on an empty football pitch, and my skin burned a furious shade of red, but I couldn't tell if I was running away or trying to catch up.

On the following Wednesday, I sulked through the whole scout meeting, barely making eye contact with anyone. My movements felt slowed, and all sound felt deadened, as if I were submerged under water, just out of sight. We finished early enough to fit in one last game. I trudged through each play.

"What's your problem?"

"Why don't you catch something for once?"

I don't remember coming alive to my senses until our families arrived. The others pleaded for one more play. Ricky and his team lined up across from me. On my side, Jeff drew the scrimmage line in the air with the tip of the football. We were panting from the last play, and we paused to catch our breaths. Over Tommy's bent shoulders, I saw my father's car pull in to the driveway. He stepped out and greeted Ricky's mother, putting an arm around her back as if he was putting on a show, as if he was posing for a new picture.

"*Tackle*." I whispered across the scrimmage line.

"Are you crazy?" said Ricky. "They're all watching."

"So you don't think you can catch me?" I said.

Jeff smirked at my taunt. He called "hike" and shoved the ball into my stomach. I ploughed forward and spun away from Tommy's grasp. I ran past Greg. Juan yelled, "cheater!" and Ricky grabbed my shirt from behind. I turned and hefted my weight

toward him. The quick rush of violence flowed through my veins, and I felt that same sick feeling well up at the back of my throat. Ricky pulled at my shoulders, and we both went down. The pack fell silent. Underneath the spot where Ricky's head hit the ground was the jagged edge of a rock and a red shock of blood. The parents came running, and one voice, my father's, broke through the noise.

"What did you do?" he said.

I stood up from Ricky and he rolled over in pain. He drew back his hand from his head, and when he saw the patch of red, he screamed. I looked back to my pack for some sense of solidarity against the oncoming wall of our parents and siblings. They backpedalled. I searched through the crowd, looking for Elaina Dove, for a wink or a soft hand at my side, anything to tell me that I was still a good boy. When I finally found her face, I saw only Ricky's mother looking down at her son.

Now, as I hold my last keepsakes from my days as a scout – the thin patches my wife will sew on our son's uniform, the neckerchief slide his den mother will fix under his chin, the flimsy pocketknife that I'll fold into his tiny palm – they feel foreign, untranslatable. Now, when I try to picture Elaina Dove, it's that final expression that remains seared in my mind. I don't remember seeing any shock in her face, and I don't remember seeing anger toward me or care for her son. In her eyes, I had become part of some long history of disappointment, lumped into a worn and tired groove, cut deep by those before me who had come into her life, and then, after leaving a stain of violence, left.

Sanctuary

The four of us are sitting in a booth with an hour to go until last call. My brother, John, and his new girlfriend, Liz, each have just an inch of drink left, and Ruth's head feels heavy against my shoulder. The summer rain slides down the bar windows in fat drops, splitting at random into forked streams. I think we've finally worn the night thin, but then Ruth looks up and says something stupid.

"Hey John, got any more good stories about Matty?" She yawns through her words, faking interest. She's just being painfully polite.

"Did Matty ever tell you the one about how we brought down the sanctuary ceiling of our Dad's church?"

"That one, tell that one!" says Liz, swinging her legs into my brother's lap.

"How come I'm the only one who hasn't heard this story?" says Ruth, and I think she's genuinely hurt.

John's eyes go wide. That's all he needs for an invitation to start in on his favorite story, the one I've suffered through a hundred times, the one where he wrings out the truth and leaves you with some worn out barstool tale of adolescent rebellion. I'm going to need a drink, so I stand up with my empty glass in hand.

"Well," I say, "who wants what?"

"Better make it a whiskey," says Ruth. John finishes his beer and tips the empty pint in my direction. Liz sucks up the last of her drink through a skinny black straw, holds the tumbler aloft, and through scrunched eyes and gritted teeth exclaims, "Gin!"

I give our order at the bar, and our corner booth comes back to life. Ruth leans over the table to listen with her head perched in her hands. Liz's shirt hangs loose over one shoulder, and she's pulling eyes from all corners of the room. She puts her hand on top of John's and rubs her fingers between his knuckles. They won't last, but my brother seems to like it that way. He's turning 30 this year and showing no signs of settling down. "Why should I?" he'd say in that way that leaves no room for a response. I balance two drinks in each hand and walk back to our table.

John starts talking as I sit down. "When we were kids," he says, "growing up in our father's congregational church at the center of our shit New Hampshire hometown, we thought that nobody else got it. All those churchgoers, they could go every Sunday, mumble the Lord's Prayer, eat their bread, swallow their wine, and drop their wrinkled dollar bills in the plate, but they still didn't get how it all worked. Matty and I knew our father's weekly sermons weren't any kind of hallowed message handed down from God. He was a man who sat in an office every week, reading his books and writing a speech, just like any other man might do, like a bricklayer, nothing more than putting pieces together for others to see."

John adopts his preacher voice pantomime of our father and says, "it looked impressive when Dad stood there in his robes behind the altar reading two-thousand-year-old words from that ancient tome of a Bible, voice booming through the pews, but what I'm trying to say is that he had microphones and speakers made by man, and that Bible

was just a book with stories in it – long stories, short stories, violent ones and boring ones – just like any other book."

"Ink, paper, and binding," John says, banging his fist on our table with each word, sending a small tide of foam over the lip of his glass.

Ruth jumps at the sudden, violent noise and then laughs at her own surprise. Liz leans back against my brother, and she grins like she knows what's coming next.

My brother says, "When we were younger, Matty and I looked almost like twins, yellow haired and boney, like a couple of skinny scarecrows in a corn patch. We looked so much alike that during coffee hour, after Sunday services, some of the old crusties took to calling us the two saints. Most regular church-goers thought they knew us because our father would tell stories about us in his sermons. Every time we opened our dumb mouths, he'd make a story of it. Every time we messed something up, he made our life lesson the business of the entire congregation. We sat in the dead last pew of the sanctuary, burning red as beets while all those strangers turned back to smile at us, and our father would tie our stories up with a moral and a message, set right next to those 2,000 year old Bible stories. So of course they thought that Matty and me were saints, like the two missing apostles from the Good Book."

John nods his head in my direction each time he refers to us as a pair, as if we're still a close, brotherly unit. Ruth squeezes my knee under the table and looks over like she's expecting me to join in on the story at any moment. Liz sucks at the ice in the bottom of her glass and raises her hand to flag down a waiter. Ruth reaches out to pull Liz's arm down, and Liz rears back like her hand has been burnt. She scowls at us, then turns her eyes back toward the bar.

"More gin," she says, calling out to no one in particular. "And get to the good parts," she says, throwing an arm around John's shoulders. He tips back his pint and wipes the foam from his mouth with the back of his hand.

John says, "We hated being called the two saints, and we decided to ruin their perfect little vision of the preacher's kids. We started out small. We'd draw on our bulletins during church, bullets between the hymn listings, severed heads in the margins, blood spilling over the scripture readings. Then we folded it up with our dollar bills to drop in the offering plate. After service, we'd play war games in the playground, launching pine cone bombs off the see-saw and pretending we were storming the church walls. On Communion Sundays, we followed the bread leftovers to the kitchen after the service, stuffed our mouths full and yelled, *we're eatin' Jesus* to everyone within earshot."

Liz tosses her head back over John's shoulder in silent laughter.

"You two were a couple of little shits," says Ruth, but she looks worried when I don't laugh.

The bartender leaves a fresh gin and tonic on the table and says, "Thirty minutes left until last call."

We order three more pints and John keeps talking. "On weekend nights," he says, "we'd get a few friends together and creep up into the steeple with our father's keys, open up the panel in the clock face, and look down over the town while we worked our way through a few stolen six packs. The sack of empty bottles made such a racket on the way down that we could have woke the bones in the graveyard. But that was all just kid stuff compared to what Matty did next.

"He found some girl – what was her name – Suzie Stramer," he says, pointing his finger at me across the bar table and nodding his head.

"She was just a sophomore like him, but she went crazy about us being preacher's kids. So what does Matty do? He waits for a weekend night when the church is dead silent, sneaks Suzie into the sanctuary, and puts it in her, right at the foot of the altar."

"You put it in her, huh?" says Ruth. She slaps my face jokingly, but she's drunk, and it leaves a red sting. She laughs with a hand over her mouth, but I don't laugh back.

"What's wrong?" she mouths to me and cups my hand in her lap.

John says, "I couldn't let my little brother have all the glory. Matty had raised the bar. He had committed the ultimate sacrilege. So what I could do? I had to sneak my own girlfriend into the church, and I had to make it riskier, too. So we did it on a Sunday morning while it was still dark, just hours before the first early-risers would come to church. There we were, laying by the altar, clothes half on and half off, when we heard a low creak and a sharp split like thunder. The sound shook through the floor and up into my legs. Then a wall of air hit me like a slap against both ears and a kick to my ribs."

"Like this," he says, and he slaps his hands together over the table as if that could somehow approximate the sound of a ton of wood, nails, and insulation dropping from a height of over 25 feet.

"Dirt and dust filled the air," he says, "and it was like trying to inhale sand. When I could finally breathe again, I realized what had happened. The whole sanctuary ceiling had come crashing down on the backs of the pews, and the edge of it was just inches from our toes."

My brother lets his words settle, as if the air is filled with dust all over again, and he wants to let it clear before anyone can speak.

"What happened next?" says Ruth

"That's it," says John, "that's how Matty and I brought down the whole church ceiling. It was like a warning from god to both of us," he says in his mocking tone of an evangelist preacher. "It was a miracle that set us back on the right path." He tips back the end of his drink and nudges Liz as if to say that she is somehow a sign of the right path, as if that whole dumbed down story he just told us really altered the course of our lives toward this very moment, the four of us, sitting drunk at a bar.

Liz says, "How many Hail Mary's did it take to make you boys good again?" She traces the line of John's ear with a finger.

"We're not Catholic," I say.

"It speaks!" says Liz, pointing a finger at me.

"We're past last call," I say, looking at my watch. "Let's go." I stand up from the booth to settle our bill, and Ruth stands with me. Liz frowns up at us and won't move until John pulls her up by the wrists. He's still mumbling in his imitation preacher voice, and Liz giggles, trying to hold her balance on the twin spikes of her heels.

We head out into the night. The rain has stopped falling. A musky heat radiates up from the wet pavement, and the yellow fluorescence of the streetlamps stretches our shadows across the road. John and Liz careen out in front of me, holding each other up while pulling in opposite directions, listing across the street like a boat caught in a storm. They belch at each other and laugh at their failing bodies, tripping over their own feet. Ruth pulls up next to me and wraps her arms around my side. She keeps looking up at

me, trying to pry free some words with her eyes, but I can't stop staring at John, at his cursive path through the street, at how easily he laughs off our childhood in our father's church. I keep asking myself, where does he put it all? How far deep has he stuffed our story to where he can skim off simple laughs from the surface and forget everything else?

John talks about our rebellion like it was all a game, and he leaves out the time when I bashed in another kid's face by mistake on the church playground see-saws. The kid was Michael's son, and Michael was a church regular. He was in his mid thirties when I knew him, but looked like he had already seen fifty years of life. He had a small purple scar that pulled up on one corner of his upper lip so that he always looked like he was half smiling.

We were supposed to be babysitting Michael's son, so we brought him outside to the church playground. We taught him how to jump on one end of the see-saw like a catapult, launching fake grenades into the air, but then the kid stuck his head over the see-saw just as I jumped on the other end. The wooden board leapt up into the kid's jaw, lifted him a foot into the air, and dropped him on his back into the hot sand. His mouth opened wide, but no screams came out, just blood pouring out of his mouth. He tried to catch it with his little hands, and then the screams came. The sound must have carried because Michael came running. The scar on his lip tugged his face all out of sense – one half trying to smirk while the other half bent down in a scowl. He stared into me, picked up his kid, and walked off without saying a word. The kid's adult teeth took ages to grow in, so I had to stare at his gummy, toothless mouth week after week and wonder if he would ever look right again. Now John leaves out that part of the story because it isn't

any good for a laugh. There's no sense and no message in it, just a lot of blood and two nubs of white teeth in that little kid's hand.

And then, when John finally works up to the sanctuary scene, he always tells it like we had a real competition, as if we weren't just clueless high school students bumbling around in the dark. That night with Suzie in the sanctuary, I remember how our pale skin was just light enough to see in the blackness, and we fit together like two crescent moons pulled down from the sky. The sanctuary was so dark that we couldn't see back to the last row of pews, and we couldn't see up to the high ceiling. We could've been out in a forest looking up into a starless night sky. We could've been in an old rock foundation in the woods, totally alone except for each other, the ground, and the worms. We could've been anywhere, really, someplace that I could make and name and frame on my own terms.

John looks so carefree now, drifting ahead of me with Liz at his side, drunk off his own triumphant and rebellious telling of our childhood, but I remember how it really looked after the ceiling fell, inches from killing my brother and his girlfriend. John's call to my cell phone woke me up at 4:00am. I entered the sanctuary near the altar, and the air was still thick with dust. I turned on the wall lights and saw the entire ceiling lying across the pews like a frozen sea of broken wood, waves tipped white with insulation. It had peeled clear from the roof, and I could see the bones of the attic, leading up to the steeple bell. My brother was at the cusp of the wreckage, having just escaped the fall of timber and plaster. Grey dirt caked his face, frozen in a wild grimace like some fiendish gargoyle but for the two pink lines of skin under his eyes, washed clean from tears. I

remember how his girlfriend yelled, "Turn off the lights!" as if we could make it all disappear back into darkness.

I fumbled with the long row of switches, accidently turning on the back lights, dimming the front, off and on and off again until I finally got it right. We weren't the only ones awake at that hour. Michael lived across the street, and he must have just been getting out of bed, because in his half-conscious state, the flashing lights from inside the sanctuary window sparked fear in him, catching his eyes like flickering flames.

The fire truck arrived first, followed closely by three police cars. The blue and red flashing lights shone through the figures forged into the stained glass windows and drew long shadows of the apostles across the broken wood. They found the three of us there, struck dumb by the scene and unable to explain ourselves.

Michael arrived behind the police. He phoned our parents who called the girlfriend's parents. The noise and flashing lights were enough to wake a few of the church goers from the old folk's home next door, and they emerged on the scene, bleary-eyed and curious. The sight of my brother and his girlfriend wrapped together under a fireman's blanket was enough to get the rumor mill turning.

Of course John leaves all of that out. He makes a simple little story that he can tell to his girlfriends like a cheap pick-up line, and as I look at Liz hanging off of my brother, I know that she hasn't heard the whole story and that she probably never will. They are both staying at my apartment tonight, but I wish I could send John home already. Maybe then I'd be able to tell Ruth what really happened.

The fall of the church ceiling wasn't some kind of retribution handed down from above. It wasn't a miracle to shed light on us sinners. The church was old, built before

the nearby roads became major throughways, before 18-wheelers lumbered through town, sending small shocks through the ground and up into the church ceiling, loosening all the iron nails until they finally let go. It must have started at the far end of the sanctuary, and the weight of the first section of loose wood peeled the whole ceiling down together like an old scab.

My parents took away my phone and barred me from dating. They tried to hold John at home by taking away all his driving privileges, but just after his high school graduation, he snuck off with his friends in a shared van and spent the summer on a long road trip. So of course he thinks the story ends there, just after the ceiling fell. Our father held a regular service outside in the sun the morning after the incident. The organist played music on an electric keyboard, and the congregation sat on folding chairs. Our father's message for the congregation that day was about the strength of community in the face of hardship.

After one of those services, Michael took me aside into the quiet of the church kitchen. Even after what we did to his son, I guess he still felt some kind of duty to help look after the preacher's kids. Michael's scarred half-smile crept up one side of his face, backlit by the bright morning light streaming through the kitchen windows.

"People are gonna talk," he said. "They're gonna talk about you and John."

"No one is going to talk," I said.

"Do you think the ceiling was some kind of sign handed down from above?" he said.

"It was just bad luck."

"Right, but people will talk, and someday, you might both believe it. You might find yourselves feeling like maybe you really did cause all of this happen. That you brought it down on yourselves."

His face was washed out in the glare from the window, and all I could see then was the black outline of his head and shoulders while his voice carried on, slow and calm.

"I'm not saying He doesn't have a hand in things, in how the world turns, but it's too much blame to carry around forever. It's a bad path to take," he said.

"Okay," I said.

"Your father is a good man. There are a lot of us who think so, and we hope you stay."

"Okay," I said.

Soon enough, everyone knew what had happened in the sanctuary. These sorts of things don't just pass without the real story squirming its way out of hiding. But it took sometime before anyone acted on the news. John was already out driving across the country when the phone calls started coming. While he was off enjoying his summer, I was at home, listening to the hollow ring of the phone, waiting for the answering machine to click on. Voices that I used to recognize from coffee hour – people that used to call us the two saints and try to pinch our cheeks – left bitter words on the tape. They couldn't believe the news, they said. How could any man believe what he preached and still raise kids like that? they said. When my father wasn't at home, I would erase all the messages that came in. I'm not sure if it helped or not. I watched the congregation thin each week. My father mumbled through the prayers, dropped his notes during the announcements, and left sermons half-finished. John came home just long enough to pack for college,

and when he was safely settled into his new dorm room, my father left the church altogether and went into counseling work instead.

Now I watch John and Liz disappear around the corner as they turn onto my street. I'm still walking slow with Ruth by my side, taking my time and keeping my distance. When my brother is out of sight, Ruth finally asks, "What's up? You're being so quiet."

"I'm fine," I say, "just drunk is all."

We turn the corner and John and Liz are on my stoop waiting. I get out my keys, and maybe the drinks really are hitting me, because I can't seem to get the lock to turn.

"Hurry up," says John.

"Yea" says Liz, "C'mon."

Ruth squeezes in between John and Liz, and now we're all crammed up against the door, and the goddamn knob won't turn until Ruth puts her hands over mine and helps me fit the key in right.

I push open the door harder then I meant to, and it swings wide, slamming against the wall. We stumble into the dark front room, and the city lights from outside are just bright enough to paint our outlines. Liz tips over into the futon and kicks her shoes off the edge of the bed. John sits down next to her with his hand on her thigh. Ruth gulps down water at the sink.

"John," I say, talking to the nothingness of the dark room, "we cost Dad his job." I say it like he doesn't already know, like it's some big secret.

"What?" he says.

"People left the church because the preacher's kids were having sex in the sanctuary."

"You're drunk, Matty."

"Not drunk enough," says Liz and she sits up to say, "you gotta lighten up."

The room is spinning as Ruth pulls at my arm and says, "time for bed, let's go."

"He's gonna leave you," I say, pointing toward the futon, no longer sure which dark shape is my brother and which one is Liz. "This won't last," I say, waving my hand at them now as if they were a cloud of smoke I could clear from the room.

John says, "fuck off, little brother."

Ruth pulls harder at my arm, leading me toward our bedroom, and I know that they'll probably forget what I said in the morning. It won't stick. Nothing is going to stick.

The Passing of Mr. and Mrs. Crow

Gabriel Crow heard a knock at his door, so slight that at first he mistook it for a tree branch cracking in the wind. He looked out his font window into the evening darkness, and at the edge of the porch, just visible in the dim house lights, stood a thin man wrapped in grey raingear. The visitor was familiar yet forgettable, and as Gabriel swung open his door, he felt an unplaceable shiver of déjà vu.

"You're running out of time," said the thin man. "We're concerned."

"Who are you?" said Gabriel.

"You're old," said the thin man, and it was true. Gabriel Crow's bald head was covered in liver-spots, and his beard was a tangle of cobwebs. He was so old that he seemed to have aged from man to mineral, formed by some tortured geological erosion, shaped by glacial ebb.

"I think you should leave," said Gabriel.

The thin man moved forward, and his wire-framed glasses caught the porch light, reflecting back two burning orange globes.

"You can keep pretending," said the thin man, "but I know that you know who we are. Time, Mr. Crow, is like a fresh pack of playing cards."

From his pocket, the thin man produced an unshuffled deck, and he fanned the cards apart from Ace to King between long, spindly fingers.

"Each moment arrives and passes in a neat, linear fashion, and it's your job to keep all of our cards in order. The deck has too many cards now, Mr. Crow. You can't hold all of them up forever."

The thin man dropped the cards at Gabriel's feet and smiled, bearing two rows of white, menacing teeth.

"I've got years left in my term, you old bully," said Gabriel.

"No, Mr. Crow. You have *days*. Find a replacement before it's too late." The thin man closed the door on Gabriel, then he turned into the air, a line of grey, then nothing.

Gabriel retreated into his kitchen to find his wife, Millicent.

"Who was that at the door?" she said.

"An incredibly thin man," said Gabriel.

"Oh," she said. "Them."

She was holding a carton of milk which Gabriel had misplaced in the cupboard, causing it to turn sweaty and sour in the warmth of the kitchen.

"What happened to the milk?" said Gabriel. "It smells."

Millicent looked her husband in his pale, watery eyes, took him by the hand, and sat him down at their kitchen table. She arranged her dress around her chair and pulled her back into a straight line. She opened her mouth to speak, paused, placed her hands flat on the table in front of her, then brought them up into a bridge under her chin. In a corner of the ceiling, a spider scuttled across an invisible web.

"The first time we had sex," she said. "When was it?"

"Missy, please, it's just a bit of spoiled milk. I can still remember. I'm still me."

"Prove it."

Gabriel winced. His wife held her stare, unflinching.

"Fine," said Gabriel. "The first time we made love, we had stayed up all night waiting for everyone to leave the apartment, and the sun was just coming up – "

"Give me the *facts*, Gabe. The place. The time."

"The colors of the sky," said Gabriel, pounding the table to the beat of the words, "is just as important."

Millicent looked at him with eyes magnified behind her thick glasses. Age had piled on top of her, rounding her out, the plump sides of her filling up her dress, which she still knew how to wear with a certain elegance. Gabriel remembered how different their bodies had been then – his taut, even skin and her red, flushed neck.

"1602," he said. "August 13th. London."

"Good, now give me one."

"The time we broke into my boss' office, the day before I quit, and made a mess all over his record books."

"1823," said Millicent. "April 20th. Boston. Do you remember who took the job after you and when?"

"I don't know, Missy, but I probably never knew, so what's the difference? It doesn't mean anything."

"No, Gabe, it means everything."

He closed his eyes and sighed like an old, punctured tire. Under the table, Millicent slipped one foot out of her shoe and tucked it behind Gabriel's ankle. Outside, a silent vein of lightning split the sky.

"One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand, four – " Gabriel said, counting the lag between lightning and thunder.

Beneath the cliff where their house stood, the ocean waves rose in sharp, blue points then shattered like glass against the rocks of the shore. The air was as crisp as paper, cut only by a black arrow of geese trying to outrun the storm clouds on the horizon, but they appeared to be barely moving as if they were held fast to the sky by some invisible hand. Finally, thunder cannoned the air.

"Gabe, honey, go check the clocks, will you?"

In his barber shop, converted from the front room of his home, Jacques Fleuette listened to the thunder. He swept together the last bits of hair scattered about the floor like broken bird nests. He laid out his shears and razors to dry and wiped the smudges from the mirrors. Dark combs stood magnified in a jar of antiseptic blue.

Storms were bad for business, and Jacques' worried that if the rain held through the night and into the next day, only the most desperate, wild-haired customers would brave the weather. On normal days, the townspeople would come to him simply for the pleasure of sitting in his soft leather seats. Jacques knew the entire town by name and birthday, upon which he offered his services half-off. Women would ask him to check for grey hairs with an intimacy usually reserved for their husbands. Men and boys without even a shadow of a beard would sit for Jacques' famously bloodless straight

razor shaves just for the feel of the warm cream and his brisk, bladed movements. And above all, they came for the stories. His mind held a compendium of tales, some historical and some new, some true and some pure fantasy. He told personal tales from his childhood in Montreal, about how he once stole an old-fashioned horse-drawn carriage and took tourists' money for rides through the cobblestone streets. He invented stories about the town's history as well, claiming it was founded by a ship of renegade sailors blown off course by gale winds.

Jacques turned off the lights in his shop. Up the road from the center of town, on the edge of the cliff that hung over the sea, he saw the dark house of Mr. and Mrs. Crow. He had seen the old woman come into town from time to time, but in all his years living in this town, he had never seen the old man up close, only shadows moving slowly across the porch or the yard, and it was the mystery of old Mr. Crow that had become his favorite muse for barbershop stories. Jacques invented tales about what Old Man Crow was searching for when he wandered along the ocean cliffs: the heads of his enemies, the hearts of his friends, dreams from the dreaming. On sunny days, when his clients arrived in pleasant moods, Jacques imaged Crow as a benevolent presence, sent to ensure smooth seas for the ships leaving the harbor. On somber, grey days, Crow became a bitter old ghost who would freeze the town under a foot of snow out of spite. To troublesome children, Crow was a dark spirit who ate the souls of the weak and lazy. To the adventurous, he was the protector of lost treasure hidden somewhere in a cave along the cliffs, and if only someone was brave enough to speak to him, perhaps he would reveal his secrets.

Jacques' dog padded into the shop and licked at the barber's fingers.

"Dinner time?" said Jacques.

He checked the dog's food bowl in the kitchen and saw that it was still full from this morning, and when he called for her to come eat, she moved toward him with slow, labored steps, as if she were stuck in slow motion or wading in water against a strong current.

Fat drops of rain broke against the house. The wind climbed up the cliffs, pulling black clouds from the sea. Gabriel Crow descended into his basement. The old planks of the stairs stained the bottoms of his slippers ash grey. Cool air pooled in the darkness, as dry and as still as a tomb. Gabriel stamped his heel against the floor and found the spot that rang hollow. His back creaked as he bent over and pulled open a square hatch in the wood. The silence of the basement filled with the rhythmic, staccato ticking of the clocks. Down another set of stairs, Gabriel followed the sound.

Gold pendulums of great grandfather clocks swayed back and forth behind frosted glass. Cuckoo clocks dropped their chains and released squawking robins, blue jays, and parrots. Five rows of tables topped with boxes and cabinets held pocket watches, locket watches, and wrist watches. The room beat with an exhausting cacophony of ticks and tocks, and even Gabriel admitted to himself that perhaps he had acquired a few too many clocks.

There had been just four empty hourglasses when they started the job. The work had been clean and simple then. Each night, Gabriel and Millicent would open an hourglass and sprinkle a bit of sand in the top, and as it slid to the bottom, they gathered together the days' events and memories and placed them in a neat line in their minds,

ascribing each moment to a grain of sand, adding them to the events of the previous day, and the day before that, and so on and so on, like ordering the pile of shuffled cards the thin man had dropped at Gabriel's feet. They became the repository of time past and the vessels through which time marched forward, and without them, all time would come to a shuddering end. It was the way their predecessor had done the job, and it was the way he had learned from his predecessor before him, the way it had always been done since the position began.

At a market in Spain, Millicent bought them a brown leather case and sewed a cushion inside to fit their four hourglasses. At a tailor in England, Gabriel had special pouches sewn into his coats, and they collected sand from beaches along the coasts of Europe. They travelled from one town to the next with their four hourglasses and their sand, never stopping anywhere long enough to draw suspicion. Their work had unhinged their bodies from the normal stream of time, and while they grew imperceptibly older in the span of a normal life, they watched their acquaintances grow old and die. They became each other's only companions, closing their hearts to neighbors and strangers as whole centuries rose and fell. Wherever they went, moving from rooftop flats to vacated homes, from grand hotels to forest hovels, they had each other, and each night, Gabriel would cup his wife's hand as she poured sand into the hourglasses, and they would sit and remember.

They filled their first three hourglasses before they crossed the sea to the Americas, and when they started to fill their fourth, they had a visit from a slightly different looking thin man.

"It's time to secure a replacement," he said, standing in the doorway of their home, talking to a much younger Mr. and Mrs. Crow.

"But there's two of us," said Gabriel. "We can remember twice as much as any of our predecessors. We should be allowed twice as many hourglasses!"

Millicent wrapped her arms around Gabriel to try and stop herself from trembling. She knew instinctively that if they completed their work and returned to the normal stream of time, their bodies would crumble to dust in an instant, never to breathe each other's names again.

"Yes, there are two of you," hissed the thin man, "a mistake which we will not replicate in the future. We wouldn't like you getting too attached to the work."

In the weeks following the thin man's visit, Gabriel frantically cast about for some method of extending their term. He tried writing out a day's moments in a massive bound book of blank pages, but his hand grew numb before he got even halfway through the work. He thought about simply buying additional, larger hourglasses, but he worried that the memories of people and places would start to slip into the faceless piles of sand, forgotten. Finally, upon entering a watchmaker's shop in Boston, he discovered that the process of winding a mechanical clock had, for him, the same meditative quality of watching sand slip though an hourglass, and he found that he was able to ascribe the day's events to the ticking of the clock.

The mechanical watches, however, didn't hold the same fascination for Millicent as they held for Gabriel, and as they filled their final hourglass and moved on to their first pocket watch, she missed the soft swoosh of sand slipping through glass, and she struggled to remember anything with the noisy ticking of mechanical parts. Although

they had successfully found a way to extend their term, the work increasingly fell to Gabriel and the job became a heavier burden with each passing day. He needed more and more clocks of varied make and design, distinctive enough to help him remember which piece corresponded to which swath of time. The clocks came from countries across the globe. Some were drawn up from the sea. One was pulled from the wreck of a fallen plane. At first, Gabriel kept the clocks in his coat pockets, and as he collection grew, he strapped some to his wrists, wrapped others around his ankles, and stuffed the rest in an additional suitcase until finally he could no longer keep them on his person. Gabriel and Millicent were forced to give up their love of travel, and out of necessity for a quiet space to keep their clocks, they made a final, permanent move to their house on the ocean cliff.

Gabriel surveyed his now grand collection of clocks. Hanging clocks covered the wall. Some were plain – a black rim around the face as white as an egg. Others were themed – a Dali clock dripping a six and seven toward the floor. Propped up against the left wall, a massive, lacquered slice of a redwood marked the time with long, thin hands bisecting a thousand tree rings. On the opposite wall hung a row of clocks built over enlarged playing cards, the Jack of Clubs, the Queen of Spades, the Suicide King.

Gabriel listened to the collective beat of the clocks. A vast, empty silence laid in the midst of each second. It sat calm like the sea between the pull of a wave and the crash against shore. The day's events came to him like breath filling his lungs. Then the clocks' tick broke the quiet and Gabriel exhaled, lining up time in his mind. Again and again he repeated his work until his heart settled into the rhythm of the clocks, and he listened for the faint murmur of any slowed, off-beat notes, a sign that he had let some memory slip. There, to his right, the grandfather clock lagged. He opened its glass case,

and with one practiced turn, wound the clock as if tightening a chord back in tune. Outside, a flock of geese passed over the house, stuck in the midst of the storm but flying fast as if they had just been sprung loose from the sky.

There was still an off-beat murmur somewhere, and Gabriel advanced through the room, pausing to breathe and listen at each step. In the top right drawer of a desk pushed against the wall, he found a pocket watch, flipped open the cover, and held it to his ear. It's beat was slowed, like the tired heart of an old animal. Gabriel wracked his mind for the missing bit of time, but he could not place it. The watch was a fairly new addition to his collection, so perhaps, he thought, he was forgetting some recent moment corresponding to someone or something nearby in town. He hadn't walked into town for weeks, or was it months? Longer even? For the first time since taking the position, he felt the world slipping out of sync, as if the members of a symphony were playing over each other, the whole musical number about to collapse into a single note of sound. He feared that if he continued his line of questions without answers he would risk pulling a thread that would unravel the fabric of all things, and so, feeling defeated and anxious, he placed the watch back in its drawer, and its offbeat tick taunted his weary mind. Gabriel turned his back on the clocks and pulled his rigid frame up the steps toward bed.

The storm continued through the night. When morning broke, the sun still hid behind a curtain of grey and barely managed to lift the sky's dim pallor. Gabriel, still wearing a pair of ragged pajamas, stood in the bedroom closet with his crooked back bent over a box of old keepsakes from past homes, trying to jog his memory. He sifted through a set of browned, two-tone portraits taken in an old German studio, a blood-red

kerchief Millicent had caught as it drifted from the stage of a Globe Theater show, worn dusty coins from out-of-use currencies, forged birth certificates for Gabriel Crow, Gabriel Crow, Jr., Gabriel Crow, III, Gabriel Crow, IV, Gabriel Crow, V, and so on. Millicent discovered him there, with his hands wrist-deep in their old things, quietly staring as if trying to discern the bottom of a deep well.

"We need to get you dressed," said Millicent.

Gabriel straightened at the sound of his wife's voice and turned toward her.

"I still think we should wait until the storm clears," he said.

"We've waited long enough."

"If we just had another month. Even a week. Perhaps we could take one last trip. Remember that watchmaker in London? He'd be perfect for the job."

"Gabe, he's surely dead by now."

"Oh. What about Croatia? We always said we'd make it to Split before the end."

Millicent reached behind her husband's back and fingered through the suits hanging in the closet. She pulled out a tan sports jacket.

"Place and date, please," she said.

"Macy's, 1972," said Gabriel. "See? I've still got it. There's no hurry."

"It's hideous," she said. "Of course you remember it. How about this one?"

Millicent pulled out a navy blue jacket and Gabriel furrowed his brow.

"I don't remember either," said Millicent. She placed a hand on her husband's cheek, then ran her fingers through his beard.

"Here, let's get you dressed," she said. They picked out a tweed suit and an orange tie which Millicent straightened in the mirror.

"Now tell me your line again – how will you introduce yourself?"

"Hi," said Gabriel, practicing in the mirror, his lips twitching into a smile. "I'm Bob from the American Life publishing company, and I'm doing interviews for our new book on seacoast towns." He turned back to his wife and said, "Missy, are you sure they won't recognize me?"

"Gabe, you haven't shown your face in town in a generation."

"Has it really been that long?"

Millicent held Gabriel's face with both hands and her cheeks ran wet.

"You look so handsome," she said.

Gabriel Crow stalked through the huddle of houses and shops in the center of town. Under the oppressive battering of the grey, dreary rain, most storefront widows read "closed." Shutters rattled. Tin pans collected drips from ceiling cracks. Gabriel looked like a lost, delirious traveler, wandering through the streets alone without another soul in sight, his umbrella failing to keep the rain off his dripping beard and slick jacket. Looking back at him from inside the houses, Gabriel saw shaking heads, twitching mustaches, and beady-eyed children hiding from view in the corners of front windows. Gabriel concentrated on the slow, even pace of his boots splashing against the wet streets, trying to align his steps with the rhythm of his pulse.

He began his search at a Bed and Breakfast run by the Creel family, one of the few town business that appeared to be open, a neon sign blinking "vacancy" above the door. As Gabriel entered, Mr. Creel looked up from the front desk and asked, "Can I get

you a room?" Mr. Creel fixed his eyes on the rain water sliding off Gabriel's jacket and pooling at his feet.

"I'm afraid not," said Gabriel. "I'm Bob from the American Life publishing company, and I'm doing interviews for our new book on seacoast towns."

"You're doing interviews in *this* weather?"

"Well, it's rather urgent. I'm working under strict deadlines. So Mr. Creel, do you know much of the history of this place? Do you have a mind for dates and facts?"

"Sorry," said Mr. Creel. "My mind leaks like a sieve." He tipped his head and tapped one finger on the side of his skull, as if trying to dislodge something from his downturned ear. "Sometimes I can't even remember my own wife's name," he said and laughed.

"I see," said Gabriel. "Can you recommend anyone else in town? Someone with a mind for history?"

Mr. Creel directed Gabriel to the Herolds, who he claimed were a couple of old history buffs. Gabriel thanked him and left back out into the rain. Although the air was still thick with the storm, the drops seemed to be slowing their descent, as if gravity had reduced its pull on the world, and Gabriel picked up his pace, feeling time slipping away from him. At the front door to the Herolds, he had an equally disappointing conversation, sure that neither husband, wife, nor daughter Herold had the right mind for the job. He garnered another recommendation, and in this way Gabriel moved through the town, to the baker's shop, the cobbler's house, the Smiths, and the Whites, from one house to the next, finding no one who fit his own narrow criteria for a suitable candidate, until finally someone suggested that if it was stories he wanted, there was really only one man to ask.

"Bonjour! My name is Jacques Fleuette. This, you cannot possibly pronounce. So please call me Jackie. What do I call you?"

The string of bells hanging from the door of the barbershop rang sharply as Gabriel closed the door behind him.

"Well, my name is – "

"Wait," said Jacques. "You seem familiar. Have you been through town before? Any relations nearby?"

"Well, I – "

"Ah, where are my manners? First, come sit." Jaques gestured to an empty seat. "As you can see business is slow so there is no wait, and your beard seems in need of a trim."

"Well that does sound nice," said Gabriel. He slowly peeled off his wet jacket, folded up his umbrella in the corner by the door, and eased himself into the soft leather barber's chair. Jacques snapped open a black apron in front of his customer, letting it billow and settle over his lap. The bright mirror lights shone hot on Gabriel's face, a welcome reprieve from the cold, wet morning. Jacques ran his comb through Gabriel's beard, and the ancient tangles worked free at his slightest touch. His shears opened and closed. Wet curls of white hair fell onto the floor like music notes sliding off the page.

"I have to admit I did not come here for a beard trim," said Gabriel. "I hear you're quite the storyteller."

"Ah," said Jacques, "stories keep me sharp. I never forget a name or a face if I can work it into a story."

"Is that so? Tell me one."

"Well, would you like to hear an old story about our town? Something from the sea? Or perhaps a story about Old Man Crow who lives up on the hill?"

Gabriel tensed under the black barber's apron. "Yes," he said, "tell me about him."

"They say he has a watch where his heart should be, sewed into his chest," started Jacques. "It keeps him alive beyond his years, and the only way to kill him is to make him forget to wind his heart each morning."

Gabriel smirked. It was the first time in decades, maybe centuries, that he was aware that anyone besides Millicent had taken notice of him, and he realized with a start that perhaps they had indeed spent too much time in that house on the hill to have bred such odd stories and rumors. Perhaps they had been too careless in lugging each new clock into the basement in full view of the town. Regardless of the source of Jacques' interest, Gabriel was taken with the strange inventiveness of the tale, and he felt that he might finally be in the presence of someone capable of fulfilling the position.

"That sounds like a fascinating story," said Gabriel, "but it's not true. I'm Gabriel Crow, so I would know."

Jacques froze. The blood drained from his face and he felt an irrational fear about having the powerful demigod he conjured through his tales sitting before him, a child-like excitement over finally meeting this local celebrity in person, and a deep mortification at having accidentally delivered a tale about Gabriel Crow to Gabriel Crow himself. He looked at his customer through the reflection in his mirror, and confirmed that, yes, this was most certainly the same man he had seen creeping along the edge of the cliffs at the top of the hill. Jacques' shears twitched, nicking Gabriel's cheek and drawing a

miniscule drop of blood, the first scratch he had ever marked on a customer since he trimmed his first head of hair.

"I'm terribly sorry," said Jacques. "The trim is on the house, of course, and I'm quite afraid that I've said some awfully offensive things."

"Oh please," said Gabriel. "I'm flattered to have stories told about me."

"Well how can I make it up to you?" said Jacques. "Let me make your dinner. Yes, you and Mrs. Crow must both come. I'll hear no objections against it."

"Jacques," started Gabriel, surprising the barber with his clean French pronunciation, "why don't you come to our house tonight instead? We haven't had a guest in years, and it would make my wife happy to meet someone new."

"Well," said Jacques, "If you insist."

"Yes," said Gabriel, "I insist."

Later that evening, as Jacques walked up to the house on the hill, he worried at first that meeting Mr. and Mrs. Crow in person might break the spell of mystery that served as the source of his best stories, but his curiosity won out, and he eagerly awaited the strange sights he might see and the fodder he might gather for even grander stories yet. He stepped up to the porch and knocked at the front door, but there was no answer. He tried again, knocking louder this time, thinking that perhaps they were hard of hearing in their old age. He leaned his head toward the door to listen for any sound of coming footsteps. From outside the cone of porch light in the dark shadows to his left and right came hands reaching toward him with long, thin fingers. Before any sound escaped his

lips, the hands wrapped over his mouth and his eyes, grasped his arms, and legs, and then his world faded to black.

Jacques awoke on a hard floor with the loud ticking of a thousand clocks beating in unison. When he tried to move, his limbs felt clamped to the floor as if held there by heavy weights.

He tried to ask, "Where am I?" but the words bunched together like thick taffy in his mouth.

"He's awake," said Millicent.

"Good," said Gabriel. "Listen to me, Jacques. You'll be able to move and talk again soon."

"We're going to give you an important job," said Millicent. "And in return, you'll get the chance to dream up years and years of new stories."

Unintelligible sound oozed from Jacques mouth. Outside the house, the rain stretched and slowed. Lightning spiked the sky and stuck in the air until the night glowed with the combined, white light as time slowed almost to a halt. The thin man and his lookalike associates slipped into being and crowded around Gabriel and Millicent.

"Quickly," said the thin man.

"Quickly," repeated his associates in unison. Their eyes grew large and white and they clenched their long fingers into nervous fists.

Millicent dragged a box across the floor full of clear plastic tubing, metal clamps, and a roll of heavy packing tape. Gabriel pulled a small bag of sand from his pocket.

"He doesn't have anyone," said Gabriel. "It's terrible, isn't it?"

"But he'll be good at this," said Millicent. "One of the best, maybe."

Gabriel held his wife's hand, feeling the bones just beneath her thin skin. They felt the pulse of the clocks beating out a steady rhythm, reverberating through their chests, setting the pace of their final heartbeats. Between each tick of the clocks, the silent moments lengthened. In those pauses, the immense weight of their life's memories piled together like the stone bricks of a great tower, chiseled and smoothed by hand over centuries, stretching up from the earth and piercing the sky. But with each hit of the clocks, they looked into each other's eyes and saw the tower crumbling. Millicent's hands trembled as she reached into the box. Gabriel steadied her with his arms around her sides. Together, they picked up their tools, and then they began.

Beached

Do you remember that night?

In all the years you took me there as a kid, summer after summer, when we set up our tents over the same patch of earth in the same campsite just down the road from the coast, we never had another night like that. It had rained the whole week, but we were determined to see one sunset before we packed up and left for the summer. When we got to our beach, the clouds were still too thick, and we couldn't see a thing. So we waited and listened as the cobblestones clacked together in the push and pull of the waves. The sun burnt the clouds off as it set, and finally, we got one ribbon of red at the horizon's edge.

We brought out the kerosene lantern and decided to stay. We played rummy and laid our cards out on the rocks, seeing how close we dared place our sets and runs to the ocean's edge. When the lantern burnt out, our eyes soaked up the darkness until we could see the stars above our heads and their silver sheen over the waves. That's when it happened. It ghosted pale green across the sky – the tail of the aurora. It twisted like a fist, then a finger, then a whole arm waving. You told me we were just far enough north to catch it. You said, "You can see it better if you look out the corner of your eyes. Don't look head-on or it'll vanish." I stared at the tops of the trees and pretended not to

look and not to care, as if we could coax the aurora down from the north if only it thought that no one was looking.

I've heard that telling stories might help, and the nurse keeps encouraging me to talk. A familiar voice might sink down far enough for you to reach – it might help pull you back up to the surface. Even if your fall wiped your memory's slate clean, how could you ever forget that night? I've been looking for the aurora again, up in the sky from that same beach. I've been there every weekend since your accident. I was going to keep this a surprise until you woke up, but maybe this will give you a reason to open your eyes: 848 Driftwood Avenue, Blueport, Maine. You know the town, and maybe you remember the road. The street number is new, though. I had to register it myself. It's harder than you might think – buying a house that's been abandoned for years, one that no one actually owns anymore. I ended up at the Blueport Town Hall, looking through past public records and property listings. I had to petition the town to rezone that little half acre of land as a residential plot. I wanted it to be official.

I'm talking about the house just off the road. The one we'd pass on that mile hike though the woods to the sea. To our sea. To our rocks. Even the kelp on the rocks. That's ours, too. When you wake up, we can go there again. We can park right by the house. We don't have to creep past anymore and peer in the windows, pretending to be thieves or spies. It's not a ghost house anymore, not home to a story you'd tell me about a no-legged sea captain or a beast in the woods. It's real, Dad. You can smell it. You can open the windows and the smell of the sea smacks you right in the face. The morning fog is thick with it, blowing in through the trees.

I tried to keep the house a surprise for Lilly, too. Every weekend that I took that drive from Boston to Blueport, I told Lilly that I was traveling to meet alumni, that I was shopping around a big proposal to prospective donors. I know, I know, I shouldn't have lied, but how am I supposed to explain what this house means to anyone else? It was hard enough to try and explain your letter. Lilly was there when it arrived. It was a Monday morning, and we were both getting ready for work. I cut open the envelope and unfolded your clipping from the obituary pages. Mom's life story was so short that the newsprint fit in the palm of my hand. I thought I should have felt sad, that I should have acted the part of the bereaved, but I didn't feel anything. Lilly read over my shoulder, and she said she'd take the day off work. I told her I was fine, but she insisted. I know I never really knew my mother, and I know how painful it must have been for you, trying to take care of a 2-year-old kid while your wife was in and out of rehab, and yes, Dad, of course I'm grateful that you juggled your job, and a divorce, and childcare, and that I grew up just fine like any other kid, but Jesus, she was still my mother. Did you really think that sending her obituary was the best way to break the big news? Was it so difficult to call or to write in your own words?

By the time Lilly convinced me to get on the phone, it was too late. It rang and rang, but you were already in an ambulance headed here to St. Mary's. They found alcohol in your blood, Dad. You *know* better. When you were perched on top of that ladder, were you just pretending to work on your second floor siding or did you really slip on accident? Did you have this all planned out from the start? Wherever you are, way down under, it's probably quiet and calm and peaceful. I bet it's nice, isn't it? Down there, you don't have to see or hear or feel. You don't have to deal with anything.

If you disagree, shake your head no.

If you agree, just lay there and don't move a muscle.

Well?

You don't look so good, Dad. Your face is puffy, and there's still some swelling under your eyes. You've got a tube taped to your nose, an IV in your arm, and every day they dress you in a new hospital muumuu. This one has flowers on it – little pastel daises. You're going on 28 days and counting in this bed, but I'm not giving up yet. You owe me an explanation when you come to, and now that you know about the house, you owe it to yourself to wake the hell up already.

I've sunk hours into fixing up the place, though it might not look it from the outside. The grey paint is still fading and peeling off the siding. I didn't really have time for aesthetic touchups, so I've left its rustic look. Do you remember that old boat in the yard turned vertical with its nose pointing to the sky? I left that, too, just like it was. The boat still looks like it capsized and sank halfway underground. Even up close, I can't really tell if it's half a boat sitting on the earth or a full boat buried up to its bow. You want to bring up some shovels and dig it out? Technically, the boat is ours now too, as I hold the deed to the patch of land where it rests. We could fix it up and take it out on the water. How far do you think we could go?

At first, I had trouble actually entering the house. We spent so many summers imagining the scene behind that old wooden door with the loose knob and those clouded, black windows, everything from a witch bent over a frothing cauldron to a dry, old skeleton, bones still wrapped around a pile of gold coins. I worried that as soon as I

opened the door, all those stories we thought up would die at the foot of a empty, boring room. But then I stepped inside.

The small living room had an old, sagging futon couch, two wicker chairs, and a set of bookcases. In the middle of the floor, on a brown and stained threadbare rug, lay one raccoon, dead. Two seagulls picked at the bones. When I stepped forward they flew off through a hole in the ceiling. *A hole*. I walked past the mess to where the living room opened into a tiny kitchen. The oven was waterlogged and home to a family of spiders. Remember when you used to check my tent at night for bugs? I couldn't get any sleep unless you wiped down all the sides and inspected all the corners.

In the cupboards, I found four plates, four bowls, and four mugs. The mugs had about an inch of water in the bottoms and slugs oozing up the sides. I washed them all, back to sea froth white. In the sink: one pair of old boots, leather, full of holes, unusable. On the counter: one Mr. Coffee holding a browned, cracked filter over a pot full of mud.

At the opposite end of the living room, there's a small bedroom. An old mattress sat directly on the wood-planked floor, covered with twenty-three shards of dark, broken glass. You wouldn't have wanted to lie on it anyway – it was soaked through with mold. So I took the mattress out behind the house and set it on fire. The steel skeleton lifted up through the flames as the mattress burned away, and the springs crusted black when the fire died out.

In the bedroom closet was one pile of pink sheets hiding two black snakes. In the hallway closet: one shotgun, loaded, not sure if it would still fire, no extra shells in the house anywhere except for a single, spent casing on the floor next to the broken window looking out into the woods. In the living room bookcase: two full shelves, three empty

shelves, forty-one paperbacks, and one notebook with handwritten journal entries. From what I could see around the water damage, the handwriting seems to be a man's – hard lines and messy, unfinished letters that run into each other – but I guess you can never really tell. On most days, he just made a list of whatever he saw down at the coast: sailboats, egrets, puffins, and seals. Then, on one day, he just wrote: "*3:05pm – I found it!*" The lists continue on. Some days he must have given up altogether where he just scrawled "*nothing of note*" or "*it hasn't come back.*" But on a few other days he wrote "*saw it again!*" always with the specific time, and on the last page he wrote, "*got really close this time.*" What do you think he was looking for? A boat or a whale? Maybe some old ghost drifting across the sea?

The pipes near the sink and bathroom had frozen and cracked during some winter years past. The wiring near the sockets had frayed and snapped. I looked up the town's nearest plumber and electrician, and they happened to be the same man. He said he was closer by boat so he came in at the small dock about a mile down from our coast. I walked him up to the house and he just shook his head. I showed him the pipes and wires and he just laughed.

When I asked him, "How much?" he said, "Too much."

When I asked him, "How long will it take you?" he snorted and said, "Whatever it takes won't be worth the work."

When I told him I would pay him double, he finally agreed to at least hook the house back up to the grid. The rest I did myself. The toilet still needs help flushing, the pipes under the sink leak, and I've only finished wiring one electric outlet so far, but it's a start.

Last weekend, I finally finished fixing enough of that long list of damages that I thought I would show Lilly the house. Even if it was still rough around the edges, I thought that I could sell it like an investment, a work in progress. I told her that we could have a seaside getaway where we could all stay whenever we want. We stepped inside, and Lilly noticed the drafts in the insulation and the lights that flickered when a strong wind hit the house. She seemed worried about the brown water coming out of the faucets, but I explained that it's normal for old pipes, and that all she had to do was wait a few minutes for the rust to clear.

Then I brought her to the beach hoping that the salty air might work its magic. We walked through the woods on that path knotted with tree roots, but when the forest opened up to the ocean's edge, it wasn't the endless sea that drew Lilly's eyes to the horizon or the crash of the waves that caught her ear. It was a still, grey lump lying at the foot of the water. As we got closer, we could make out it's black eyes and white whiskers. A seal pup. It was barely moving, not even trying to get away when we approached. It looked up at us with eyes that seemed fake, more like the marbled glass made by a taxidermist than the eyes of a still-breathing animal.

Lilly said "What kind of a beach is this?"

I was on the phone with the local police, asking what happened to the animal control guy. They told me he was out and wouldn't return until the week started. So we just walked back to the house. That's when Lilly found the utility bills that I had forgotten to stuff behind the bookcase. She looked over the numbers and her face pulled taut.

"Why is your name on this?" she said, and I tried to explain that I wanted it to be a surprise.

"You've bought this place already, haven't you? You've bought it with our money," she said, but I told her it was so cheap that it was basically free.

"Why did you lie to me?" she said, and I told her that it was for you, Dad, that it was important to give you this reason to wake up. She put both hands on my cheeks, and she told me that she was going to find a hotel. I told her to get me the next morning because I still had work to do on the house. I spent most of the afternoon reaching into holes along the wall, fiddling with the wires to try and get another socket hooked up. That night I called Lilly over the roar of my vacuum cleaner plugged into a newly fixed outlet, and I told her I was sorry and that I would make it the perfect summer vacation home. She told me she had to go because room service had just brought her dinner.

In the morning, as soon as I woke, I saw through the windows the usual stream of tourists heading for the beach with their camping chairs and coolers, their cameras and their kids. One of the families, they were really clueless. You know the kind. Dad wearing loafers instead of a good pair of hiking boots, kids locked on to their handheld screens. Did they notice the wet, tangy snap of ocean air or the smell of the kelp burning black across the rocks? Did they see how the mist held to the stones at the water's edge or how the birches shocked the deep green undergrowth with their white striped trunks? Did they listen to the hum of the birds and the bugs and the worms? They should have let the wind bore into them like it hits against the rocks of the shore, year after year, and they should have braved the icy crash of the waves against their skin, finally letting go the tidal push started out past the horizon, so that, maybe, they would've had the sense and

the decency and the responsibility to stop and marvel at the sheer audacity of that place, in the face of everything, to be so goddamn beautiful.

I followed them down to the beach. I kept close and listened to the kids whine and the parents bargain with them for pithy bits of silence. I wanted to see their faces. I wanted to watch as they ran toward the water and then stopped in their tracks at the sight of the seal pup. I thought it would be dead by then. Picked at by birds and sea spiders, opened and stinking in the morning sun. I would have smiled and watched as the family retreated back into the woods and back to their car. Maybe I would have left it there to ward off everyone else. I would have waited until the sun set, buried the thing in the woods, and then scrubbed the stained rocks clean. But the seal was gone, picked up by national park workers or pulled back into the sea with the tide. I watched as the parents set up their chairs and pulled out their books, and the kids scrambled over the rocks to under heavy blankets of kelp.

Lilly is trying not to show it, but she's still upset, so when you wake up, maybe we can both stay up there, just me and you for a while. You were always better with your hands than I was anyway. I could use some help patching those holes in the wall, and the old furniture is warped from the sea air, so maybe we could pick out a few new things together.

At night, the beach is still ours. The tourists leave and we can have the whole coast to ourselves. I'll drive us both up there as soon as you're well again. It will be even better than it was on our summer trips because we won't have to leave. It's ours again, not just for a week or two out of the year but for every week and every day. You don't even have to tell me how this happened. I don't care now if you slipped off that

ladder by accident or if you jumped on purpose because it doesn't change anything. You'll wake up soon and I won't even ask, I promise. We'll figure out together what happened to the man who lived in the house, who kept his daily records of beach sightings. Why do you think he would ever leave such a perfect home? Why wouldn't he pass the house along to family or friends? Didn't he realize how good he had it? Or maybe he finally found what he was searching for, and he chased it toward the waves, and the sea swallowed him whole.

Hunting Povaks

Colestown, Vermont no longer exists. Go ask the local historians, and they will pull out their best maps and point their knobby fingers at unmarked patches of green. There will be some argument as to which forested mass held the general location of Colestown, but the consensus will be clear: it is a lost place. The historians will shrug and sigh and their shoulders will sag forward as their crooked backs curve outward as if they had just suffered an old defeat that has broken them anew, and they will quietly tell you to please leave them in peace.

Turn then to the people who live in the towns surrounding those empty patches of green. Look for them splitting wood in their yards and ripping up weeds from their gardens. At the mention of Colestown they will take you by the hand and lead you to the edge of their yards and present a crumpled stone wall or a dark patch of soot where a wood fire had scorched the earth. They will all reclaim these heaps of forgotten history for the lost town and its people. In this way, the land will appear to be blanketed with Colestown, as if it had once covered the state from border to border or exploded into every darkened corner.

If you are still not satisfied, and I can see that you are not, then here is what you must do. Wait for winter. Acquire a vehicle with reliable four-wheel drive. Wrap the

tires with snow chains. Drive west on 125, past Hancock but not past Ripton, and mind the hills and hairpin turns. You'll need to go slow. The path you want is easiest to see in the morning after a fresh snowfall. All will appear as a blur of white except for one spot where the snow will not accumulate, a dark corridor into the woods marked by an unearthly bending of the trees away to either side. You will see the path at the top of the steep hill, the one that will force you to shift from third gear down into second and down again into first just to pull your shuddering engine to the peak of its ascent.

There, it's just there, can't you see? Pull over. Now get out and get bundled. Approach the path. If you scrape at the frozen earth between the sinewy roots of maple and birch trees, you'll find old bits of black gravel and tar – the last remnants of the only road into Colestown. Take the path and stick to it. After a vigorous five-mile hike, you will reach a clearing overgrown with weeds. That crumbled stone foundation marks the site of Gary Schmidt's bankrupted store. That thicket of dead brambles used to be the tilled and weeded garden of Paul Cohen. Below that hump of mounded earth lie the bones of Mary Wright. That pile of blackened bricks once housed Jess Jones' oven. And do you see that farmhouse with its walls and ceiling collapsed in a pile of molding and mossy wooden planks? That is the home of Saul Brentwood where our sorry story will find its end.

I can see that you, however, are not here for the mere distorted whispers of long-dead foundations and buried bones. Here then, are the facts. Pick up one of those bricks that once held the heat of Jess Jones' oven. Let the blackened edges stain your bare palm. We'll start with her, where the trouble began.

Jess was the sort of vexing woman, who, at a dinner party, would stuff extra biscuits into her napkin and then sneak them home to eat when no one was looking. She would always accept an offer of seconds (yes, thank you), she never shied away from taking the last slice of Christmas ham (well, if no one else will eat it), and when she ate her steak, she finished even the rind of white, gristled fat (waste not, want not). Despite her questionable eating habits, she continued to receive dinner party invites due to her exquisite baking, for no gathering in Colestown felt complete without a Jess Jones original pie. She had once had ambitions of writing her own cookbook, but that dream remained nothing more than a warm, unrealized hope, left to perch on the horizon of her life, safely secured from failure.

That all changed one late November day when Jess was raking up the last of Autumn's dead leaves from her yard, and she saw a small figure slip out from behind her oak tree. Its head was no bigger than Jess' fist, and it stood upright on two legs like a miniature human. Its face had all the right features in all the right places – eyes, ears, nose, and mouth – but everything was grotesquely stretched out of proportion as if drawn on a balloon and then inflated to the point just before it would burst. Blue spider veins crept up its neck to its bloated head, and it looked up at Jess with large, black eyes. She raised her rake in defense, bent metal tines quivering with fear. Then she noticed that the creature was wearing human clothes, an exact match of Jess' outfit: a knitted wool hat, a gray coat, and old, worn jeans which had the same bulge in the back as her own pair, stretched over a round, stout ass. Despite the strangeness of the creature's sudden appearance, Jess increasingly felt a calm sense of familiarity wash over her as she stared at the thing, and she slowly lowered her rake. The creature raised its arm to wave,

winked one of its round, bulbous eyes, and vanished back behind the oak tree. Jess searched about in her piles of leaves, but the creature was gone.

She initially chalked the visitation up to a strange waking dream brought on, perhaps, by a restless sleep following a ill-conceived late night snack of crackers and cheese which she had found molding in the back of her refrigerator (just slice away the bad parts). She gave herself an extra hour of sleep that night and tried to put the visitation out of her mind. The next day, however, the creature returned. This time it appeared inside her home, emerging from underneath a pot in Jess' kitchen, wearing an apron dusted with flour, one that was an exact miniature match to Jess' apron. She soon felt the same warm sense of familiarity at the sight of this doppelganger, a feeling she later described to those who would listen as an amelioration of a hunger she hadn't known existed.

The creature bent down to pick up a mixing bowl no bigger than Jess' thumb, and pulling out a wooden spoon from the front pocket of its apron, it stirred up a thick, orange batter. Then it dipped a finger into the bowl and brought it to its mouth. Satisfied with its work, it left the bowl on Jess' counter, pulled itself up onto the kitchen window sill, and slipped away underneath the cracked window.

Not one to waste food, Jess picked up the small bowl and tipped the mixture into her mouth. It tasted unmistakably of her own recipe for pumpkin pie, only with a touch of something extra, an additional spice that drew out the sweetness even further than she thought possible. She rummaged through her spice rack, uncapping each bottle and breathing in each scent, then, still unsure of this new ingredient, she laid out her mixing

bowls and utensils and set about testing every possible combination of flavors in her search to recreate what was undoubtedly the finest pumpkin pie batter she had ever tasted.

The creature returned again, three more times that week, leaving mixing bowls full of Jess' favorite baked goods, always with some additional twist on her own recipe. She worked furiously, spending all her waking hours in the kitchen keeping her stove warmed, filling her sink with crusting bowls of batter, and piling half-eaten pie after pie first on her kitchen's cooling racks, then, when she ran out of room, on her living room sofa, the back of her toilet, and even her bedroom pillow, working until, finally, she had captured those elusive tastes. On the fourth day, no creature appeared in Jess' kitchen, but she scarcely noticed, too engrossed in writing down her new recipes between mounded forkfuls of the most perfect strawberry rhubarb tarts and apple turnovers. Even though her stomach knotted with the furious pains of overconsumption, nothing could stunt her joy as she penned a title to her new recipes, "Vermont Country Cooking," under which she boldly and proudly printed her name.

Now clear away that patch of snow from the earth, lie down, and put your ear to the mounded grave of Mary Wright. Listen to the final silence of her bones.

Mary was single in the latter half of her years, thin, quiet, and generous to a fault. She confined herself to simple meals with a clear glass of water or sometimes a cup of black tea except for her one annual indulgence: hot, spiced rum and cider at Christmas time. The drink loosened her up just enough to ask one favor of another person, which was always to request that her daughter come home to celebrate the holidays in Colestown. This year, however, her daughter was studying abroad in London, and had asked if they might, just this once, spend the holidays apart. Mary could not justify the

cost of the plane ticket, and she rued the thought of denying her daughter the chance to experience the holidays in a new and foreign city. As the days grew colder and Christmas grew closer, Mary inwardly brimmed with an unassailable misery.

Mary's visitor came in the evening while she sat in her rocking chair tipping back the last cinnamoned dregs of her drink. She noticed a small movement in the dark corner of the living room, and, thinking it to be a mouse, she drew her legs up toward her body and sucked in air through her teeth. The small figure advanced into the lamp light, and Mary saw what was unmistakably an image of her own daughter in miniature. It had the same blond hair dyed with black streaks and a spider web tattoo on the left side of its neck, just visible above the shirt collar. Behind the figure stood a scale model of the daughter's flat in London, identifiable by the street number to which Mary would send a monthly letter and care package.

The creature looked up at Mary and mouthed the words "Help me!" but no sound left its mouth. Mary cocked her head, looked down into her emptied mug of drink, and tried to shake the vision from her mind, rubbing and blinking her eyes. Again, the creature mouthed a silent "Help me!" this time cupping its tiny hands around the sides of its lips. An orange spark of flame ignited inside the model flat, and a thin trail of fire spread to the base of the creature's feet. Mary cried out as the flames raced up the creature's legs, engulfing it in fire. Its eyes shone black through the bright orange heat. It raised its arms, and its mouth opened wide in a pantomimed scream. Mary watched, transfixed, as the apparition scuttled out of the room. She rose to follow it, but found no trace except a small pile of ash by the front door and a blackened mark on her living room floor where the model flat had stood.

Mary swore off the rum cider, convinced that her stress and excess drinking were simply manifesting themselves as nightmarish visions. But the creature returned. Again and again, Mary watched each night as this miniature facsimile of her daughter asked for help and then burst into flames. It was finally the push she needed to ask her daughter to come home, and she even offered to pay for the entire roundtrip flight. Her daughter, noting an uncharacteristic wavering in her mother's voice crackling across the international phone lines, began to worry about her mother's health, and agreed to make to journey home in early December. The day after her daughter boarded her flight at Heathrow, her London flat burned to the ground.

Now wrap your gloved hands around those thorny brambles and throw them aside. Dig at the frozen earth until you see the rich, black soil that was once Paul Cohen's garden.

At the time of these visitations, Paul was 75 and lonely, except on Tuesday nights when he would spend two hours with Dorice at their bridge club in the basement of the Colestown church. He thought himself to be long past marriageable age, but Dorice had unsettled some peace in him so that he no longer felt content to spend his nights alone. Instead, he longed to spend his final years with Dorice, but in his stubborn shyness, he let each Tuesday slip past without speaking a word to her outside the confines of their card games.

Then, one morning, Paul saw a miniature version of himself staring up at him from the wooden planks of his bedroom floor. The creature carried a bouquet of flowers and wore a smart new suit. Its hat covered the bare spots on its head which the thin wisps of hair could no longer conceal. Paul's confidence billowed as he pictured that

life-sized image of himself, and without needing a second or third sighting of his doppelganger, he drove to Burlington for a new fitted suit and picked out a medley of flowers from his own garden. That Tuesday, he presented the flowers to Dorice, asked her out on a date, and she replied with a resounding "yes."

Jess, Mary, and Paul were not the only people of Colestown to see themselves or a loved one reflected back at them in miniature. All across the town, these creatures were appearing under porches, on rooftops, in mailboxes, inside suitcases and purses, even peeking out from underneath the bed sheets. At first, no one spoke of them, thinking their stories would welcome nothing but ridicule and scorn. But more and more people saw their own small visitors, and the number of those individual secrets swelled within the town like a dammed river, until, having reached the breaking point, the dam split and the rumors spread through town with a gushing force.

They began to wonder, why us? Why Colestown? Their home was nothing more than a point through which others traveled on their way to someplace else. In the grand scheme of human accomplishments, there was no one from Colestown, not a single one, who had or would ever have any contribution of any lasting significance to the greater population whatsoever. They did not feel particularly worthy or deserving of anything more than what their simple lives contained. But these visitations had cracked open the calm of their lives and made the people of Colestown feel that they had been given an opportunity and a responsibility to put their small town on the map. They felt a newfound desire to make something greater out of their lives, and they accepted the challenge with a growing excitement, enamored with their budding self image as a small

group of people chosen from among many to reveal the existence of these beings to the world beyond Colestown.

Now step into the ruined wreck of Saul Brentwood's farmhouse. Lift the decayed beams of wood and feel their lightness, how all the surety of their weight has drained back into the earth.

Brentwood was a good man. He had grown up in Colestown where he met and then married his wife, Beth, while they were both in their twenties. Together they kept an expansive garden, maintained a chicken coop, tapped maple trees in the winter, sold their eggs, vegetables, and syrup to Schmidt's General Store, and drove what was left to the Burlington markets, and in a place like Colestown, that was, blessedly, enough. When sales were particularly good, they would treat themselves to a night out dancing in the city before returning to their quiet home. They had tried and failed to start a family, and it was the only issue that flared their tempers, so they expanded their garden, took dancing lessons in Burlington, and filled that hole in their lives as best they could.

One snowy December, years before the visitations had begun, Saul and Beth Brentwood were driving home from the city. He lost control of their car across a skid of black ice. He survived, but Beth died, after having just reached the age of 52. The town briefly mourned with Brentwood and then returned to their quotidian lives. Brentwood's garden grew rough with weeds and his tomatoes blackened on the vine, but the town understood the reason for his neglect. Foxes snatched up Brentwood's chickens through unrepaired holes in the coop, leaving bloody tufts of feathers stuck to the wire, but still, no one put the blame on him. As the years turned, however, the town's sympathy crumbled to annoyance at how Brentwood stewed in his memories. So they let him float

further into his grief like a boat set adrift, and never, not once, did someone try to reel him back in. When he appeared in church each Sunday or emerged from his farmhouse clutching amber bottles of syrup, they did their best to greet him warmly, and though they might not have admitted it, they congratulated themselves on their grace and good humor. Oh, aren't we good people to be putting on such nice faces for such a sour old man?

Now imagine Saul Brentwood standing over boiling pots of sap in his kitchen, five years past the loss of his wife. He is spending another long, December night tending to the sap, boiling off the impurities and reducing the liquid down to its thin, golden sweetness. It is good work, pure in its simplicity, and it affords Brentwood plenty of time to think.

Tonight he is thinking about the rumors rumbling through town. Even people that Brentwood scarcely knows have been coming up to him with hopeful and conspiratorial grins to ask, "Have you seen them?" Brentwood stirs his pot with a wooden spoon, breaking the thin skin over the top of the sap, now boiled down to the thickness of honey. He tells himself that his neighbors have been swept up in a wave of nonsense, that they all must be incredibly bored with their tired lives to dream up these illusory reports of strange, dwarfish creatures emerging from the woods. But he still can't seem to shake the shadowy chill that sweeps over him when someone asks, "Have they come for you?"

Brentwood clicks off his gas stove and covers his pots of sap for the night. He pours himself a modest tumbler of whiskey, and he wonders what good fortune those small creatures could possibly bring. A freshly shingled roof? The alleviation of the jagged pains of growing old? Or perhaps just one peaceful night's sleep. One night free of his reoccurring nightmare in which he relives the moment when he last saw his late

wife as he turned from the steering wheel to look toward the passenger seat, their car crumpled from the impact against the tree, Beth looking as if she had fallen deeply asleep, her braids shook free into a loose tangle of hair. Except for the thin trail of blood running down from the corner of her mouth, she was seemingly unharmed, but still lost to him forever.

A faint light appears in the corner of his vision, pulling him back to the present. On the floor of his living room sits a small television set, an exact scale model of his own, with a silver antenna and two gray channel knobs. The screen illuminates a couch, also identical to Brentwood's, complete with beige cushions and frayed stitching on both arms. Sitting on that couch are two of the creatures he has heard so much about, one wearing Brentwood's flannel tucked into a replica of his baggy jeans, held up by a belt cinched to its last hole, the other wearing a yellow nightgown, her hair loosed from its pins and braids. Beth. They look up and smile at Brentwood, and their small, strange teeth glow blue in the light of the television.

Impossible, thinks Brentwood, and his fingers tighten around his glass. He feels not the warm familiarity as Jess Jones had, nor the fear that Mary Wright felt, and not the confidence that swelled within Paul Cohen. Instead, he feels indignant, furious at these things who have invaded his home and his thoughts to taunt him with an impossible vision. He stands, towering over the miniature couch, his shadow dimming the light of their small TV, and slams his foot against the wooden floor, inches from the creatures. They tumble off the couch and scamper across the living room toward the window. Brentwood follows. The two creatures reach for the low window sill and pry up the edge, jumping out into the cold darkness. Brentwood watches the small, dim movements they

make across the dead grass of his yard, and he marks in his mind the place where they slip back into the woods. He returns to pick up the miniature couch from his floor, inspecting the seams of the cushions and the weight of its construction. He squeezes it in his fist until the frame cracks and releases a white puff of stuffing.

The next morning at church, Pastor Tom takes a stance on the presence of the creatures. In a sermon titled "The Saints Among Us," he preaches that the small beings had arrived in Colestown in order to hold a mirror up to the soul, to show people who they truly are and who they truly ought to be. Then Tom invites to the pulpit a Mr. Eldridge (Professor Emeritus), who launches into a treatise on Slavic fairy tales regarding garden gnomes, and through a dizzying and rather questionable show of etymological sleight of hand, Eldridge concludes by coining the name "Povak." No one would be capable of reproducing the steps that the old professor took to arrive at the name, but the congregation is convinced. Something about the name feels both new and familiar, and the town has the feeling of welcoming home an old friend after a separation of many years. "Povak," they whisper to themselves, rolling the name about in their mouths, the final consonant clicking satisfactorily like a hard candy tapping against their teeth.

In Colestown, absence from church is only usually caused by severe illness or death, and the congregation duly notes the absence of one man: Saul Brentwood. As the steeple tolls out the close of the service, Brentwood's usual seat in the last pew remains cold and empty. Harv, Colestown's policeman, takes it upon himself to check on the man. Ever since Harv saw himself in a Povak on horseback, he has foolishly interpreted his visitation in a literal way, adopting the unfortunate persona of a Western sheriff, always

referring to 12:00 pm as “high noon” and telling the drunks that “Colestown just isn’t big enough for the two of us.” In point of fact, Colestown is without a doubt big enough for the sparse population to double, even triple in size, and Brentwood rightly thinks Harv to be ridiculous. Harv pulls up to Brentwood’s yard in his cruiser, walks up to the house, and knocks.

Brentwood appears, unshaven and wearing the same clothes as he had on the previous night.

“Howdy, Saul,” says Harv with a tip of his hat.

“Yes?” says Brentwood.

“Didn’t see you in church today.”

“And?”

“And I just wanted to make sure you’re all right.”

Harv feels relieved to see the man, having briefly wondered if Brentwood had off-ed himself, head drowned but preserved in a pot of syrup.

“I’m fine,” says Brentwood. “Just tired is all.”

“I hear you there.”

Brentwood starts to ease his door shut.

“Now wait just a second,” says Harv, sticking a dusty cowboy boot in the door frame. “You missed something important today.”

“Yes?”

“We’ve got a name for ‘em.”

“Who has a name for what?”

“For the little people.”

Brentwood's jaw tightens.

"We call them Povaks," says Harv. "Don't ask me why, but they have a name now. They're Povaks."

When night comes, Brentwood paces back and forth across his living room, keeping an eye on his door and his windows, and holding his tumbler, this time filled to the brim. The whiskey crests over the lip of the cup, leaving a trail of amber drops alongside his feet. His pots of sap sit cool and congealed on his stove.

He has heard the rumors, and he expects the Povaks to return, but he has not yet decided if he wants to see his Beth again. He can wake up from nightmares, he reasons, but how do you shake a waking dream? Back and forth he paces, sipping at his cup. Still, no Povaks return. His steps begin to slow. He takes one last sip and the room feels blurred and unbalanced under his feet. Brentwood pulls himself up his stairs toward bed and gingerly lies down across the top of his sheets. He moves to turn on his bedside lamp and notices the outline of a dark shape in the corner of the room. As he turns on the light he sees an entire scale model of a farm house identical to his own, except newer, more like how it looked when he first moved in with Beth. The model shines with its original, fresh coat of white where his own house now looks faded, white scabs of paint peeling off the back. In the model house, all the blue window shutters hang straight and secure, and Brentwood remembers the loose left shutter in the top right corner of the front of his house, an item left on the bottom of his to-do list for the past five years. Brentwood sits up from his bed and slowly crouches down to look inside the model house. The interior is a perfect match, down to the grey wool blanket folded across his living room

chair and the black and white checkered shower curtain hanging in the bathroom. Brentwood searches the other rooms of the house and finally sees movement through the kitchen window. "Povaks," Brentwood whispers, but the name sounds too imprecise. No, he thinks, that is Saul and that is Beth. The small figures are swaying back and forth, his arms around her waist, her arms resting on his shoulders. He wears his pair of loose grey pajamas, and she wears her pink bathrobe and slippers, her hair still wet from their shower, leaving dark spots on her robe's collar. They practice a set of dance steps to the faint sound of a waltz. He missteps, stubbing her toe, and they laugh, her hand on his chest, gently pushing him back into position.

Brentwood remembers. Still glossy-eyed with drink, he urges them on, whispering the beat, "One two three, one two three…"

The Povaks hear and look up through the window. They smile at Brentwood, and this time, he allows himself to smile back, thinking this vision to be so much more bearable then what will come to him in his sleep. That small figure of Beth then moves toward the back door of the kitchen, steps out of the model house and pads slowly toward Brentwood. He feels overcome with the need to make some physical contact, but wonders, do I pet its small head, shake its tiny hand, or perhaps brush a thumb along its cheek? He extends his index finger and reaches to touch the image of his late wife on the forehead, and as he makes contact, a chill creeps into his hand, up his arm, and then wraps itself around his heart, slowing the flow of blood almost to a standstill. In all the stories he had heard traveling around town, no one had actually touched a Povak. No one had made contact. But this is not a Povak, Brentwood thinks, this is Beth.

Neither of them seem able to move, frozen for a moment through the bridge of this physical contact, until a burst of color and a loud pop erupts from the creature. Brentwood flinches and closes his eyes. A light mist falls over him. When he looks again, he sees the miniature Beth laying still on the ground like an old, limp ragdoll, its arms and legs splayed open, the head gone missing. Brentwood wipes the thin film of liquid from his face with a trembling hand and sees not the vital red of blood but an imitation pink.

He scans through the rooms of the model house. The copy of himself is nowhere to be found. He hefts the whole house down the stairs to the foot of his fireplace, then systematically dismantles it by hand, ripping off the roof, pulling out small pieces of furniture, snapping the walls and cracking the glass windows, and like a criminal destroying the evidence, he throws each piece into the red embers of the hearth and breathes new life into the flames.

He finishes his work and goes back up the stairs to retrieve the limp, broken doll of his late wife. There on the floor of his bedroom, where the creature's head should be, is a small, green stone, iridescent and almost translucent, like a pebble of sea glass. He pinches it off the floor between thumb and forefinger and catches the smell of lavender soap and grass cuttings. He brings the stone to his nose and breathes in deeply, filling his lungs with the scent until he remembers that exact smell on Beth's wrists as she would come inside from an afternoon spent in the garden, and after washing her hands, would run them through Brentwood's hair and cradle the back of his neck. His legs crumple underneath him and he collapses into a ball at the foot of his bed, clutching the stone to his face.

Down the road from Brentwood's farm at the Vermont Country Gifts store, Gary Schmidt and Jess Jones are plotting. After Gary's Povak visitation appeared holding bags of money, the scheming little cogs of his mind spun him a plan to celebrate the Povaks' good reputation to his own benefit. Already drunk off the thought of success, he heeded no mind to the succession of visitations that followed, the Povaks that stood inside collapsed, ruinous foundations and looked at him with red, burning eyes.

Gary turns the sign in the door from "open" to "closed." Jess stands waiting behind the storefront counter. "We've got to be smart about this," says Gary, his eyes flitting back and forth over the empty gravel parking lot. "We're sitting on a gold mine here."

"I still don't see it."

He walks over to the snack aisle. "I'll push all of this to the back and we'll set up your table here. Picture it Jess, you sitting before a line of eager readers, pen in hand, signing and selling cookbook after cookbook."

"What line of readers, Gary? Who in Colestown is going to care about my cookbook? Where are these hoards of customers you keep dreaming up?"

"Tourists," says Gary, eyes still scanning the store, planning out his new product layout. "They'll come by the hundreds, the thousands."

Jess sighs. She holds an arm over her bloated stomach, still aching from when she forced down another leftover pie that morning.

"I heard Tom talking about news crews," says Gary. "And not just the local channels. Imagine Colestown flooded with radio hosts, reporters, and TV news anchors. No one will believe our stories, but they'll come for themselves to see it."

Jess' eyes widen as the plan takes shape in her mind.

"Povak fever," says Gary. "Talk shows, books, documentaries, you name it. It's coming and we've got to be ready for it."

"I could sell Povak Pie and Povak Preserves!"

"Think bigger. A whole line of goods. Pens, dolls, t-shirts, and toys. Think copyrights! Think patents! By the time the public catches even a whiff of this, I want to own the word Povak."

"We'll both own it," says Jess.

Outside, a light December snow begins to fall in fat, swirling flakes.

In his sleep, Brentwood looks to the passenger side of his car, as he does every night, only this time, Beth looks back.

"I think you're finally getting the hang of it," she says. Her hair is still in braids, her mouth is moving, she is whole and alive.

"What?" says Brentwood

"The waltz," she says, "I think you've got it now."

He feels the hard ring of the steering wheel under his hands and the soft depress of the gas pedal under his right shoe.

"Is this real?" he asks to Beth, to himself, to the empty black of the road tunneling forward through the night. Beth frowns at him and then laughs, but the sound grows dim. The brown of his car fades to gray. His seat beneath him reclines and grows soft.

Morning. With a dry gasp in his throat, Brentwood awakes, still clutching the green stone under his nose, but now it smells of nothing. He puts the stone in his mouth, tries to suck up the last of Beth's memory, but it dissolves into tasteless chalk on his tongue.

Still wearing his loose pajamas, hair disheveled from sleep, he stumbles down the stairs and pulls on his winter coat and boots. He cannot wait for night to come again, and he cannot wait for the next visitation before he finds another green stone. Brentwood leaps out of his house toward the spot in the back of his yard where he watched a Povak disappear into the forest. His boots leave prints in the new-fallen snow, kicking up white flakes that cling to his thin pajamas and melt against his legs. At the edge of the woods, he sees small tracks in the snow, a tiny imprint of two feet. He steps carefully over the underbrush following the thin trail through the trees which narrows to a trickle as the birches and maples close in on him. He takes short, ragged pulls of cold air into his lungs and exhales quickly, his breath still dry and stale from sleep. The trail ends at an old stone wall, soft with moss. He unzips the front of his jacket and sits to catch his breath.

Have I imagined all of it, he wonders. Have we all just been dreaming up these beings, born on rumors?

As if in response, he hears a rustling in the undergrowth ahead. He sees the small outline of a Povak step out from behind a tree. As it moves out from the shadows of the wood toward Brentwood, its face seems featureless at first, but then pulls together into

Beth's eyes and Beth's smile, and a copy of Beth's winter jacket wraps around its small body. Then another steps out from behind a rock, this one morphing to look identical to the first. Then another and another and another, all Beths, gathering en masse at his feet as if they were drawn there by some magnetic force. They bow their heads in deference to Brentwood. He reaches out his hand, and one by one, their frail bodies explode. The light red mist stains his pajamas, and his chest steams in the cold morning air. Littered at his feet rests a pile of green stones. He scoops up a handful and brings it to his face. The smell is thick and heady, and he fills his jacket pockets. He looks down at the ruined, headless images of his late wife, and feeling once again like a criminal trying to hide the evidence, he takes the tattered dolls up into his arms.

Beth's scent ghosts through the air and wraps itself around Brentwood, pulling at his senses. He cannot find the tracks he made on his way into the woods. He turns about, desperate to get home, to find his way back into his dreams. Picking a course, he crashes carelessly through the woods. Stray branches catch at his arms, pulling the small bodies from his hands. Brentwood carries on, delirious, unaware. He hears the sounds of faraway cars. It is almost noon when he emerges from the woods, legs wet with melted snow and sweat, hair tangled with dead leaves. He recognizes the turn in the road, just a short distance now from his home. The stones feel heavy in his pockets and his arms grow weak, the scent pulling him back to sleep. The last Povak bodies fall from his limp grasp in a heap by the road. Brentwood staggers to his front door, into his house, and back to his bed.

Further down that same road, Pastor Tom and Harv cruise slowly through Colestown, plotting out where to send the reporters and news crews.

"If this Povak craze takes off like you say it will," says Harv, "I'll be busier than a cat covering up shit on a concrete floor."

"I assume you mean you'll need help. Do you have any friends at that state level?"

"Well, sure, but I haven't told any of them yet."

"You haven't told them about the media crews?"

"I haven't told them about the Povaks. I just don't think they'll believe it until they see it for themselves."

"Harv, what's that bloody pile there?" says Tom, pointing down the road.

"Roadkill."

"Now who is the idiot driving fast enough in this weather to hit an animal?" says Tom. "Aren't you patrolling this road?"

Harv slows his cruiser and his pulse quickens. He pulls over to the side of the road, and as they both step out to look at the small pile of headless Povak bodies, Harv and Tom have the feeling in the dark pits of their beings like some unthinkable rule of nature has been broken. In the first bit of real police work he has done in months, Harv points to a track of footprints in the snow.

Brentwood feels the steering wheel under his hands. He tries turning it slightly and feels the sway of the car.

"I'm back," he says, turning to Beth in the passenger seat.

"Where did you go?" she asks.

"I just needed something to help me remember."

"Well good, but stop staring. You'll drive us straight into a tree."

Brentwood's attention snaps back to the road, the ice gleaming under the car's headlights. He knows every turn in the road, every bump and pothole, having played it over in his mind time and time again.

"We're almost home now," says Beth.

Brentwood tries to pull his foot off the gas, but the car barrels on.

"Beth, I can't slow down."

She puts a hand behind his neck, tangling her fingers in his hair.

"Just keep it steady, we'll be fine," she says.

"No, we've got to bail out. Beth, listen to me, open the car door and jump."

"Now why would I do a silly thing like that?"

"Do it! Just do what I tell you and jump!"

"There's no need to shout, now. Better look at the road."

The car continues toward the turn painted in black ice. Brentwood turns the car into the other lane. The tires bite at the pavement, the ice passes by on their right.

Brentwood laughs. "We've made it! We're through."

Around the turn comes the blaze of headlights from an oncoming car, the roar of an angry horn, and the crash of impact.

All across Colestown comes the sound of telephones ringing. When people hear the news, it feels as if the air has been sucked from their lungs, the blood drained from their veins. "Why?" they ask. They are as children again, experiencing their first brush with death from the loss of a grandparent, when life felt as fragile as thin glass.

For some, the very idea of murdering a Povak stuns them into quiet oblivion, and they sit under blankets, dumb with shock. Others are quick to boil over with anger. They have heard where the footprints led, from the pile of small bodies to the farmhouse. They reach for their wood axes and guns and yell threats to the cold air.

The second call that each of them makes is to the lone policeman of Colestown, a call for justice. Sitting at his desk with head in hands as the telephone rings, Harv wracks his brain for a law or a precedent. There is no clear course of action, no lawfully accepted use of force. Tom stands behind him, hands on his slumped shoulders. Outside the small office, he hears a crowd forming and a furious knocking against his door.

As Harv opens the door, Gary Schmidt's fist is raised in the air and red from where it hit repeatedly against the wood. Jess Jones stands at his side, her large arms wrapped around him, her round face wet with tears and buried in the front of his jacket. Mary Wright is there as well, looking as if she has suffered a physical blow, one arm around the shoulders of her daughter. Even Paul Cohen is there, holding Dorice's hand, their mouths held taught in anger.

As if about to deliver a sermon, Tom steps into the morning light from behind Harv and raises his hands to quiet the crowd. "We'll go talk to him," he says, and a violent cheer rises up from the mob. They pile into their cars and follow Harv's cruiser down Colestown's single main road, still covered in snow. The cars pull into Brentwood's yard, tires working the snow into a slush of mud and dead grass. The mob crowds around the front door, and Tom calls calmly into the house: "Saul Brentwood? We'd like a word, please."

Tom tries again, preceding his words with a heavy knock against the door. "Saul? We need to discuss something with you."

When no answer comes, the crowd yells at the house.

"Come out and face us, you coward."

"Come out before we break this door down."

A hearty roar of approval rises up like a flame and Tom turns back to face them.

"Now, everyone stay calm," he says, raising his hands a second time.

"There's no reasoning with a man like that," says Gary. "There's no soul left in him, pastor."

"There's always room for talk," Tom says, but his voice drowns under the volume of the crowd, starved for action. Someone picks up a rock and raises it above the heads of the others. The arm winds back and the rock crashes through the window next to Tom's head. The bodies push against him. He reaches for the knob and it turns, carelessly left unlocked. They stumble into the front of Brentwood's home. Glass crunches underfoot. A vase tips and cracks against the floor.

"Find him," someone yells, and the crowd invades the house, into the kitchen, rushing the living room, pounding up the stairs. A voice cuts through the chaos: "Up here, he's up here."

Tom and Harv squeeze through the wall of bodies crowded into the bedroom. Brentwood lies on his bed, unmoving, still wearing his boots and jacket, still stained with the blood of the Povaks. A pile of green stones cover his lap and rest on his reclined chest. His head leans to one side, and a thin trail of blood runs down the corner of his mouth.

Harv walks forward and places two fingers against Brentwood's neck. He turns to the crowd with his head bowed low. All is still, and then a slight movement on the floor by the bed catches their attention. A single Povak looks up a them. It is bald, pale, nude, and genderless, stripped of any resemblance to anyone or anything they know. It's eyes are as cold as spent coal as it stares up at the people of Colestown, and then it turns its back and fades into the shadows under Brentwood's bed.

Look at these ruins, the crumbled rock foundations that refuse to hold any weight and the molding wooden beams that blur the memory of their origin. Colestown didn't end in riots and violent flames. This is the decay of the forgotten, the slow rot of a quiet shame. The Povaks never returned. The townspeople couldn't decide if they should despise Brentwood's memory or mourn his passing. They didn't know if the Povaks had brought something good to their town or something awful, and they couldn't decide if they had followed the signs correctly or misread the creatures to appease their own hidden desires. They tried to attach their grief, confusion, and blame onto a hazy, moving target which slipped from one face to the next, from Brentwood to pastor Tom and all through the town, then to the Povaks themselves, to the weather, to a vague sense of human imperfection, until finally, without finding a suitable home, those tortured emotions settled over their hearts like black ash.

There was a cursory investigation into Brentwood's death, and the coroner found that he had died from massive internal bleeding and injury, all inexplicably sustained from the comfort of his own bed. No one planned or attended his funeral, so Pastor Tom buried the body in the frozen earth without ceremony. December closed out the year, and

the town went through the motions of a cold and cheerless holiday. The news vans and talk show hosts never arrived. When Gary Schmidt received his boxes upon boxes of Povak gifts, he stacked them neatly in the back room of his store, unopened. Jess Jones lost the required energy to bring her baked goods to perfection, and she slowly reduced her pantry to the simplest and blandest ingredients, abandoning her cookbook half-finished on her shelf. Paul and Dorice delayed their wedding, telling themselves they would wait to celebrate until the grief had dissipated from their bones. The town looked to Pastor Tom for some guidance, but he locked his door during the week and only emerged on Sundays to deliver an uninspired reading of the scripture. The choir mumbled through hymns, and week by week, the congregation thinned. Harv was the last to stop attending church, where he had taken to sitting listlessly in Saul Brentwood's old spot in the last pew of the sanctuary.

A heavy fog of gloom settled over the town, noticeable even to strangers from out of state who passed through on their way to someplace else, feeling a dank chill as they drove by the dark and quiet houses of Colestown. The general feeling of malaise was so pervasive that construction crews were brought in to build new roads, allowing drivers to circumnavigate the town altogether. Colestown slipped from the ledgers of state budgets and the maps of state atlases. The residents of Colestown each created their own reasons for leaving town. I need to be closer to family, one said. I just can't stand the winters anymore, said another.

Mary Wright's daughter continued her annual visits to her mother over the holidays, and she was amazed at how the town grew smaller and dimmer with each passing year, how the drive became increasingly difficult when the roads fell to disuse.

Plows stopped clearing the snow in winter, and each summer, new weeds sprung up through the potholes in the pavement. The daughter felt as if some supernatural force of nature was accelerating the growth of the surrounding grasses and forests, and the dwindling population of Colestown seemed to be fighting a losing battle. She eventually moved Mary Wright to a nursing home in upstate New York, but when Mary passed, her will included a request to be buried in Colestown, the only place she had ever called home. Her daughter dutifully complied with her mother's final wishes, but she could barely find the road after passing by it twice, and when the fallen branches and undergrowth became too thick to drive, she had to hire a group of men to carry the body from the hearse across the final two miles into town. Mary Wright's daughter never spoke a word of the Povaks until she was an old woman herself, but by the time her stories spread to a new generation of listeners, Colestown had been completely consumed back into the forest.

Now see how the moss lies over these old foundations like a scab. Pick at the spongy lichen sprawled across the crumbled rock. You know what stood before you. Hold Colestown in your mind and keep the facts straight. Ready yourself for a day when, perhaps, they might return, back from the dim shade of the woods, from under our cars and our floorboards, up into the light of our homes. They'll see into us again.