ABSTRACT

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Alison Emilia Hennessee,
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Directed By: Associate Professor Maud Casey
Creative Writing, Department of English

This collection of short fiction includes four stories. Though the situations and characters in each are unrelated, the collection as a whole treats recurring thematic interests: individual and shared origins; tension between loving one's home and needing to leave it; childhood and parenthood; and the American South. The stories are ordered to create a chronological arc from wild uncertainty of childhood to the measured acceptance of late middle age.

TERMINUS AND OTHER STORIES

By

Alison Emilia Hennessee

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Advisory Committee:
Professor Maud Casey, Chair
Professor Howard Norman
Professor Emily Mitchell

Dedication

For James

Acknowledgements

I want to thank the University of Maryland for giving me the opportunity to pursue this work and engage with so many brilliant and kind members of a wonderful academic community. I especially want to thank Maud Casey, without whose guidance and wisdom and infinite patience, I would have abandoned this endeavor long ago. Thank you to my family: my brother Ian, who engaged a whole Senegalese village in supporting me; my brother Zachary, who let me know in no uncertain terms that his love is dependent only on my existence; to my father, who instilled such a firm sense of place in me that I can't seem to stop writing about it; and to my mother, whom I will never stop thanking as long as I live. Finally, I want to thank my husband for, you know, everything in the whole wide world.

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Smash Factory

It started with a penny.

We were walking along the railroad tracks down by the Dairy Queen, kicking gravel at one another and looking for hobo dens.

Wayne had a hand in his pocket and was jingling the change from the Dilly Bar that was now all chocolate streaks down his school shirt.

“Wayne, you got a penny?”

Kevin was always asking Wayne for money, and Wayne was always giving it to him.

Wayne dredged up a handful of grubby coins and sifted through them. He handed Kevin a penny.

“Minted 1972.”

“That’s old,” said Shelva Ann and everybody laughed. That was always happening, too. Everybody laughed at Shelva Ann; if you didn’t, it was like you liked her, or at least thought she was all right, and Shelva Ann was too little and dumb to be all right.

“Your mom’s old,” said Kevin, and everybody laughed again, but it was a different kind of laugh.

“What you want a penny for, Kevin?” asked Weathers Bolt. Weathers Bolt had honey-colored hair and more money than the rest of us. I thought he was cute, but I wouldn’t say so. Kevin and them would have laughed my face off and never asked me to come tramping with them again.

Kevin just grinned, his braces gleaming. He flipped the penny up in the air, but missed it on the way down, and he scowled as he dug it out of the gravel.

Then, watching us all the time, he laid the penny on the tracks.

Shelva Ann's eyes got wide and her mouth dropped open to a little pink "O" and you could see all the gaps where her grown-up teeth still hadn't grown in, even though she'd lost the last of them months ago.

"You can't do that!" Shelva Ann was pointing at the penny balancing on the steel rail. "You'll crash the train!"

We laughed.

"It's true!" Shelva Ann said, her voice creeping into a whine. "My daddy said that if you put a penny on the tracks you'll derail the train!"

"My daddy said!" whined Kevin, putting his hands to his face and screwing up his eyes like he was going to cry. He made loud bawling sounds and wiped imaginary snot off his nose.

Weathers Bolt and Wayne started in on it, too. They were all prancing around, mincing on their tiptoes, shrieking, "My daddy said, my daddy said!"

Shelva Ann's chin was beginning to tremble, and I could tell she was trying to squeeze back the tears. The boys always tried to make her cry. The only reason she was with us today was because Ms. Hamby was standing right there when Shelva asked if she could come with us. I felt bad for her and I thought about saying something to the boys, getting them to lay off her for a minute.

Instead I pitched up my voice and made my chin quiver. "My daddy said!"

Then Weathers was looking at me and thinking I was funny, too, and we were all laughing, except for Shelva Ann, who was still trying not to cry and who would never leave us, because she didn't have any other friends.

We left the penny on the tracks and kept on walking. Weathers and Kevin turned off first, on Euclid, except they weren't going to the same place. Kevin was going up to Elizabeth Street, where he lived because his daddy worked at the water plant, which was just a few streets further out of town. But Weathers Bolt, he had a long way to walk to Finley Park, where the houses had porches all the way around and nobody cut their own lawn. I waved to Weathers Bolt, trying to put something extra in the wave, something only Weathers would see, but Kevin looked at me funny, then flipped me the bird. Shelva Ann turned herself right around, because she didn't even live over this way, she lived in a split-level on F Street, but she just wanted to walk with us so bad. Wayne and I split up at Hinshaw Baptist. He kept on walking along River Road to go out to the shotgun house where his family raised rabbits and chickens. And I turned on Beech and then home onto Orange.

I let the back door slam, because my mother was working the day shift at the hospital, so she couldn't yell at me to hold it and let it close soft.

Opa was sleeping in his chair that had the stuffing pilling out of the arms because his old cat, Ormaloo, always used to scratch it. Ormaloo's dead now, and so is Jake, who was Opa's dog when Opa was young. Opa says the chair's not "quality," but he only says that because my daddy made it, or at least, he ran the machines that made it. He used to work at American Drew Furniture, and then that became La-Z-Boy. But now the plant's closed, and Daddy lives with a new family in Charlotte.

As I was grabbing a fistful of Vienna Fingers from the cookie jar, I heard Opa snort grunt himself awake.

"Laney, that you?" Opa called, his voice soggy-sounding from sleep.

"Yeah, it's me."

"Well, get in here, boy."

Opa did sometimes get confused about things, but he knew I wasn't a boy. He said he called me that because I kept my hair short and got dirty and wore pants. I told him that it wasn't the olden days, all girls wore pants now, but he just said, "Hush up, boy." Momma said it was because he didn't have any sons or grandsons.

Opa's hair was all flying up off his head when I went into the den, and he had two different colored socks on. I guessed my momma had helped him dress before she left for work, when it was still dark.

"Where you been?" Opa asked, rubbing at his eyes with his fists.

"Walking the rails," I said, sitting Indian-style on the floor in front of him.

"Walking? I used to ride them rails," Opa crowed. "Me and Jeff Tippins would've got all the way to Mexico if we hadn't run into Preacher Chalmers in Chattanooga. We'd a been Mexican cowboys!"

Even though I had heard this story before, I laughed at the thought of Opa with one of those tall hats and a big shiny moustache.

"What're you eating?"

"Cookies," I said and opened my mouth to show him.

"Boy, I know you have better manners than that," Opa said and frowned. Then he grabbed my ear. "Gonna have to pull this thing right off if you don't act better."

I squealed and squirmed, pleading with him. I knew Opa wouldn't pull off my ear, though, and I knew he wasn't really mad about the manners.

"Those them Vienna Fingers your momma's always buying?" Opa asked after he let me go. I nodded. "Damn. Those things ain't any good." He paused. "Get me a few, boy."

"But you said they weren't any good."

"Yeah, but I'm hungry."

I brought the cookie jar into the den. Opa took one and I watched his liver-spotted hand with the skin loose like it was going to fall off. He opened up the cookie, and scraped out the filling with his bottom teeth, which still looked good. When Oma, my grandma, died a few years back, she didn't have any teeth at all.

Opa stacked the scraped-out cookies on the end table, and said, "We'll feed these to Jake later."

I didn't say anything about that, because sometimes Opa's brain lives somewhere else.

"I got something for your walker, today, Opa." I was brushing the last of the cookie crumbs from my tee shirt.

"Well, don't just sit there, boy. Go get it."

I fetched my backpack and pulled out a strip of stickers. Each one was printed with a dog wearing a trench coat.

"McGruff came to our school today, and I got these."

"Who's McGruff?"

"He's a crime-fighting dog."

"Is he a hound dog? Hound dogs're the only dogs any good at police work. German shepherds, Dobermans, stupid Labradors—ten of them ain't worth one good hound." Opa gave a cookie a long scrape with his teeth. "What'd you learn from McGruff?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't really listen. But I like the stickers. Do you?"

Opa studied the sheet. "He's a hound dog, all right. Kind of short ears for a bloodhound, though. Probably has some bull dog in him." He squinted. "Yeah, I like them pretty good. Go ahead and put them on."

I peeled off the stickers one by one and placed them all over the walker, which was sitting in the corner by the ficus. Momma had gotten the walker last year for Opa, because both his hips were real bad with arthritis, even if he wouldn't admit it. One day, he walked to the Chevron to buy a pack of Lucky Strikes and a blue raspberry Icee, but he fell right in front of the post office. Mrs. Marshall called Momma at the hospital, and Momma had to leave work early to take Opa home. Later, while Momma and I were playing checkers, I saw Opa sitting in his chair and crying. He wasn't making any noise; tears were just falling down his face. I looked at Momma, but she gave me the look that meant I'd better not say anything.

The next week, Momma came home with the walker. She brought it to him in the living room, turning it around, showing it off like she was a car salesman and it was a Mustang.

Opa was eating pistachios and spitting the shells on the floor, because he knew it made Momma angry.

"What in the hell's that damn thing?" he said squinting at the walker.

"It's a walker, Daddy," Momma said. I could see her clenching her jaw, trying not to say anything about the shells on the floor.

"Huh," said Opa, and turned up the Braves game.

The next day, while Momma was at work, Opa heaved up out of his chair and pulled the walker out from the corner. I watched him from the picture window in the living room as he stumped around the yard, practicing. We didn't have a real lawn, just a scrubby little patch of jimson weed and crabgrass next to the carport. The ground was all rumpled from tree roots and molehills, and the walker's feet kept catching on the bumps. Every time the walker caught, Opa wobbled, and he had to hold on tight to the crossbar to keep from falling. His face got tighter as he walked, and he stuck out his jaw the way he did when he was mad. After a while, Opa turned the walker out the yard and went down the street toward the Chevron.

By the time, he got back, it was starting to get dark. When he came in the house, I was lying on my stomach on the floor by Opa's chair, drawing in my sketchbook and trying to look like I hadn't been worried or lonely. He dropped into his chair and used his foot to kick the walker back toward the corner. I didn't see any cigarettes and his lips weren't blue from an Icee; I wondered if he had made it to the Chevron or had just got too tired or too angry to keep going. I waited for him to say something, but he didn't, and his face still looked so hard and his eyes had the foggy, other place look that I didn't want to say anything either. I finished drawing the pterodactyl I'd been working on. Later, I made us both tuna sandwiches and we ate them, and then we went to bed.

Opa used the walker pretty regular after that, but we didn't talk about it. It was like a secret, the kind that everybody knows but tries to pretend they don't. When he wasn't using the it, it lived in the dusty corner of the living room, where the canister vacuum couldn't reach. I thought the walker might be better if it looked handsome, more like something you'd want to be friendly with, so I'd started decorating it. Now the walker was mostly covered with stickers from school and the Dollar Tree and with drawings I'd done in Sharpie of animals and happy trees and a bunch of wooly worms wearing ugly hats.

When I was done putting on the McGruff stickers, I tried to get Opa to look it over, make sure I didn't put McGruff next to any cats, but he just said "Huh," and ate the middle of another Vienna Finger.

I turned on the television and we watched *Family Feud* and *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* and *The Price is Right* until we heard Momma's key in the front door and we had to turn off the TV and shove the cleaned-out cookies under Opa's chair.

"What are y'all smiling about?" Momma asked when she came in with a bucket of chicken.

I smashed a giggle down into my belly, and Opa said, "Never you mind, little miss, never you mind."

At recess the next day, Kevin, Wayne, and Weathers Bolt were hunched down by the big poplar stump.

Weathers Bolt looked up and waved to me. My face got hot.

"Laney, you gotta see this," he called, and I came running, my untied laces whipping around my ankles.

The penny was on the stump and it was twice the size of a normal penny, sort of like those pennies you run through machines at amusement parks. But it wasn't shiny like those pennies, and you could still see Abe Lincoln's head, except now his head was all stretched.

Kevin flipped it over. The back looked polished, and I could just barely see the outlines of the Lincoln Memorial.

"When he found it, it was still hot," Wayne said. "He had to look in the bushes and all around. The train threw it off the tracks!"

Kevin glared at him, and snatched the penny off the stump. "You let me tell my own stories, Wayne Jenkins. Whose penny is this, anyway?"

Wayne's, I thought, but didn't say.

"You can hold it, if you want," Kevin said, and tipped the penny into my outstretched palm.

The penny was warm. I wanted to think that was the train's heat, all its noise and speed and power shrunk down to one little penny. But I guessed it was probably from the sun. I rubbed the back of the penny with my thumb, and it was smooth and neat, no hard edges anymore.

"What're you gonna do with it?" I asked, flipping the penny back to Kevin like I didn't care who had it.

Kevin shrugged. "Dunno." He rubbed the penny, too, then looked up at us.

"Y'all got any more change?"

Weathers Bolt only had dollars, and Wayne had put his coins from yesterday in his bank, which was really a mason jar. I'd spent all the money I had on hologram stickers with birds that flapped their wings when you turned the sticker.

"Why you want more change, Kev?" Wayne asked.

Kevin groaned. Weathers Bolt punched Wayne in the right arm and I punched him in the left. Wayne rubbed the spots like he was cold.

"Because, Wayne," Kevin explained, stretching the words way out. "I want to smash it."

"But you already have a penny."

"Yeah, and I want a nickel, a dime, a quarter, and everything else." He frowned. "Is there anything else?"

"You could smash one of them Sacagawea dollars," I suggested.

Kevin's eyes got big, and he flashed a shiny smile. "Yeah. We need one of them, too." He looked hopefully at Weathers Bolt, but Weathers Bolt shook his head.

Then Kevin looked at Wayne.

"I don't have one," Wayne said and looked down at his shoes.

"Me neither," I said, but I wished I did.

Kevin scanned the yard, his eyes ticking right and left. Shelva Ann was on the playground, swinging by herself. When he called her name, she looked up quick. and when he motioned for her to come over, I could see her face light up, like he was driving the ice cream truck. She ran over to us, her arms flailing like rubber hoses.

"Jesus, she looks like a retard when she runs," Kevin snorted. We all laughed.

"Hey y'all," Shelva Ann said when she got over to us. Her towhead hair was flying up from her forehead like a halo, and she was panting. She didn't seem to notice that we were still snickering. "What's up?"

"Shelva, you still got that coin collection?" Kevin said, talking sweet like she was a real little kid, which she kind of was because she was more than six months younger than all of us.

Shelva Ann's face got bright and happy. Last year at her birthday party she had shown us a big book filled with wheat pennies and half dollars that her grandmother had helped her collect.

"Yeah, I got it, Kevin," she said, rocking onto her tiptoes.

"Well, Shelva, I am just so *fascinated* by your coin collection. I would love to see it again." Kevin smiled at her. It was a sticky-sweet smile, and anybody with any at all brains would know that Kevin didn't smile like that unless he was after something he didn't really deserve.

Shelva beamed. "You could come over today after school!"

"I don't know. How about you bring the book to school tomorrow? Or maybe..." Kevin looked at us. "We're all going down to the tracks today after school. Why don't you go home and get the coins and then meet us there. We can hang out."

"Okay," Shelva said, real breathy and high.

"Be sure to bring your coin collection. We all want to see it."

"I will!"

"Now go back to the swings," Kevin said. He patted Shelva Ann on the back and she went running off, arms flapping.

Kevin grinned.

We were sitting on the rails seeing who could spit the farthest when Shelva Ann showed up, panting and sweating. I could tell she'd run all the way here from F Street lugging that big, heavy book of money.

"Do y'all want to look at the coins right here? It's awful hot," said Shelva Ann, plopping down next to me.

"Just give me some real shiny ones," said Kevin. He leaned toward her and stuck out his hand.

All the sweaty redness went out of Shelva's face, and she hugged the book of coins to her chest.

"Why?"

Kevin sighed just like my mom does when I ask the same question too many times.

"Don't ask why, Shelva Ann. Just give them to me!"

Shelva picked out three nickels, two dimes, two quarters, and a penny.

Kevin looked at the coins in his palm. "Gimme one of them Sacagawea dollars."

"And a half-dollar," added Wayne, pointing at Shelva Ann.

Shelva didn't say anything, just opened her book, pulled out the coins, and handed them over. Then she got up and started walking west along the tracks.

"Where're you going?" I called after her.

"Home," she said and didn't turn around.

I looked at Weathers Bolt, but he was looking at the ground, scuffing his feet in the dirt.

The next afternoon, we ran to the tracks and scrambled up the embankment to find our loot. One of the nickels had fallen off the rail, but all the rest of the coins were flat and oblong from being pounded with tons and tons of zooming freight. I felt proud, like I'd made something new and special, even though I knew I hadn't really, I'd just put the coins on the tracks and waited for the train. Kevin kept the half-dollar, quarters and the dimes, but he let Wayne and Weathers Bolt each have a nickel, and he gave me the penny, because I was a girl.

I didn't care too much that I got the smallest coin; it wasn't like I could spend it. I decided it was my lucky penny. I wasn't sure if you were allowed to just decide something was lucky—seemed like most of the lucky things I'd heard of were lucky because they were magic or had around been around when something good happened—but I didn't have any other special charms, so I figured I might as well make my own. I put it in my pocket every morning before school and rubbed it when I needed luck—when we had our spelling test, when Ms. Hamby picked class monitor, when we learned square dancing and I was hoping the gym teacher would assign Weathers Bolt as my partner.

It sort of worked sometimes, though we didn't win any money on the scratch-off ticket I asked Momma to buy. But I knew it wasn't the penny, anyhow, that made things happen. Momma said it was God, and Ms. Hamby said it was stick-to-itiveness, and Opa said it was piss and vinegar. I guessed that rubbing on a penny was like wishing, and whenever I said I wished something, Momma would always say, "If

wishes were horses…" in this little ho-hum singing voice. Even though she never said what came after that, never told me what we'd do with wish-horses or what wish-horses were, I guessed I knew what she meant. She meant it wasn't worth going around wanting things you couldn't have and all that stuff about thankfulness and not being greedy. It made sense, but I didn't know how to stop wishing, and I didn't think Momma did either, because even though Daddy left a long time ago, Momma still wore her ring, and when he called at Christmas, she talked to him in her pretty voice. So I kept the penny with me. Even when we went to church and I had to wear dresses with no pockets, I put the penny in my shoe. I wanted to have it around, all the time, just in case, because sometimes, unluck can sneak up on you

"Laney, you gotta eat something green. Have some salad."

We were at Ryan's and I was on my third bowl of macaroni and cheese.

I shook my head. "I don't want any salad. It's too damn crunchy."

Momma raised her eyebrows high on her forehead. She didn't do that so much before Daddy left, or maybe she did, and I was just too little to remember.

"What was that, young lady?"

I looked down at my plate and stabbed a macaroni hard.

"Nothing."

"That's what I thought," Momma said, and handed me a plate of salad. "Now eat some of this. It's good for you."

"Leave her alone, Jeanie," Opa said through a mouthful of creamed corn. "She doesn't want to eat salad, she don't have to eat salad. She oughtta have meat! Meat makes you strong! You want to be strong, don't you, boy?"

I nodded, my cheeks full of macaroni, then gave my salad the hairy eyeball.

"When I was her age I was riding the rails out to California to dig up gold!"

Momma sighed, "You were not her age. And this railroad doesn't go near as far as California." She forked a Brussels sprout. "Children need green things." But she wasn't looking Opa in the eye. "Besides, she wasn't eating meat, anyway."

Opa winked at me.

"I saw that," said Momma.

Opa winked again.

When we were done eating, Momma left to get the car and bring it around front. Opa tried to tell her it didn't matter, that he could make it across the parking lot, but Momma went anyway. I didn't want Opa to feel bad, but I was glad she was getting the car; sometimes it got boring waiting for him to get somewhere.

I stayed with Opa and walked real slow with him to the door, one hand on the side of his walker, covering up a little drawing of a penguin wearing tennis shoes. We had to go even slower than usual because the floor at Ryan's was carpeted and the tennis balls on the bottom of the walker couldn't slide over it. Instead, Opa had to kind of jerk it up and plop it down when he wanted to take a step, and each time he plopped it down, the back feet went *thunk* first and then the front feet went *thunk* and then the whole thing kind of rattled, because it was held together with screws that you could undo when you want to take it apart.

I could see Opa's forehead scrunching up and his eyes getting far away. I started humming, just because I was nervous and it felt like people were watching us and the carpet seemed like a wide, rough ocean. After a second, I realized I was humming in time with the walker's thunks. Opa smiled a little bit, and he even hummed a few bars of "Shady Grove," his favorite song. We made it out the front door, and Momma helped Opa into the car. She chatted while we drove. Opa was quiet, but I couldn't tell from the backseat what kind of quiet it was. When we got home, I saw his face in the carport's floodlight. His forehead had smoothed out, but his eyes were gone. Momma shooed us in the house, and I finished my homework, and Opa went to the back door to let Jake in four times before I went to bed. I put my penny on the pillow next to me and rubbed it until I fell asleep.

Kevin was in charge of the smash factory, which was the name Weathers Bolt came up with for what we were doing on the tracks.

"We gotta go to work at the factory today, kids," Kevin would say while we waited in the play yard for the first bell to ring. Then we would know to meet him down by the tracks with something to smash.

At first, it was just coins: anything we could find on the street, any pocket money our parents gave us. One afternoon we found a half a roll of new nickels, almost thirty of them, perfectly clean. We lined them up on the rail and admired them for a bit, because they looked so new and bright, and for just a second I thought about how that metal on the tracks was worth a dollar-fifty, and I thought about how many sour watermelon slices I could buy from the bulk candy section at Wal-Mart with that

money. But then we heard the whistle of the train speeding toward Elkin and Statesville and on to join the Southern Mainline and we ran to hide in the bushes. I was crouched next to Weathers Bolt and I could smell the laundry soap on his clothes, which smelled more like perfume and less like baking soda than the one my mother used. Like it was by accident, I scooched my foot so that it was almost touching his, and we stayed that way until the train was gone and we ran to look for the coins.

We didn't ask Shelva Ann for any more of her collection. I had been the one who found the Sacagawea dollar in the bushes, and I told Kevin it had gotten lost. Wayne and Weathers Bolt and I went to Shelva Ann's house to give it back to her. She'd cried and cried, holding the smashed coin in her palm like a dead gerbil. We shuffled our feet on her porch and didn't know what to say. On the way home, we didn't look at each other.

Sometimes Shelva Ann came to the tracks. She didn't walk there with us, but I'd hear rustling leaves and snapping twigs, and if I looked carefully between the branches, I could see her pointy little chin and her gray eyes that always looked like they were about to overflow. She didn't speak to us, and we didn't speak to her, but once I waved, and she waved back. She always ran away before we went through the bushes to go home.

Kevin hoarded the coins in the beginning. When he felt like it, he'd give one to Wayne and Weathers like they were good dogs getting biscuits, and skip me, because I was the girl and already had my penny. But once we'd smashed enough that Kevin couldn't fit them all in his pockets, he wasn't so stingy. He'd stand around and throw rocks at the mile marker while we gathered our loot from the tracks, shrugging

when we found the things we'd smashed. By the time Halloween came, he had let me keep six coins, because he said they were boring now. I didn't think so. I liked how they felt familiar but not quite right, the size and shape and feel different than you expected. I'd carry a new coin for a day or two, but then I'd put it in the coffee can with my other treasures: some river rocks; Daddy's cigarette lighter; a furry-capped bur oak acorn; a spiral seashell I found when me and Momma and Daddy went to Ocracoke Island; a mouse skull; the dull penknife Opa gave me last birthday and told me not to tell Momma about; and a packet of Fruit Stripe gum where every stick was the cotton candy flavor. These other coins were special, but they weren't lucky. One lucky penny was as much luck as I thought I'd be allowed, probably more.

Kevin was the boss—or so he said and no one else said any different—and one Friday morning while we waited for the bell to ring, he told us he had made an executive decision. We all had to bring something new to the factory on Monday, something bigger than a coin, something the train could pound the hell out of, he said. Each of us brought something different: Kevin brought an empty can of Bumble Bee tuna; Weathers Bolt brought a key that didn't fit anything in his house; Wayne brought a bottle cap and Kevin socked him one good because a bottle cap isn't really that much different than a coin; and I brought all the tokens from my Monopoly game, figuring that I could still use the pieces when they were flattened. Even though the tokens were small, the boys all agreed that they wanted to see what a flat battleship would look like, so I didn't get a sock in the arm.

The tuna can didn't smash; we found it the next day in the snarls of pokeweed, just kind of beat-up looking, but not flat. We guessed the train knocked it off. The

bottle cap was too flimsy and we found parts of it melted to the rails. The key looked good, twisted like a dogwood branch. We couldn't find the Monopoly tokens. I didn't know how Opa and me were going to play anymore; I thought maybe we could use buttons, as long as we put them back in the sewing box when we were done.

"I think we can do better, y'all," said Kevin, as he picked at the smears of bottle cap on the rail. "Next time, we all gotta bring bigger stuff. Better stuff. Stuff that will look cooler smashed than it does regular."

"I wish we could smash a car," sighed Wayne, watching a jet stream fuzz out and disappear.

"That would derail the train for sure," Weathers Bolt said. He meant it like a warning, but it came out like he was excited.

I imagined the train slamming into a car. In my mind, the train was a steam engine and the car looked like the Buick that had been up on blocks in Mr. Bramer's yard ever since I could remember. The pointed cowcatcher wouldn't do any good, it would just wedge right into the passenger door, sending wheels and gears and glass flying out for yards and yards. Then the train would rock side to side, and it would rock for a long time, long enough that you thought it might never fall, and then finally it would topple. But it wouldn't just crash to the ground and lie there. The track ran along a ridge higher than the town, so when the train fell, the engine car would unhitch and head down Winston Street, tumbling over and over itself like I used to when I rolled down hills at the Community College park.

First, it would crush the Dairy Queen, because that was right down the way from the track. All the teenagers who went there after the high school let out to smoke

and kiss and eat Blizzards would come running out, except the slow ones, who would get flattened. Next would come the ABC store. That was outside town, too, because of the undesirables it attracted, though every grown-up I knew went there. I knew they sold liquor, not toys like I used to think, and there would be a big smash-up there, all the bits of broken bottles shivering out onto the road and a dark river that smelled like my daddy running into the grass.

The train wouldn't stop there, though. It would keep crashing along until it came to West Main Street, where it would roll down the little line of stores we called the center of town, even though nobody except the old people really shopped there, most people went out to 421 because that's where the Bi-Lo and the Wal-Mart Supercenter were. Darlene's Shoes 'n' Things would go first—it was on the corner and the awning was already halfway off. The train would crush the old-time diner and the drugstore at once, because they were small and they shared a building, and move on to the photography studio with all the faded pictures of proms and weddings and naked babies in the window. Then would come the one-screen theater and Griffin's Sporting Goods and the real estate office, and last would be the Christian coffee shop, because a barreling train doesn't care about godliness. It would stop at the bottom of Main, stretched across the street, smoking and hissing. All the shops would be piles of bricks and two-by-fours and busted signs, and that would be it, the whole town ground down into the clay, smashed just like a penny, and I didn't know if they would ever be able to build it up again.

Opa usually fell asleep in his chair. When Momma had to work early, or late, it was my job to get him to his bedroom. Tonight Momma's shift started at midnight, and she had been in bed by the time I got home from school.

Jeopardy! was blaring on the TV. I shook Opa's shoulder.

"Time for bed, Opa," I said.

Opa blinked his eyes a lot and looked around, then shook his head. It seemed like he thought he'd woken up somewhere different than where he'd fallen asleep. Then he noticed me, and he smiled, as if I was the only thing he recognized about this new place.

"You sure are getting tall, boy."

He leaned on my arm, putting most of his weight on me as we walked to his bedroom. I could hold him, because Opa was getting lighter as he got older, even though he didn't seem much smaller. It was like his insides were hollowing out. I led him to the bathroom and waited outside the door in case he fell or needed help with the electric toothbrush Momma had bought him for Christmas last year. I chose him some pajamas, red and blue striped flannel, and handed them to him when he opened the door a crack and stretched out his hand. I combed his soft white hair, even though Opa could do that himself; he just liked the way I made his part. Then we both got into his bed under the quilt that Opa's mother had made for her marriage bed before she married Opa's father, or had even met him. Opa told me a Brer Rabbit story, the one with Old Man Tarrypin, but he left out a lot of the parts, and some of the parts I think he just made up.

"Now you tell me a story, boy," Opa said when he was done.

I wiggled my toes under a big red satin star in the quilt. “I don’t know any stories.”

“Lies. You know stories. Just tell me something you know.”

“We’re learning world capitals in social studies. London is the capital of England, Berlin is the capital of Germany, Moscow—”

Opa blew a raspberry. “Does that sound like a story to you?” He plowed his finger into my ribcage, and I giggled until my stomach hurt.

“Okay, okay! I can tell a story.” I chewed my lip and thought. I didn’t have stories; I was too small to have stories. I reached into the pocket of my jeans and felt the good luck penny, warm from being so close to my skin.

“We smashed some stuff on the tracks the other day.”

Opa wrinkled his nose. “What does that mean?”

I shrugged. “We just put stuff on the tracks, and when the train comes it smashes the stuff flat.”

Opa nodded slowly, thinking. “What kind of stuff you been smashing?”

“You know, pennies, tin cans, a key. It didn’t go to anything,” I said when Opa started to frown. I didn’t tell him about Shelva Ann’s coins, which wasn’t lying exactly, but I knew it was sort of like it.

Opa nodded again, and then looked at me hard. “What the hell you doing that for?”

I shrugged again. “I don’t know. It’s fun, I guess.”

“Hold out your hand,” I said, quick, before I knew what I was doing.

Opa held out his hand. He looked like a little boy. I placed the penny in his palm and I felt some its warmth go from me to him. He held the penny between his index finger and his thumb, turning it back to front, looking at every smooth bump of what used to Lincoln's face. He rubbed the penny against his cheek.

"We used to ride them rails when we was boys," he said, staring at the ceiling.

I stood up and kissed Opa's head.

"I know, Opa," I said and turned out the lights. I could already hear him snoring as I shut the bedroom door behind me

After the coins, we brought mostly trash, stuff we found on the ground or took from the garbage bins on Monday mornings on the way to school. Little stuff, like a ladle with a broken handle, or a china piggy bank with chipped ears, or a bunch of headless Barbie dolls we found in the abandoned lot on Trogdon, by the waterworks. One day, Kevin brought a fire poker, and when Weathers Bolt asked him where he'd gotten it, he curled up his top lip like Weathers Bolt was a retard and said,

"My house. Where'd you think?"

"Won't your daddy be angry that you took it?" I asked.

"Naw. We don't ever make fires. Fires is olden days shit."

We brought bigger things to the tracks: a frying pan, a skateboard, a boombox. We quit taking things from the trash—it was dirty, and the neighbors were starting to give us the look when we went near their garbage—and instead took things from home, stuff we hoped our parents wouldn't miss.

The weather started to get cold, the wind storming down from the mountains and pushing big gray clouds across the sky. We had to dig through crackling leaves to find our flattened treasures, and we blew on our fingers to keep them warm. On a Saturday that smelled nearly like snow, Wayne came to the tracks carrying a full-length mirror above his head. He'd unscrewed it from the inside of his closet door; he told us he didn't need to see so much of himself. We laid it across the tracks crosswise and stood in the brush to watch the train send glittering pieces of dark gray sky and pines and mountains sailing off, like they were going to be free. Except I knew the pieces had to land, and I was afraid one would land in my eye and for the rest of my life, all I would be able to see would be a reflection of the inside of my own head, twisted and dark like a corn maze.

Weathers Bolt started pinching stuff from his attic—an old ironing board, a pair of ice skates, his grandma's silver tea service that his momma never used, but couldn't give away. Wayne took a pair of hedge clippers from his daddy's tool shed, and later, after the handles were splinters and the blades all mangled, told us how his daddy ripped the house apart looking for them, yelling at Wayne and Wayne's momma and little sister, and how the rabbits sat hunkered down in their hutches outside, scared of the noise. Kevin never brought much, just a couple of bottle openers and a camping lantern, but that was allowed, because he was the foreman, he said, and the foreman at a factory doesn't have to make the stuff, he only has to tell the workers how to make it right.

I tried to bring what I could, but there just wasn't that much around my house that my mother or my granddad wouldn't notice if it went missing. I could always

take cans from the recycling bin, because I was the one who sorted recycling and walked it the near mile to the recycling center. I brought some jars, but they weren't big enough to scatter like the mirror. I sacrificed a heart-shaped locket I'd gotten for my seventh birthday and a whole houseful of dolls. I didn't play with them anyhow.

One day we were headed for the tracks and passing around a big bag of boiled peanuts Weathers had bought from the roadside stand near school for us to share. Kevin asked each of us what we'd brought. When I said I had another Bush's can, Kevin sucked his teeth and shook his head at me.

"Laney, you are such a girl."

I paused with my handful of peanuts halfway to my mouth. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know; you don't contribute. You just show up and let the men do all the work."

"'Work?'" I asked, trying to make the word sound as mean and little as possible, like I was spitting out a wormy crab apple.

"You don't ever bring anything good to smash. Me and Wayne and Weathers Bolt are putting in our fair share, and you," he pointed at me with a greasy finger, "just bring trash."

My throat was all tight, and the space behind my eyes was hot. "I brought a necklace! And all them dolls!"

Kevin laughed, a big spout of a laugh, and slapped his knee. Wayne let out a little snort, and I heard Weathers Bolt cough, trying to cover up a snicker.

I wheeled around to look at Weathers Bolt and jammed my fists into my hips, peanuts falling from my hand into the dirt. “What? What’s so funny?”

Weathers Bolt coughed again, and scratched the back of his head.

“Well, I don’t know. It *was* all trash or girl stuff.”

“Same thing!” yelled Kevin.

“It kind of is,” said Weathers Bolt, and Wayne nodded his head.

There was a silent second. In it, I heard a leafy whisper in the brush and saw a blur of white-blond hair. Shelva Ann was watching us. She smiled a little, just a trembly turn-up on the corners of her mouth. I nodded to her and turned east toward home.

It was a bad night, the kind of night when Opa didn’t know the difference between what was happening now and what happened a long time ago. During dinner, he kept calling Momma Fran and asking her where Jake had got to, and then Momma yelled “I’m Jeanie! Jeanie! Your sister’s been dead longer than that damn dog has!” But then she was sorry, and said she had one of her headaches, and when I asked her if she wanted me to wash up, she patted my hand.

“You’re a good girl, Laney,” she said.

I did the dishes, remembering not to use soap on the cast iron, just letting it soak like Oma told me to. I put Opa to bed, but I didn’t stay with him, because he’d gone quiet, living at the distance we couldn’t reach. Once I closed the door of Opa’s bedroom, I went back into the living room and sat in Opa’s chair, because there was no one to tell me to go to bed. I picked bits of stuffing from the arm and watched the

world the way Opa sees it, except he doesn't usually see it in the dark. Something in the corner caught my eye. It was the walker; I had put a whole bunch of glow-in-the-dark skeleton stickers on it at Halloween, and now they were bright green, glowing like a neon exit sign.

The walker was easy to carry. I held it in front of me like it was a shield at first, but then halfway to the tracks I tried using it to walk. With each step, I flung the walker out in front of me with a snap of my wrists, then straightened out my arms and swung myself forward like a gymnast on the parallel bars. It made my arms tired, but I kept swinging. I liked the rhythm of the thud on the pavement and the lurch in my stomach as I sailed to catch up. That wasn't the way Opa used the walker. I guessed it helped him, but he had to lean on it so hard that he fought to get its feet to shuffle to the next step. He never got to use it to swing free.

When I got to the tracks, I couldn't decide how to put the walker on the rails. If I laid it right in the middle, I was afraid it would get tangled up in the undercarriage and the train really would derail. But the walker was too big to balance on one rail, like we did for smaller things. I settled for a compromise; I placed the walker over one of the rails, so two of the feet were on crossties and two of them were on the gravel beside the tracks. Then I stepped back into the serviceberry and Sweet Betsy bushes and crouched down to wait.

The moon was hiding in clumps of black clouds. Every so often it would appear and the stand of shrubs where I sat would glow silver; but then a cloud would cover the moon over again, and the light would go out. I thought about tomorrow morning, when I would show the boys what I had made in the factory. I thought about

bringing a broken-off leg of the walker, twisted into flat angles, to Weathers Bolt and giving it to him, telling him to keep it and think about me when he saw in on his bureau or his bookshelf. I thought about telling Kevin that I was running the smash factory now. I thought about bringing Shelva Ann out of the branches and leaves and letting her keep all her coins.

My legs were getting tired of squatting, so I sat down in the dirt. I put my hands in the dead leaves, crunching them into dust in my fists. In one of the handfuls, I felt something sharp, and when I sifted through the mess, I saw something shine: one of my Monopoly tokens. It was all scratched up and mangled, so I couldn't tell what it was. It might have been the old shoe, or maybe the top hat.

I slipped the token in my pocket, but held on to it, closing it in my cold hand. Far off, I heard a train whistle.

Lowlands

Anna was certain that nothing more would fit in the car, but she didn't bother telling Paul.

Her parents had come by that morning to see them off and ended up helping Anna and Paul finish packing. They crammed the Volvo station wagon from floor to ceiling with the accumulated debris of six years together, and by the scheduled departure time of nine-thirty, it had been ready to go.

Then Paul had realized that Anna's sewing table had been left out.

"It's fine," she'd said, standing on the driveway arms akimbo, surveying the car. "I hardly ever sew anymore. My parents will keep it for me until the next time we drive up here."

Beth and Glenn had nodded. They were already keeping the couple's bigger furniture items; what did one little sewing table more matter?

"No, no, that's not necessary," Paul said, hoisting the sewing table back out of Anna's parents' pick-up. "It's so small, I really think I can make it fit. Just give me a minute."

It had been over two hours. Paul had tried countless arrangements of the bags and boxes that crowded the station wagon, only to find that each time something was sticking out or had been forgotten on the driveway.

Anna and her parents had retreated to the porch to wait.

Every so often, Glenn would call from his perch on the steps, "Sure I can't help you with that, son?"

"Thanks, Glenn, but I think I got it," Paul would say without looking up. "Just one more minute here."

"Puts me in the mind of that story, *The Mitten,*" Anna's mother said. She and Anna were sitting on the porch swing, kicking their feet back and forth to keep it in motion. "You know, where all the animals, the rabbit and the fox and the bear, get inside this mitten, but when a little mouse tries to get in, the mitten just can't take another thing, and it bursts apart."

Beth was the librarian at an elementary school in Blowing Rock. She firmly believed there was no situation so big or complicated that it couldn't be clarified by relating it to a children's book.

Beth leaned forward. "Glenn, you remember that story."

Anna's father was sitting on the porch steps. He took a sip of his iced tea. The weather was cool—March in western North Carolina allowed only the hint of spring—but Glenn could drink iced tea all year round, in any kind of weather.

"Let's see. *The Mitten*, you said? I don't believe I recall that one."

Glenn furrowed his bushy brows. As a teenager, Anna had been mortified by the way his brows grew up and away from his face, and she'd begged him to let her trim them. Her father had always calmly refused.

Once Anna had burst out in frustration, "But Daddy, they make you look like a Great Horned Owl!"

Glenn had laughed and laughed. For days afterward, he would sneak up on Anna while she was studying or talking on the phone, swoop his arms and let out a loud hoot. Ten years later, he still sometimes called her Owlet.

"Yes, you do, Glenn, that's the one with the little Scandinavian children. You remember that."

"Of course, dear."

Beth gave her husband a peevish glare, then looked out over the yard. Paul was holding Anna's KitchenAid stand mixer in his arms; now that the sewing table was in, there was no room for this.

"Paul, you remember that story."

"What story?" Paul said without glancing up. He was chewing on the inside of his lip in the way that Anna knew meant he was somewhere else.

"*The Mitten*. You know, the one about all the animals who get inside that mitten."

"I don't know that story, Beth." He rested the stand-mixer on the car's bumper.

"Oh sure you do, honey. You must have read it as a kid. Anna did."

"Mom, you know Paul's not a reader."

"Well, you don't have to be a reader to *read*. Isn't that right, Paul?"

Beth's tone was light, but Anna could hear the steel that crept along the edges of her voice. Since Anna had lost the baby, Beth hadn't been as warm to Paul as she once was. Anna tried to tell her that it had nothing to do with Paul. But Anna had never lied well to her mother, and she knew her mother hadn't bought the story about the miscarriage, even if Beth didn't actually know the truth.

"I really ought to read more."

Paul grimaced ruefully at Anna, but she just turned up the corners of her mouth in a noncommittal way. She didn't want to be on anybody's side.

There was silence for a moment.

Anna looked out from the porch, surveying the land she would soon be leaving. Morning sun was burning the wisps of fog from the peaks of the Blue Ridge sleeping on the horizon. The mountains surrounding her home had always made Anna feel safe and contained. They were a seam hemming in her known world. They showed her just where she belonged.

The yard in front of their house was small and neat. Anna hadn't ever gotten around to digging the vegetable garden she'd planned when she and Paul had moved in three years ago, but she'd planted some native azaleas in front of the house and made a small bed of coreopsis and sweet alyssum around the mailbox. The last of the snowdrops were blooming in the shadiest corners of the yard, while in the spots with full sun tightly furled crocuses were beginning to thrust themselves from the cold earth.

Anna didn't know what kind of plants grew in Florida. She could only imagine palm trees and hibiscus, plants that were strange and unwelcoming to her. When she'd mentioned it to Paul, he'd told her that north Florida wasn't really so different from the rest of South, that despite being near the ocean, she'd be surprised how much Jacksonville would remind her of home.

"Easy for you to say," she'd said, as she toyed with her dinner. "It *is* like your home."

Paul scoffed through a mouthful of spaghetti. “That makes no sense. Florida is nothing like Delaware.”

“Well, they’re both coastal. They’re flat. No hills, no valleys, everything the same—it’s unnerving.”

Paul reached under the table and squeezed her knee. “Spoken like a true hillbilly.”

On the porch, Anna frowned. The hillbilly crack was part of a long-standing joke in their relationship, ever since they’d started dating during their sophomore year at UNC. Paul always teased Anna about her gentle mountain twang and her steadfast love of the Blue Ridge, but it had seemed harmless and good-natured. In fact, she’d always assumed Paul envied her firm sense of origin. After all, what kind of place was Delaware? What could it possibly mean, she wondered, to be from such a place? Her assumption was confirmed when he agreed to move to Boone with her while she got her teaching certificate at Appalachian State. He did computer consulting. He said he could do that anywhere, so it might as well be somewhere beautiful.

But then Paul had started applying for jobs with tech companies. A week ago, just after the abortion, he’d accepted a lucrative offer in Jacksonville.

“You’re a teacher,” he’d said. “That’s a job you can do anywhere.”

Anna said nothing. She looked out the window behind him and fixed her eyes on the fog trapped in the trees at the top of Howard Knob.

Now, the jokes about her heritage were starting to grate at Anna; in preparing to leave her home, she couldn’t bear to take it lightly anymore. She realized, too, that she had nothing to say back to Paul when he called her a hick or made a joke about

moonshine. She could think of nothing clever or cutting to say about Delaware. Secretly, she thought this meant there was nothing special about the place at all.

Glenn drained the last of his ice tea, jangling the ice cubes around in the bottom of the glass.

"You sure I can't help you there, son?"

Paul had a garbage bag full of bedclothes in his hand, and he was studying the open hatch.

"I think we'll just have to leave these. I can't see how they're going to fit."

Anna frowned. "If we leave something, don't you think it ought to be the table?"

"We can use the table; we don't need all these blankets."

"But I want the blankets." Anna winced as she heard how her words sounded—petulant and childish—and wished she could pull them back into her mouth. But it was true. The sewing table had come from Ikea in Charlotte. Most of the blankets were handmade or hand-me-downs.

Paul looked at her, head cocked to one side. It was the look that said, be reasonable.

"Anna, it's Florida. Do you really think we need *two* huge bags full of blankets?

Anna opened her mouth and took in a breath to speak, then quickly exhaled and shut it. After a pause, she said, "I suppose not."

She hoped that the afghan her grandmother had crocheted was in the other bag.

Paul tossed the garbage bag into the back of the truck.

"Well, folks," he said, striding over the porch. "Looks like it's about that time." He smiled at Anna. "You ready?"

Anna wanted to remind him that she was the one who'd been waiting hours for him. But there were twelve hours in a car ahead of her, and she figured there were no percentages in a comment like that.

Anna turned to her mother and hugged her. Beth squeezed Anna hard.

"It may seem like a long way, but I'm always close to you, honey."

"Mom." Anna tried to sound exasperated, but there was a scratchy feeling in the back of her throat.

"Don't you 'Mom,' me, missy."

Beth gave Anna one last squeeze, then pushed Anna out to arm's length. She looked at Anna, smiling, tears welling. Anna blushed and looked away.

Anna pecked her mother on the cheek, and stood up quickly. On the steps, her father was standing up creakily, slowly straightening out his legs with a little grimace of pain; Glenn's knees had taken a beating when he played football for State, and they'd given him trouble ever since. Anna reached out her hand to help her father, but he didn't take it until he was already standing. He held her hand in one of his big palms, and patted it with the other.

"You take care, now, Owlet." There was a little crease of worry in between Glenn's eyebrows.

"I will, Daddy." Anna's chest felt tight. "We've got to get going."

"Of course." Glenn dropped his daughter's hand. He turned to Paul. "Drive safe, son."

Paul nodded. "Will do." He raised a hand to Anna's mother. "Thanks for all the help, Beth. I'm sure we'll be back up to visit before too long."

"That would be nice." Beth was holding onto the porch railing. She was smiling, but Anna saw her eyes dart back and forth from Paul to her daughter.

Anna took Paul's elbow. "Let's go."

As usual, Paul insisted on taking the backroads. Paul loved to take backroads—state highways, country lanes, countless Main Streets. It was the one vestige of the Kerouac-ian image of himself he had treasured in college: there had been no Interstates when *On the Road* was published. Normally, his obsession annoyed Anna—road trips with Paul invariably took hours longer than they would with any other person—but today, as they wound along the esses and switchbacks of the Blue Ridge Parkway, Anna was thankful.

She watched the landscape flash by. Later in their drive, once they had left her corner of the state, Anna knew she would see the South as most people understood it. There would be an endless parade of nameless and crumbling towns, each one containing the same elements, as if they were standard issue: convenience stores selling bait and tackle; Waffle Houses with letters missing from the sign like gaps in a toothy smile; abandoned Wal-Marts across the street from bustling Super Wal-Marts. One desiccated hulk of mid-century America after another.

But now, now they were still in the mountains, where the world was cleaner and crisper, where the light possessed a certain clarity you didn't find anywhere else.

Here in the mountains, Anna could only just see the world emerging from the cover of winter. Huge icicles dripped from a rock face, but underneath them, the grass was greening into its spring brilliance. On the rolling ridges the tree tops were mostly a sea of dusty brown, but here and there, Anna could see buds, purplish and densely clotted, dotting the skeleton branches. The leaves of the rhododendron were beginning to unfurl, spreading their dark waxy faces to a sun that was newly welcoming. In a few months, these roads would be clogged with tourists come to see the rhododendron's dramatic blossoms and the quieter saucer-shaped blooms of the mountain laurel. Though most locals complained about the influx, Anna didn't blame these visitors. There was nothing more beautiful than the Blue Ridge in spring.

Paul glanced over at Anna looking out the window.

"I know you're going to miss it. I'm sorry."

Anna shook her head, tossing her hair back on her shoulders. She smiled at Paul and reached over to put her hand on his thigh.

"It's okay. It'll be fine."

He covered his hand with hers. "Of course it will."

After a moment, Paul switched on the radio and tuned it to WNCW, the station out of Isothermal Community College. It was Saturday, but it didn't matter; here, Jesus was always on the radio. Right now, a gospel bluegrass program was on. In a tinny recording, the Alabama Sacred Heart Singers were belting out "Behold the Morning Sun."

Anna began humming along.

Paul snorted. "I still say that stuff is ridiculous."

Anna thought it sounded riotous and joyful, like people who just couldn't contain their happiness. She didn't say anything.

"It just sounds like shouting," Paul said, and reached for the dial.

Several hours later, as they were gliding across the scrub-dotted land of the Georgia Piedmont, Paul turned down the radio.

"You want to stop in Augusta for lunch?" he asked.

Anna responded without looking at him. "It's already after four. We might as well just wait until dinner."

"I don't know. There might not be all that much between Augusta and Jacksonville. I don't want you getting too hungry."

"I'm not hungry." She pressed her fingertips to the window. It was warm. "I want to keep going."

"It's up to you, but keep in mind we still have a good six hours before Jacksonville. We might be stuck with fast food."

"It doesn't matter," Anna said. They were passing a roadside stand selling tomatoes and watermelon that had probably been shipped in from South Florida. A little boy was leaning over the counter, waving to the cars as they passed. Anna waved back.

Paul glanced at the clock on the dash and tilted his head slightly to consider their progress. "It's probably more like seven hours. Going's always slow on 121. All those lights."

"I don't mind."

"Really? It's up to you, but I just think it's going to be a long way."

The tomato boy was receding out of sight. Anna could see him craning his neck around the stand, looking for the next car to welcome. She leaned out the window a bit to watch him disappear behind a hill.

She sat back and put her hands in her lap.

When they had first started dating, Anna had been impressed with Paul's willingness to take her opinion into consideration. Before Paul, she'd only ever dated boys from her hometown or places like it. Boys like these had hitched their parents' and grandparents' notions about relationships to their pick-ups and hauled them into the twenty-first century. If they took her to dinner, they chose the place and the and the date and the time. Sometimes they chose her meal. They always knew what drink she wanted, and they always ordered it with a knowing wink tipped in her direction.

With Paul, it had been different. Paul asked her what she liked, where she wanted to go, and he'd never ordered for her. When she'd ask him what their plans were for the evening, he always said, "It's up to you." He'd also been good at interpreting what she wanted when she was too shy or confused to say it. When she'd walked out of her chemistry final exam and burst into tears, knowing she'd failed the course for the second time, he'd taken her to his car and pointed the old Volvo northwest, toward her parents' house. When Anna led him by the hand to her apartment, vacant for once of her vacuous roommates, and then stalled once they reached the bedroom, Paul began singing "You Fill Up My Senses" in a loud and wobbly falsetto. Anna's laughter untangled the nerves that were knotted up in the pit of her stomach. She slid her tee-shirt over her head and pulled Paul all the way under the covers with her.

After they'd been together a year, Anna began to notice more carefully the way Paul asked her things. The question began wide and expansive, with limitless answers, but by the time he reached the end, passing through the "up to you" and "I guess it doesn't matter but" and "I'm just concerned," it had become a narrow hallway leading inexorably to the chink of light coming from the only open door.

For a time, she'd thought this was an amusing little quirk of his, the kind of thing she could laugh about with her mother as they washed the dishes or put up butter beans for the winter, the kind of observation of male behavior that would be followed by an indulgent shake of the head, a little loving laugh. Lately, though, it had begun to seem less lovable. She didn't know how to arm herself against his backhanded persuasion. Paul knew how to make Anna think that she'd come up with whatever it was he wanted. It would only be later that she would realize he'd gotten his way.

They got into Augusta around five o'clock. The city depressed Anna: a parody of itself, all stately brick and tall white columns. She tried to convince Paul that they should just get a snack and push on to Jacksonville; they still had a ways to go.

"Now, if we'd taken the highway—" She cut herself off when she saw Paul's crumpled expression, and she cringed at her own meanness.

"Never mind; you're right," Anna said, putting her hand to the back of his neck. "I'm just cranky from being in the car so long. Let's get something to eat." She brushed the little curls that escaped down Paul's neck with her fingernails. "Do you forgive me?"

They were at a red light. Paul leaned over to peck her cheek. “There’s nothing to forgive.” He leaned back and considered her for a moment. “Is your hair different?”

Anna smoothed the flyaways from her forehead. “Yeah. I got it cut yesterday. I wanted something new for the move. You know, to make a change.”

“I like it.” Paul tucked a lazy wisp behind Anna’s ear.

Anna felt her cheeks pink. Paul’s compliments were always small, but they warmed her in a way she couldn’t quite define. Perhaps it was their smallness; it made them feel genuine.

Their restaurant choices were limited, so they settled on the Boll Weevil Eatery. The sign near the restaurant read “Ninth Street” at one end of the road; at the other end, closer to the river, there was a hand-lettered strip of cardboard taped to the pole that read “James Brown Blvd.” When they asked their waitress about it, she told them that after the singer’s death, the street’s name had been officially changed on maps. The city, however, hadn’t gotten around the amending the sign, causing great confusion for the tourists who came to town for the PGA tournament. The cardboard was the restaurant’s temporary solution.

“Why did you only change on the side by the river?” Paul had asked. He was always chatty with waitresses and handymen and gas station attendants.

The waitress shrugged and fluffed her cumulous puff of hair. “Only tourists go along the river. Locals know what’s what.”

The cover of the menu proclaimed “The Boll Weevil Eatery: Meat-and-Three Just Like Home!” But a quick perusal of the inside pages revealed that it was actually

meat-and-two. Anna wondered what had prompted the shift: maybe hard times or maybe the changing culinary habits of modern Americans. She understood, though, why the restaurant hadn't changed the tagline: "Meat-and-three" had such a nice ring to it.

Anna could have read the menu three times cover to cover in the time it took for the waitress to return with their sweet tea and a fat order pad with crinkled pages, but she still didn't know what she wanted. Paul ordered biscuits and gravy from the all-day breakfast options while Anna poured over the menu. She was still deliberating after Paul had finished ordering.

Paul laughed and gave the waitress a sympathetic look. "She always does this."

"I'm thinking, I'm thinking," she said with a note of panic in her voice. Ordering at restaurants made her anxious, like there was a right answer somewhere on the menu but she couldn't be sure what it was and choosing wrong would alter her life forever.

Paul put his hand on her back. "Why don't you get catfish? The catfish looks good."

Anna shrugged his hand off. "I don't know. Just give me a sec." She looked up at the waitress. "I'm sorry. I'll just be one second."

"Take your time, darlin'," the waitress said, shifting her considerable weight to the other Ked-clad foot. "But do y'all mind if I sit down while you think?" She gestured to the unoccupied side of the booth. "My feet can't hardly hold me up any more."

Anna felt a surge of warmth for this woman who called her darlin', who wasn't in a hurry, who didn't tell her what she wanted.

"Please, sit down. Take a load off."

The waitress sat heavily and the vinyl cushion released a little "oof" of air.

"Thanks, honey." She leaned back in the seat. "Ever since I had Carlene—she's my fourth, she was a real big baby—my circulation just hasn't been the same."

Anna felt a little flutter in her chest.

"Carlene. That's a nice name."

The waitress beamed. "You want to see her picture?" She pronounced it "pitcher." "I keep pictures of all my kids in the back of my order pad here."

The waitress flipped open the pad and pulled out several wallet-sized school photos. Anna remembered having those taken as a child. She was always so excited about picture day, but when the pictures came out, Anna was disappointed. She always hoped that the photograph would somehow make her a better version of herself, but despite the rainforest background and new haircut, it was just Anna, nothing more.

The waitress shuffled through the photos, then selected one and pushed it across the table.

"That there is Carlene."

Anna smiled. The girl in the picture was all blonde curls and pink cheeks, nothing like Anna. Anna had been an awkward child: too thin, biggish ears, hair that would never hold a curl.

"She lovely. How old is she?"

"She's about to be five this spring. She's real advanced for her age; she reads almost as good as her brother, and he's eight."

Anna studied the photo. Carlene had a small dimple in her right cheek, slight enough that if you didn't look hard, you might think it was a smudge. Anna liked the way it made her face look a little off-balance.

Anna glanced sideways at Paul. He was looking over the top of the waitress's head, trying to get a view of the Hawks game on the television over the bar. Under the table, his leg bounced and he was twirling his spoon around in his fingers without seeming to notice. For a moment, white heat surged in Anna's head; Paul didn't even like basketball. She slid the photo over to him.

"Isn't she cute?"

It was a mean question. Paul didn't think children were cute. He thought they were loud and obnoxious in restaurants; otherwise, he didn't think of them at all. He was unmoved by a tiny knitted hat with bear ears; he was confused by other's impulse to talk to children in line at the grocery store. When Anna's friends became pregnant, Paul had pitied them. They were so young, he always said. They were ending their lives at twenty-five. Asking him about Carlene put Paul in a bad spot: either he lied or he sounded cruel. But Anna wanted to see which he chose would choose.

Paul cleared his throat and pushed the picture back to her. "Honey, don't you think we should make this a quick lunch?" He smiled at the waitress. "We've still got a long road ahead of us."

Anna sighed. The heat had faded. He was right; Jacksonville was still far. She slid the picture back across the Formica to the waitress.

"I'll have the catfish."

As they ate, Paul chattered about the trip, the new house. He'd heard Jacksonville had good golfing, and he was hoping to take it up.

"If nothing else, I'll get to ride the golf carts. That looks like the best part of the whole thing."

Anna made agreeing sounds where appropriate and nodded to show she was listening, but she kept quiet while she ate. Lately, eating had been an obligation she had to make herself fulfill. She had to devise little games and benchmarks for herself to convince her to fork peas or potatoes or pot roast into her mouth. How about you eat around the clock, she'd tell herself, arranging her food in stations on the border of her plate. You need to eat half of everything here, she'd think, and divide the food into two portions: the one she would eat, and the one she could leave behind. Just one more bite of green beans, and then you can be excused.

They finished eating and paid the bill. Anna left an extra dollar in tip.

"Should we get back on the road?"

Paul was tucking his wallet back into his back pocket. The wallet had been a present from Anna several years ago; she'd made it out of scraps of leather in an art class in college. Now her poorly-sewn seams were beginning to strain.

"I suppose," Anna said, scooting sideways out of the booth. She smoothed her shirt and skirt, brushing away crumbs and bits of lint.

As they walked out, they passed the waitress leaning against the building, smoking a cigarette. Anna put up a hand in farewell.

"It was nice talking to you," she said.

"Bye, darlin'. You take care, now."

As they continued south, Anna felt the landscape flattening. This kind of land made her nervous, and she wondered how anything could grow here. There was something so barren about a land with no valleys or peaks; there was no refuge.

Anna rested her head against the taut fabric of her seatbelt, and without thinking, let out a long, slow sigh.

"You okay?"

Paul glanced briefly at her. She could see worry lines around his mouth.

Anna nodded, but she didn't sit up. Her head felt so heavy.

"Just a little tired."

"Well, you just rest, then. You can take a nap, if you want. It might be good for you."

"Please don't worry about me."

Anna tried to make it sound light-hearted, like she appreciated his concern, but actually, those concerned looks he'd been giving her the last week set her teeth on edge, made her nervous and irritable. He handled her like a piece of china that had been broken and mended, but in which the crack was still plainly visible.

She knew it was her own fault, in many ways. When she found out, Paul had been in Raleigh visiting college friends. She had picked up her phone to call him and tell him the good news, that she wasn't anemic, just pregnant, but Anna had never imagined having to call Paul to tell him she was expecting. She wanted to be waiting for him on the porch when he came home. She'd imagined the way he would swoop

her into a hug, burying his face in her hair, how he might put his hand reverently on her belly and ask her if she could feel it, and she would laugh and tell him it would be months before the baby's squirming would be noticeable. She would make them dinner, something wholesome and traditional, so the baby would know right away where it came from. Maybe they would eat huddled on the sofa. Maybe they would make love there, tossing the throw pillows to the floor, and then fall asleep on the couch, waking up with cricks in their necks.

Anna was sure this wasn't phone news. It couldn't carry over wires and distances. Paul wouldn't be able to see the barely suppressed smile, her suffused joy. Paul was coming home day after next; she would tell him then.

But two days seemed a long time to keep the news to herself, so she went to her parents' home. She sang hymns as she drove, making up words or melodies to fill the gaps in her memories from junior choir. She'd quit when she was fifteen—her voice wasn't really good enough to sing with the adult choir, and anyway, they took their music seriously, while all Anna wanted was a chance to make joyful noise in a solemn place. When she arrived, she flew into the old brick rambler. Beth was in the back, turning over a vegetable bed, preparing it for the tomatoes she would plant come May. Anna flung her arms around her mother and told her. Anna's mother began to cry. Anna could never keep her eyes dry when her mother was weeping, so they stood there in the garden, compost staining their shoes, holding each other. When they were done crying, they giggled at themselves, only slightly embarrassed by their outpouring, and went inside. Beth poured them iced tea. Anna decided to stay until her father came home so she could tell him, too. He hugged her and offered her

a celebratory drink of scotch, then red-faced, retracted the offer as Anna and her mother laughed. Anna spent the night, and slept in her childhood bed.

Over the next several days, Anna tried to plan how she would tell Paul. The ideas that fit the importance of the situation seemed stuffy and too grown-up: a special dinner, a long walk on the Parkway. And the ideas that reflected her giddiness—a series of clues hidden around the house, hiding in the broom closet and jumping out to surprise him—seemed silly and trivialized the news.

In the end, she went with no plan. When she heard Paul's car pulling into the driveway on Wednesday night, she jumped up from the couch where she had been grading math quizzes and ran into the yard. She didn't bother to put on her shoes, and her stocking feet slapped wetly on the cold walkway. Paul was still in the car, gathering his things from the passenger seat. When she tapped lightly on the window, he looked up, startled. Then his face relaxed into a smile. He opened the door.

"Hey you."

"Hey." Anna's heart was thumping wildly in her chest, pounding against her rib cage. She was ahead of herself by several minutes in her mind, already at the moment of revelation and rejoicing.

Paul stepped out of the car, looking disheveled. He hadn't shaved in a day or two and when he kissed her, the stubble grazed her cheek, rough as concrete.

"I'm happy you're home."

"Me too."

He turned to the car to retrieve his duffel bag and laptop case. She watched him rummaging in the back seat, looking for his phone or keys. She noticed that his

hair was getting long. She would ask him if he wanted her to trim it for him tomorrow.

"Paul?"

He straightened and faced her. In the dim light of the moon, he looked just like he had when they were nineteen; she couldn't see the lines that had begun to set around his mouth and on his forehead like she could in the sun.

"Yeah?"

Anna tamped down the grin that tried to creep onto her face, managing to subdue it into a wry wrinkling of her chin. She felt a swell of laughter and nerves.

Paul gave crinkled his eyes at her quizzically. "What is it? You didn't get another cat, did you?"

She shook her head. She took his hand that wasn't holding the duffel bag. She looked right into his eyes; that was always how it was in the movies.

"I'm pregnant."

"What?" Paul barked the word so sharply and loudly that Anna felt it ring in her chest. Her eyes grew wide.

"A baby, we're going to have—"

"I heard you the first time. Fuck."

There was a long silence. He dropped her hand and ran it through his hair. Anna kept her eyes on his face, waiting for some light to break through, but his face was long and shocked, and a line was deepening between his eyebrows. As the silence stretched on, Anna noticed that though the day had been warm, the night was cold, maybe even cold enough for a late frost. The damp grass of the lawn had soaked

her socks through, and she realized that her toes were growing numb. She looked down at her fingers; the nails looked blue.

Paul let out a long, ragged sigh. He ruffled his hair again, this time with both hands. Anna had seen Paul's father make the same gesture.

"Jesus." He leaned against the car. "Jesus Christ."

She nodded, but she didn't look up from her hands.

"We'll figure this out. We'll figure out a plan," he said, looking past her at the dark mountains.

Anna wanted to tell him that there was nothing to figure out, that she had already figured everything out. There was already a plan and it included nights pouring over books of baby names, a second-hand stroller, a swing set in the backyard, homemade Halloween costumes. But there were no words for all this now.

She pressed her lips together, clamping them shut with her teeth.

"Hey, don't worry." Paul reached for her hand. Anna let him take it, but it felt lifeless to her, like it belonged to someone else. "It's going to be okay. I'm sorry I got upset."

For a moment the weight on Anna's shoulders lightened. She looked up at him, a tentative smile tucked into the corners of her mouth.

"Really?"

"Of course." Paul pulled her into his arms. "I was…" The crease in his forehead deepened again. "But it doesn't have to be a big deal, right? I mean, I hear they just give you a pill if you're not too far along."

Anna suddenly felt unsteady on her feet. Her vision seemed to warp; the streetlights twisted and the moon wavered in the sky. She felt as if she had just stepped off a carousel. She held onto Paul more tightly, fearing she might fall.

"It's nothing to be scared of. Lots of women…you know. It doesn't mean anything."

"Nothing at all?"

Paul hugged her hard. "Nothing at all." He paused. "We're still so young, you know? Too young for that. I mean, we'd be lousy parents."

Anna tried to keep steady, but she was trembling all over. She felt that if she didn't hold very still, she would fly apart. Her teeth started to chatter.

"You must be cold." Paul rubbed her upper arms with his palms. "Let's go inside."

Anna followed Paul into the house.

Over the next few weeks, Anna thought again and again how stupid she had been. If she'd talked to Paul first, if she had waited to tell her parents, they would never have known. The baby would have existed only for her and Paul, just briefly, a minor inconvenience that had appeared and disappeared in the same breath. She should have thought about the situation before letting anyone know. Paul was right; they were still so young.

As it was, she'd had to lie. She told them she'd lost the baby. It was plausible; she'd read it happened to some fifteen percent of women. Her mother had pressed her lips into a thin white line, then turned back to the stew on the stove. When she faced Anna again, her eyes were dry, but it seemed Anna that her faced looked disarranged,

as if it had been re-etched more deeply by someone less adept with the chisel. Her father simply sat hard in his armchair. Then he took her hand.

"I'm so sorry. I am so deeply sorry," he said.

Now when she saw them, she had nothing to say.

As they neared the Florida line, Paul pulled over for gas and cigarettes. He'd officially quit several years ago, but he still smoked on occasion, especially on long car trips. As long as it didn't happen often, Paul reasoned it couldn't hurt too much. He referred to these times as smoking "off the record."

At the gas station, Paul put the pump into the car and went into the convenience store. Anna thought she might be able to drift to sleep—that would make the trip seem faster—but before she could begin to doze off, she heard car horns, loud and angry. She tried to ignore them, but they kept coming, a succession of short and long blasts, like a Morse code signal.

She sat up and looked toward the road. It was mid-sized with a steady stream of traffic, and all the cars seemed to be swerving around something. When she stuck her neck out the window, Anna could see it was a dog, trotting down the middle of the road. Anna thought he was a German shepherd, a big-chested fellow with tall ears. He seemed unafraid of the cars and bleating horns around him. He simply kept traveling down the road, his pace consistent, his course fixed.

Anna got out of the car and stood by the curb. Now that she was closer, she could see that though the dog seemed to have a mission, a place to be, his step was unstable, his path erratic. Sometimes, he appeared to stumble. He looked straight

ahead, and Anna began to think it wasn't bravery that kept him focused, but illness; he seemed oblivious to everything around him. Only the drivers' concern was keeping him unharmed; the dog himself was doing nothing to avoid them.

Anna looked back at the convenience store. She could see Paul leaning on the counter, chatting with the clerk. The dog was already fifty yards down the road, the honking and swerving following him. Despite his odd behavior, he was making pretty good time, and Anna decided that to catch him, she would have to run.

It had been a while since she had run. All her flesh felt loose on her body, but it was good to be moving, to be going somewhere with a purpose. Anna stretched out her arms and turned her palms against the breeze. As she ran, she tried to keep her eyes on the dog. She didn't think he was getting any farther away, but he also wasn't getting any closer. When she couldn't make him out, she could usually tell where he was by the noise and direction of the cars avoiding him. She wanted to call out—maybe if he heard someone's voice, he would leave the street—but she didn't know what to call. She didn't know his name, and calling out "dog" felt wrong, disrespectful almost, as if she couldn't be bothered to know him. She'd never had a dog, only cats, who sometimes came to a sort of kissing noise. Anna pursed her lips and made the sound, but it was drowned in the roar of the passing cars.

After a few minutes, the dog came to an intersection and made a sharp left. Anna followed him. She was in a neighborhood now. The houses were small with pocket handkerchief-sized front lawns and porches crowded with furniture made to stay indoors. Though the houses were shabby, they looked as though their owners took pride in them. The lawns were neatly mown, the walkways edged with little

plastic borders. There were gardens in front of some houses; other had silk flowers planted in the dirt. People were outside: washing their cars, sweeping their porches, watching their children run in the yard. Some of them waved to her.

In making the turn, Anna had lost sight of the dog. Fear fluttered in her stomach. But as she crested a hill, passing two bicycling children who eyed her suspiciously, she saw the dog a few blocks down. He had slowed some, but he was still in the middle of the street, still weaving shakily. She ran hard; she thought now she could catch up with him. She began calling, not to really to elicit any response from the dog, but rather to let people she ran past know that she had a purpose, that she wasn't just a stranger out for a run in a denim skirt and ballet flats.

"Here, puppy," she called. "Come here!" She even tried whistling a little, but her whistle was weak under the best of circumstances, and now she was almost winded.

She was afraid she would have to stop soon—her heart was pounding and there was a stitch in her side—but the thought of turning around without even having reached the dog was unbearable. So though she could feel the blisters forming on her heels and big toes, Anna managed to work up something close to a sprint. When she was within ten yards of the dog, she crossed to the opposite side of the street; she wanted to overtake him so she could approach him face to face. Finally ahead of him, she recrossed and waited for him at the corner under a tulip magnolia.

The dog seemed not to see her until he was just a few feet away. His eyes were milky and clouded, and she realized he was probably half-blind. He stopped abruptly, his nose twitching, smelling someone in his path. Even when he stood still,

he swayed slightly, as if he were standing on the deck of a ship. His fur was rumpled and missing in patches, and his ears were tattered. The fine hair around his muzzle was going grey.

She'd read somewhere that dogs like to smell a person's hand first. Anna held out her right hand, palm down, hoping it would be like a friendly wave to the dog.

"Hey there," she said softly, taking careful steps forward. "Hey, puppy-dog."

Her hand still out, she crept closer, rolling her feet to keep from making noise against the pavement. She kept murmuring little greetings, telling him what a handsome dog he was, asking him where he lived.

The dog made no sign that he noticed her until she was very close to him, her hand less than a foot away from his face. Because his eyes were so filmy, almost opaque, she couldn't tell where he was looking, if he could even see her at all. Then suddenly, he stiffened, seemed to exercise enough control to quell the swaying of his hindquarters, the shaking of his joints. Slowly, as if with great effort, the dog curled his upper lip and bared his teeth. He did not growl, did not raise his hackles, or lower his head. He merely lifted his lip. He seemed prepared to maintain this pose indefinitely.

Anna dropped her hand to her side and backed away, shuffling her shoes over the concrete. When she had retreated all the way to the corner, her feet stirring up the rosy petals of the tulip magnolia's fallen blossoms, the dog turned and crossed the street. With hips wobbling and feet weaving, he trotted away. She watched him until he turned a corner and was lost to her.

Anna was suddenly very tired. For a time, she stood completely still. The sun was starting to set, glazing the top of her head and the roofs of the houses. Several doors down, a girl shrieked as her brother chased her with a squirt gun. She heard a vacuum cleaner running in one house. In another, someone was practicing the clarinet.

When she at last looked back in the direction she had come, she saw the main street wasn't more than a half-mile away. She was surprised her to see it so close; she felt as if she had come a very long way. The distance to the car felt shorter, too, even though she was walking now. She thought how strange it was, how much quicker and more obvious things seemed the second time through, once you knew what to expect.

The stretch Anna had to travel was straight and flat. She could see the gas station almost as soon as she returned to the main road, but the street was lined with crepe myrtles that had been trained tall, and their arms, weighted now with unruly bunches of crinkled pink, kept her mostly sheltered from sight. When she reached the corner across the street from their car, she paused. She could see Paul now. He was pacing the parking lot, circling the pumps. When he came back around to the car, he looked inside, cupping his hands against the window. Then he pushed off the car and swung back into his orbit. Both hands went to his hair and riffled through it, sending hanks sticking out in all directions; she could tell he was angry at himself for checking a spot he was already sure she wouldn't be. Every few seconds, he jammed a hand into his pocket, pulled out his phone, and without looking at it, shoved it back in. The clerk with whom Paul had been chatting spanieled after him, making helpless hand gestures. A man with a huge belly stood by the door of the convenience store, a

the receiver of a cordless phone cradled between his chin and shoulder. Paul shouted at this man, perhaps the store manager, and the man shrugged and motioned towards the phone, as if abdicating responsibility.

Anna drew a deep breath. She should go to him. The trees didn't keep her completely hidden. Any second now, Paul would look across the street and notice a form behind the branches. Besides, it was time to be getting on with things. To be moving.

There was a lull in the traffic, and the evening grew quiet. Over the twilight sounds of birds and tree frogs, Anna heard Paul's voice. She couldn't make out the words, but his tone was clear enough: too high, ragged around the edges. The portly manager spoke, and when Paul responded, his voice wavered among the shifting border notes of panic.

Paul turned away from the manager, toward the road. His eyes roved the sidewalk, squinting into the crepe myrtles. It seemed to Anna that just then, the moment froze, and Paul was suspended, poised on the instant of recognition. She knew it would not last, that soon, Paul would realize that he had seen her, would come to fetch her, and her life would continue. But until it did, the pause, this infinitesimal interlude, was hers.

Terminus

Ida was a quiet baby. She rarely cried, even as an infant, just lay in her bassinette staring, drinking in her surroundings with liquid blue eyes. When she was a little older, her eyes began to darken. I cried when I noticed the hazel rings around the blue: I'd wanted her eyes to stay blue like Jonas's, not turn muddy brown like mine. Jonas had laughed and pulled me close.

"It's better this way," he said as I nuzzled my damp cheek against his sweater. "Hazel is a combination of blue and brown; she has both our eyes."

I didn't tell him that hazel was really a combination of green and brown. I liked his idea better, and he wouldn't have believed me, anyway. I squeezed him hard, as if by holding him, I could freeze this moment and keep it like a souvenir.

The first year after Ida was born, I didn't have a job. Jonas did ironwork—making custom gates and patio furniture—to support all three of us, though he really saw himself as a rock god. For a time, he seemed content working at something tangible and dependable while I stayed home. I thought I was taking time off to take care of my daughter. I realized later that Jonas just thought of me as unemployed.

The mornings stretched out long and delicious in front of Ida and me that year. I had always been a night person, but somehow Ida made me want to wake up at 5:30 in the morning. I didn't even need an alarm, my ears were so attuned to the little peeps Ida made when she opened her eyes and found herself alone in the crib. It helped that she slept in our bedroom, the only bedroom. When she saw me rise from the bed, she would haul herself to her feet, gripping the rails of the crib with two fat

fists, and beam at me from across the room. I would feed her breakfast, then bundle her into the old-fashioned baby carriage we bought at a flea market in Iowa to take her exploring. For hours, I rolled Ida along the Missouri, naming the trees and flowers for her. Grayson, a friend of mine from junior high, was working at the Doorly Zoo, and he let us in for free. Ida and I went there several times every week. I would hold her up to watch the animals—tiny wiry meerkats, lions lounging in the shade, peacocks unfolding their tails—and Ida would coo and clap her hands while I nuzzled the soft curls at the nape of her neck. I ate popsicles shaped like Disney characters and fed Ida her teething biscuits and it was easy to say no when Grayson offered me some of the pot he and the other employees were smoking behind the gorilla enclosure.

In the afternoons, we slept and waited for Jonas to come home. That year, every time he opened the door to find Ida and me waiting for him, his face registered a bewildered delight, as if he had expected to find the apartment empty and himself alone.

"Come here and let me hug you both," he would say. I would scoop up Ida, and Jonas would wrap his ropy arms around us, smelling of fire and the lanolin he smeared over his chapped knuckles.

Ida would be drowsy and soft by then, her head nodding onto her chest like a bright drooping poppy, little bubbles of spit forming at the corners of her mouth. Jonas always put her to bed. I was supposed to be making dinner, but more often, I was lurking in the hallway, watching the way his great, callused fingers tenderly slipped each pudgy limb into her footie pajamas, the way her head rested like a peach

in his palm. Once she was lying in the crib, surrounded by a legion of stuffed animals, Jonas would get out the battered acoustic Hohner he'd been strumming since high school and play softly to her until she fell asleep. My favorite song was one that only had two lines. It went "You're my little potato, dug you up / You come from underground." On "ground," Jonas's baritone would stretch all the way to the bottom of its range, as if with his voice he was scooping his spud daughter from the loam.

Then he would emerge from the bedroom and we would eat pasta or red beans and rice or something else that didn't cost much and went a long way. Jonas wouldn't drink more than three or four beers and we would make quiet love on the couch before we went to bed. I didn't tell him that I could hear his songs; I knew they were meant only for Ida.

We had very little. The rooms in our apartment were small, but they had an empty, echoing feel from lack of furniture and habitual transience. Only the closet in the hall was full. Every Christmas, Jonas's grandmother sent him three sweaters: one black, one maroon, and one mustard yellow, the colors of a dusty German flag. There were dozens of them: he'd kept every one she'd sent him since he was in ninth grade. She seemed to expect that he would need new sweaters every year, but she knitted them out of sturdy worsted wool, and embellished them with cables and ribbing that only added to their bulk and tenacity.

Once, before Ida was born, Jonas and I were drinking hot chocolate with peppermint schnapps on a snowy night in January. Jonas didn't finish his hot

chocolate, but poured himself a large tumbler of schnapps and then another and another.

"It's hot, it's so fucking hot in here!" he bellowed. He leapt up from the couch, lurched over to the window, and threw it open. He tore off his sweater—dark red—and stood before the frosted night, breathing the cold air in deeply, dramatically, like a Viking lord. My laughter turned soon into shivering and I pleaded with Jonas to shut the window. He refused. Instead, he grabbed his abandoned sweater and jammed it over my head.

"I'm still cold," I whined, pulling his hand like a child.

Jonas took another sweater from the closet, and I wriggled into this as well.

"Well?" Jonas asked, rubbing my arms with his palms.

"Still cold!" I was giggling, from the alcohol and the cold and because sometimes with Jonas, I didn't know how to stop laughing.

He pulled another sweater over my head. I was warm, but now we were both giddy.

"Still cold!" I chirped. Jonas came back from the hall this time with as many sweaters as he could hold. One by one, he pulled them over my head, until I felt like the core of rubber inside a baseball. My arms stuck out from my sides at right angles, and I couldn't see my feet. Finally, Jonas could no longer fit another sweater over the ball of wool that I'd become. He held my face and kissed me, then peeled off my layers one by one, marveling as my true form emerged.

It was what drew me to Jonas to begin with, these acts of fierce tenderness. He could crush a walnut in his hands—he would do it sometimes at parties after a few

beers and concerted prodding—but I had also seen him pluck worms from the sidewalk after a heavy rain, then use the toe of his boot to gouge a hole in the dirt to drop them in. Under his tenderest gesture was a layer of force, and though it scared me, I wanted to see the places where the gentle mantle had worn away.

We'd met because we traveled through the same circles of burnouts, tramps, and aspiring artists, though we had arrived there from different directions: I had adopted a drifting life; Jonas had been born into it. We both tried to compensate, Jonas, for what he didn't have as a child, and I, for what I did. We tried not to talk about the difference.

But sometimes I didn't know how to mask my upbringing. Jonas and his father didn't get along, but I had always liked Albert. I'd mentioned it once, early in our relationship.

Jonas snorted. "Of course you do. He's not your father."

"It's not just that," I'd said. "I know things were hard with him, but he cares about you. I mean, isn't that what's important? Ultimately?"

Jonas glared at me. His eyes raked my face, but didn't find what they were looking for, and his features softened. He put his hand on the top of my head and kissed my hairline

"That's what people with good parents think."

For a moment, I was stung. I knew, though, that he was right. I had two parents, happily married, gainfully employed. They were upright. They were loving. There was always one-percent milk in the fridge and moderately sweetened cereal in the pantry and a brand new box of crayons on the first day of school. The fact that I

hadn't spoken to my parents in years, not since I'd dropped out of high school and took the MegaBus to Chicago with a boy who played viola in the school orchestra—that had been my choice. Every so often, I'd call home and listen as my mother or father shouted "Hello?" into the silence. As little as I deserved it, I believed they remained as they had been when I left, loving me, waiting for me to return so they could forgive me.

Jonas's childhood had been different. It was the stuff of social work case studies, an obvious narrative of substance abuse and poverty, its after-school-special familiarity somehow conferring still another notch of suffering. Jonas's mother had disappeared when he was seven because of Albert's drinking, leaving Jonas with the weekend binges, the whiskey-infused verbal torrents, the shut off heat and water and telephone. Jonas had left home at sixteen; shortly thereafter, Albert got clean. I was happy for Albert, who loved his religion and sobriety, but I also thought that his timing seemed a little cruel.

When Ida was little, before Albert's thyroid cancer got bad, we'd go out to Des Moines to visit him. We'd sit on his crumbling porch that looked out over a junkyard and a bowling alley parking lot, chatting and drinking iced tea so sweet it made my molars ache. Sometimes I'd read to him from the newspaper or the Bible; he had a cataract in one eye, a nacreous film like skim milk. The times when I had Jonas's car, I drove Albert to his AA meetings; he went five times a week and told me every time I visited how he never missed, not once. Albert always had some present for Ida, even when we hadn't told him we were coming: a handful of candy, a little china poodle, a hair clip in the shape of a watermelon slice. After a few times, Ida

began to clap and crow when we pulled into the Des Moines bus station. She knew something good was coming.

In the beginning, I could usually convince Jonas to go with me. These visits started out well enough, but there was always a moment when they soured. Jonas might crack one of the beers he'd brought, and Albert would try to offer him a soda. Or maybe Jonas would say something about a gig he'd gotten with whatever motley assortment of half-assed musicians he was playing with at the time, and Albert would say make a comment about an honest day's work and putting family first. There'd be a heated discussion that would evolve into an argument and more often than not, the day ended in shouting, fists pounding on tables, Jonas storming out the door as I gathered Ida and her accoutrements and made little apologetic noises to Albert.

"Fuck him," Jonas would say as we left. "He can't tell me shit. Where was all that fucking responsibility when I was a kid?"

He would mutter to himself the whole way home, chanting some private litany. I'd rub his back and tell him I understood, but in truth, I didn't. I was the only fuck up in my family.

Once Albert got sick, there was nothing I could do to make Jonas come to Des Moines with me.

"He'd rather just see you and Ida, anyway," he said without looking up from the riff he was picking out on the Hohner.

I felt a little heat flare in my chest. "He's your father, Jonas. You need to see him."

He stopped playing. When he looked up at me, his eyes looked hard and glassy, and I could see a vein standing out by his temple. He closed his eyes and he slumped, deflated. I'd never seen him look so young.

"It's hard." His voice was ragged. "It's just…" His raised his hands, searching for the word. "Hard."

I sat beside him on the couch and put my arm around him. I wished in that moment that I could pick him up and carry him somewhere safe, like the inside of a seashell where we could curl together and rock in the waves. But I couldn't even reach all the way across his back.

"I know," I said, resting my head on his shoulder.

He took my hand and squeezed so hard the fingers went white and bloodless.

"No, you don't."

He was right.

When Albert died, he left Jonas some money, not much, but enough to make a difference. I thought we could use the money to make the security deposit and first month's rent on a nicer apartment, one where the carpet didn't smell like corn chips and the water didn't come out yellow. Ida was about to start pre-school, and I thought it would be good to live closer to the Head Start she would go to. Jonas agreed, but he was twitchy when we talked about it. He kept looking around like there might be some better conversation to join, and he tore a paper napkin into confetti.

Over the next few weeks, I took Ida to the library almost daily. I'd gather a stack of books from the children's section and plunk Ida down with them while I used

the computer to look at rentals. I wanted two bedrooms, so that Ida could have her own space. I imagined her bedroom with ceiling-high bookshelves and a window seat piled with plush creatures. I wanted enough space for a kitchen table, so we didn't have to eat dinner in the living room with our plates in our laps. I saw family dinners at which the three of us sat around the table eating a meal that included at least four of the major food groups, using real silverware, not plastic. I printed promising listings using change scrounged from return slot on the library's vending machine and hung them on the refrigerator.

Whenever I suggested we go look at some of these places, Jonas shrugged me off. He was in a new band, a rockabilly group that played Buddy Holly and Roy Orbison covers at local dives. He'd even bought a Western shirt to wear at their gigs. I teased him about it, called him Hopalong, but he just tugged at the sleeves, trying to make the pearl snaps close around his thick forearms. The band was good, he said, the best group he'd been with in a while, and they were practicing a lot. He'd go straight from work to practice most nights, and often didn't come home until I was asleep. He invited me to their gigs a few times, but the only person we knew who would watch Ida for free was Grayson, and Jonas said he didn't want a drug dealer taking care of his daughter. I stayed home.

It was a beautiful day when I found the guitar. It was warm, almost hot, and determined, fuzzed-out clouds scudded across the sky. Pollen drifted in the air, thick as soot, and everything was shooting forth leaves and blossoms. I wanted to be outside, under a tree by the river on a picnic blanket, watching Ida get grass stains on her knees and elbows while I plaited dandelions into a chain for her hair. But Ida had

a bug, so we stayed home. We'd played Candyland earlier, but the children's Tylenol I'd given her for the fever made her sleepy. Now she was curled on the couch, sucking her thumb and watching cooking shows. For a while I sat next to her, stroking her wheat-colored curls. Soon she began to drift in and out of sleep. I got up carefully, arranging the afghan over her, turned down the television, and went to the hall by the bedroom.

In preparation for our move, I'd been doing deep cleaning: vacuuming under the heavy furniture, scrubbing the baseboards. I'd also been collecting things to get rid of. There were a couple boxes in the bedroom, mostly full of baby stuff Ida no longer needed. I was planning to take the boxes to Thrift World before the move. A lot of the boxes were filled with things that had come from there or someplace like it, and I liked the neat circularity of returning the things now that we no longer needed them. It made me feel part of something, connected to all those living on the borders of poverty who bought bassinettes and board books secondhand.

Jonas had been complaining about his grandmother's sweaters for years. There was only one he ever wore; the rest sat in the closet getting musty and moth-eaten. Every so often, he'd talk about boxing them up and taking them to a donation center, but he never quite got around to it. Now it was time: I had arranged to borrow a small pick-up from Feliks, our Estonian neighbor, who, after years of begging us to borrow or take his belongings—a camping stove, a croquet set, military-grade sleeping bags, wicker furniture, whole libraries of books, loaf upon loaf of fragrant, pitchy bread—was delighted to discover himself in possession of something we could actually use. I was loading it up and going to the donation center in the morning.

I pulled out the sweaters and stuffed them into an economy-size trash bag. As the back wall of the closet came into view, I noticed a sweater in a particularly gruesome shade of mustard. It had an odd shape, like a creature with no arms was wearing it. When I tugged on the collar, an oblong black shape emerged. It looked like the top of a guitar case, but that didn't make sense. Jonas brought his guitar with him to work every day so he could take it straight to practice. I dug into the remaining sweaters, burrowing like a badger, throwing the sweaters behind me without bothering to bag them. I dragged out the case, my heart thumping against my ribs, and flicked open the latches.

The guitar was beautiful. It was a hollow-body electric, the body round and deeply feminine. There were mother-of-pearl inlays all along the neck and on the tuning pegs. The finish was a bright cherry sunburst, the center a honey gold that graduated to crimson along the edges.

That night, it was hard to keep my brain focused. I kept drifting away, coming to and finding I'd made Ida's dinner or done all the dishes. When I paused in the middle of a sentence in the book I was reading Ida before bed, she looked at me, her forehead furrowed. She prodded my upper arm.

"Where did you go?"

I shook my head. "Nowhere," I told her. "I'm right here."

But Ida still frowned, and when I turned off the lights, she asked me to stay with her until she fell asleep.

I sat on the edge of her bed, worrying the quilt between my thumbs and forefingers until Ida began to twitch and paddle her feet like she was swimming,

mumbling a little in a sleep-language I couldn't understand. She was a kinetic sleeper. Her thrashing sometimes became so violent that she would throw herself out of bed. When her sleep talk was intelligible, I could hold a conversation with her. She'd mutter something about giraffes and if I asked her where the giraffes were, she'd tell me that of course they were in the kitchen, couldn't I see them. In her sleep she always seemed surprised that I didn't know these things that were revealed to her in dreams.

That night I had the urge to wake her up. I thought that maybe if I interrupted the dream, she would tell me all the fantastic things that were happening in her head. I was tired of being on the outside. But I didn't want to disturb her, so as Ida mumbled something about celery fingers, I kissed her softly and left the bedroom.

I sat on the sofa, waiting for Jonas, drinking bourbon. As the alcohol spread through my body, making my limbs soft and malleable, I felt anger roiling in the pit of my stomach. I could see our new apartment, the one I'd imagined for us. It was on a ship that was slowly pulling away from the port while I stood on the dock, waving.

When Jonas came in, he shut the door carefully so as not to make a sound. He pushed his keys into his pocket and turned around. I saw him start: his eyes widened and he drew his breath in sharply. The expression he made was one of surprise, surprise mixed with anger.

"Jesus, you scared me."

"I'm just sitting here. How can I scare you?"

"I didn't expect to see you."

I snorted. "You didn't expect to see me? I *live* here."

Jonas frowned. “What’s wrong with you?”

I shrugged. It was a good question, but one that didn’t seem to matter much anymore.

He glanced at the coffee table; I saw his eyes darken and his brows crowd together over the bridge of his nose as he noticed the bottle of Old Crow.

“Have you been drinking?”

“Maybe.” I felt the urge to giggle, so I bit the inside of my lip.

“Jesus Christ! You’re the only one home with Ida. What if something had happened, what if there’d been a fire or an intruder or something? What the fuck?”

I tried to sit up quickly, but the cushions were too deep and the springs in the sofa were going soft, so I flailed, trying to use my arms to leverage myself upright. After a moment, I gave up, and just propped myself up on my elbows. The heat of the bourbon was searing the tips of my fingers, pushing behind my eyes, and the room seemed to glow red, as if it were lit by a fire and not the overhead fluorescent.

“What about you, Jonas? What about giving a fuck about your family?”

I struggled again against the gravitational pull of the couch; the anger was pins and needles all over my body, and I wanted to get up, to storm around the room, pace and point my finger. But the aging cushions had me trapped. I couldn’t get my feet to the floor.

Jonas sighed. “Listen, I’ve just been busy, and you know, with the band just starting…” He trailed off and sighed again.

“What about the apartment?” I said.

I saw Jonas's eyes twitch away for just a second. "I don't know. I mean, I just think maybe we should think about waiting—"

With a kick of my feet, I finally rocked myself forward enough to stand. I shoved off the couch, steadying myself on the coffee table. Jonas stopped talking and watched me. His fingers played with the bottom snap of his shirt, fastening and unfastening it again and again.

I strode to the hall closet, pulled out the guitar. I didn't know how to play—I'd never had the discipline to learn an instrument—but I tried to imitate what I'd seen Jonas do, placing the fingers of my left hand in contorted patterns while I strummed violently with the fingernails of my right. I didn't think Ida would wake up, or I guess at that moment I didn't care if she did.

Strumming loud and singing, I stomped back into the living room.

"Look!" I slurred as I crashed out a few fractured chords. "'I'm learning to play! 'Pretty pretty pretty pretty Peggy Sue!'"

For a moment Jonas froze, his eyes wide in horror, his hands motionless. Then, in an instant, he seemed to spring into motion. He crossed the living room in two big strides, grabbed the neck of the guitar and yanked the instrument from my hands. The force of his pull put me off balance. I fell against an armchair, twisting my wrist as I broke my fall.

Jonas looked up and down the guitar, stroking it with his fingertips, checking the frets and the bridge and the tuning pegs, inspecting it like a parent might check a child who's fallen from the monkey bars, searching for damage. Once he was satisfied that the guitar was unharmed, he placed it back in its case, clicking each

latch into place and making sure that the case was closed up tight. He stayed crouched by the case, looking down, his hands flat along the top.

I looked at him. The Western shirt was too tight across the shoulders, and I could see the seams straining. Along his neck, his dark hair was getting long; I hadn't cut it in a while.

I felt the pins and needles dissipate. The energy of anger was replaced by bone weariness. I sat on the floor beside Jonas. He didn't move.

"When did you get it?" I asked.

"Couple weeks ago," he said, still staring at the case.

"It's pretty."

"Gibson Les Paul, hollow body. It's a reissue of the '59 version. Keith Richards has one." He paused. "The original. Not the reissue."

My throat felt like it was full of cotton, like I would have to cough up wads of fluffy batting before I'd be able to speak again.

Jonas said softly, "This guy was selling it over in Miracle Hills. He was old. Had arthritis and couldn't play anymore. Said he couldn't stand to see it around his house. Made him too sad."

We sat quiet for a moment. When I talked I felt like I was cracking the air.

"How much was it?"

Jonas said nothing.

I closed my eyes. "Is there anything left?"

Jonas looked up at me.

Once, when I was six or seven, I tried to trap a feral cat. I chased it into our garage, backed it behind the Oldsmobile, between the lawn mower and the recycling bin so it had no way out. At first it hissed and swatted at me, but as I came closer, it just crouched, paralyzed, waiting for whatever horrible thing it was sure was coming. I walked backwards out of the garage and hid behind a boxwood until it ran out, its tail fat and frizzed as a bottlebrush.

"I thought I could do it. But then Dad died and…" His eyes darted all over my face, looking for a safe place to rest, not finding one.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"It's okay," I said, starting to cry.

I put my head on his shoulder and he put his arm around me, and we stayed that way for a long time.

We walked him to the bus stop the day he left. Ida kept asking when Jonas was coming back. Jonas took her little hand in his. I could see a faint downturn in the corners of his mouth, and he clenched his jaw so the muscles stood out.

"I'll see you soon," he said.

Ida and I sat on a bench at the station while Jonas boarded the big Greyhound that would take two days weaving westward to Seattle. He had a friend there, fulltime musician, making it, Jonas said. I pressed my fingernails into my palms. When Jonas's face appeared in a window of the bus, I pointed to him.

"There's your daddy," I said, pinching my palm hard.

Ida looked up. She'd been drawing in her notebook and kicking the heels of her sneakers against the leg of the bench.

She squinted at the bus and laughed. "He looks so little!"

The engine rumbled and the bus began to pull slowly toward the road.

I stood up. "Wave to your daddy, Ida."

Ida swooped her chubby hand through the air, making little bird noises of farewell. When the bus was gone, I stooped and hugged Ida hard, so hard that she whined and wriggled away from me. We walked home.

I held us together for more than a year after Jonas left. I got a job as a receptionist at a dental clinic; I made appointments, handled billing and insurance, consoled people whose mouths were limp and gums were swollen. Ida and I moved to a smaller, uglier apartment with water stains on the walls and ceiling.

At first, Ida asked me about Jonas almost daily, wanting to know where he'd gone, when he was coming back. Every time she asked, I felt the floor beneath me collapse a little more. I tried to give her what answers I could, but after a while, I couldn't answer anymore. I could only swallow another Xanax and lie facedown on the bed. She stopped asking.

Ida started pre-school that fall. I went to parent-teacher conferences, where the round-faced teacher told me how well Ida was reading for her age, how she was always very quiet and polite. I volunteered in the classroom once a month. I would go and the teacher would have me cut out construction paper circles for an art project or staple smiling suns and grumpy clouds to the bulletin board.

Each time I came in, Ida beamed and told her classmates loudly, “That’s my mom!”

When Ida lit up at my entrance, I could briefly see myself as she saw me. Her face reflected the mother I wanted to be: grown-up, confident, poised. A mother who prepared healthy meals from scratch. A mother who knew how to fold origami just like it looks in the book. A mother who always had sleek hair and a coordinated outfit, who smelled like lavender. A mother like my own.

None of this was true. We ate what was on special and required minimal effort to prepare. I couldn’t instruct Ida in clever arts and crafts; I didn’t want her to see me fail at them. I slept in, woke up hung over and strung out, forgot to comb my hair, wore the same sweater for days. But Ida didn’t see this. She saw a mother, her mother, and that image pushed me forward. I got Ida up and out the door in time for school, made sure she had her cat-shaped knapsack and two matching shoes. I showed up for work at the dental office with a thermos of coffee and gritted my teeth when the dentists tossed paperwork at me like I was their spaniel. I did not think about how much easier it would be to give up if Jonas had taken Ida with him.

Occasionally, the schedule would conspire to give me a day off during the week. These days always began with such promise—I’d plan projects, cleaning, long walks—but by mid-morning, I’d be limp and frayed, lying on the bed staring at the travel alarm clock. Once I’d given up on the afternoon, I was free to take pills and drink and ignore the phone and cry in loud, jagged heaves, free to be as fucked up as I felt, so long as I pulled myself together by 4pm. No one’s eyes were on me then; no one needed me to be anything.

On one of these days off, I called my parents. It had been a while since I had called them—not to talk, just to listen—and today it was damp and cold, the clouds bellied with pent-up rain, and I was alone, and I wanted to hear my mother's voice, her soft lull that made me feel like whatever I had done could be fixed, and that tomorrow I could start off new, re-made. I lay on my side on the floor, the phone balanced over my ear, the key pad sticking to my cheek.

"Hello?"

The voice that answered was a man's voice, but not my father's. It was deep and resonant; though my father was a big man, he had an incongruously reedy voice.

I sat up, the phone falling to the floor. Without picking it up again, I pressed "End Call," my arm stretched out stiffly, trying to get as much distance as I could between me and the unknown voice. For a while, I watched the phone, waiting as if any moment, the malfunction would be repaired or the prank revealed. A ring, my father's voice, "Just pulling your leg, kiddo!"

I couldn't think whom the voice could have belonged to. My parents' siblings were dead or far away, and I couldn't imagine they would ever let their friends answer the phone; that wouldn't have been mannerly. Maybe they were on vacation, and had hired a house sitter. But I knew that wasn't right. My parents would never have hired a stranger to watch after their home.

I dialed the number again, holding the phone a few inches away from my ear.

"Hello?"

The same unfamiliar voice.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" The man sighed sharply. "Now, listen, whoever this is had better stop calling—"

"Can I talk to Patty or Len?" The words fell out of my mouth too fast for me to stuff them back in. They tumbled on top of each other so I sounded slurred, even though I hadn't been drinking.

There was a pause at the end of the line. "Who?"

"I'm looking for Patricia and Leonard. Are they there?"

"No, I'm sorry, I think you have the wrong number."

"I don't." My heart was beating fast. "I mean, this is their number." I didn't tell him that for seventeen years it had been my number, too.

"Oh, okay." The deep voice sounded a little assured now, on firmer ground. "You're looking for the previous residents."

My breath caught in my chest.

"Previous?"

"Mm-hmm." I could hear him switch the phone to the other ear. "I have their new number here somewhere, I think. At least, I used to."

"No, it's okay," I said. The phone was suddenly heavy, and I wanted only to put it down. "Don't worry about it. Thank you."

I hung up and laid the phone on an oblong stain in the carpet, gentling it to the floor as if afraid of waking it. But even with the phone down, my arm still felt unbearably heavy, my marrow replaced with lead.

My parents didn't know my number or my address. They didn't know what city or state I was in or what I was doing or whether I was alive. How could they have

let me know they were moving? But they were my parents, my perfect parents. I'd figured that somehow they knew where I was, because they were the sort of parents who always knew. I'd believed their silence was love: they understood I needed distance, so they gave it to me. That's what good parents do: they give their children what the children need, even when it hurts them to give it.

I wondered why they had moved. Had my father finally quit his job at the bank, found a job that let him be outside, let him travel a little? Had he retired? Maybe my parents had made good on their promise to move to the country. My mother could have a wild garden where basil and snapdragons ran riot side by side. She could keep suspicious hens who pecked neurotically in the dirt and a hive of honeybees. My father would roam through the woods, writing down the names of trees and shrubs, noting instances of Dutch elm disease or a particularly vigorous clutch of native azalea. He'd pick up burrs on his clothes, and my mother would scold him for bring them in the house.

They'd talked about their country dream for years. When I was young, I was sure that my husband and I would move to the country with them, build our own house on the edge of their property, have dinner with them on Sundays. Now they were there without me.

In the nightstand drawer was a Tic-Tac box filled with pills, a sampling of Grayson's current stash, purchased at the cost of pizza, beer, and bowling with Ida. I pried off the top so I could dump the contents into a small heap on the bed. The assortment was colorful, like candy. How much better, I thought: a combination of colors, not just one. I scooped up the pile and downed them with grape juice.

Time warped and collapsed, folded itself into innumerable accordion pleats, stretched like taffy, dense and sticky and growing longer with every pull. I couldn't understand what the clock was telling me. I curled up on the bed, pulled the covers all the way over my head.

After what seemed like seconds, I felt someone prodding my shoulder. I rolled over, wiping a line of drool from my cheek, and lifted the comforter off my face.

Grayson was standing in the bedroom, and it was dark outside.

"Jesus!" I sprang to my feet. "What time is it?" I pawed under the bed looking for shoes. "I have to get Ida, she's still at school! Where are my goddamn shoes?"

Grayson squatted down.

"It's six-thirty. Ida's here."

I sat heavily on the floor. My hands lay limp in my lap; I couldn't tell if they belonged to me.

Grayson sat beside me. "When they couldn't reach you, they called me. You put me down as your emergency contact, they said." He picked at a loose thread in the rug. "That was nice of you."

"Thank you," I whispered.

I could see the sofa from where I had fallen. Ida was sitting there, hands in her lap, kicking the couch with her heels. She looked over at me and when she met my gaze, I tried to smile, but my muscles seemed to have forgotten how. I reached out my arm, creaked my wrist to call her to me. She slid off the couch and came to the bedroom door.

I pushed the hair out of my face, pinched my thigh so I could marshal my consciousness around the pain.

"Ida Bean!" I sang, gathering her into my arms. "I'm so glad you're home! I'm sorry I couldn't come get you today; I meant to tell you, but I forgot."

Ida said nothing. I pushed on.

"I'm so sorry you had to wait. We wanted to come sooner, but Grayson was working."

Ida pulled at a hangnail on my finger. "Is that why you couldn't come? You were working?"

"Yes," I said, nodding and giving Ida another squeeze. "I had to fill in for someone else who was sick."

Ida chewed her lips and studied me. The sun was mostly set and the light in the bedroom was dim. Ida's pupils were dilated wide, swallowing up the gold-threaded hazel irises, and in those dark blooms, I saw myself: my hair a nest on the side of my head, my eyes shot with veins from sleeping with my contacts in, my lips chapped, blood crusted in the cracked corners. The moment froze, extended indefinitely between us.

Then Ida blinked, and the image was gone.

"It's okay," she said. "Grayson bought me Fritos from a machine."

I looked at Grayson, standing greasy-haired and slope-shouldered by the closet, as if he were contemplating stepping into it. He smiled and shrugged.

"They were out of animal crackers."

After that, I made us all, me, Grayson, and Ida, chili from canned tomatoes and kidney beans. When we were done with dinner, we ate gummy worms until our tongues were sore from the sour, and watched three episodes of *The Munsters*.

Ida seemed to forget the incident, but I couldn't. I tried to maintain the life I'd strung together, but it became harder and harder to remember how to be good. I lost the job at the dental office. I billed four patients $265,000 for a check-up, instead of $265, and I kept forgetting to record appointments in the database. These mistakes were partially the result of the various controlled substances camped in my veins, but they were honest mistakes, I thought, simple oversights. The dentists didn't see it that way.

After that, I got a job as an assistant at an animal hospital, which really meant that I took dogs for walks and cleaned up pens. I liked the job. The dogs depended on me, but it was easy not to let them down. But once after snorting some Adderall, I gave away three of the dogs to some homeless men I met on my walk. I lost that job, too.

I kept getting jobs and losing them: grocery store bagger, parking lot attendant, dollar store stocker. After a few, I didn't even try to keep them anymore. I burned through jobs like matches.

I lost the last one—gas station convenience store night clerk—early on a Thursday morning. I hadn't worked there long, less than a week, and it was the only job I left with some measure of volition. I had made the wrong change for the eighth time in a row, and as the customer left, I saw the other cashier shaking his head. I felt

my face burn, but the guy, Terrence, had been nice enough so far, so I tried to joke about it.

"Ridiculous, right?" I said. "I'm awful at making change. Anything with numbers, really. The worst." I shrugged and aimed for a rueful chuckle, but it came out raspy and thin.

"That's kind of funny." Terrence tilted his head a fraction. "I mean, that's all you really have to do for this job—count stuff, make change. Why are you here?"

I didn't have an answer.

At 3:47, Terrence took his ten, smoking out back by the Dumpsters. I gathered my belongings, waited for nine minutes to pass—I didn't want to leave the store unattended too long—and left through the front doors. I contemplated going to Grayson's to pick up Ida, but I didn't want to worry either of them, and Grayson had said he would take Ida to school.

At home, I lay on the bed, on top of the covers, clothes on, not planning to sleep. There was a water stain on the ceiling shaped like a saxophone, and I stared at it, making it take up my whole mind. Every so often, I checked the clock. Time was passing normally, neither too slow nor too fast, just methodically going about the business of moving on. It was comforting.

At 7:04, I opened the night stand drawer and pulled out the Tic-Tac box. Grayson had resupplied me, mostly with Klonopin and Ambien, his favorites. I shook the container until two baby pink Oxys shifted to the top. With my thumbnail, I scratched off the coating, letting it flake onto the floor, then cracked the bitter disks

with my molars. I watched the saxophone until the edges started to blur and the warm drifting began.

The world safely blunted, I retrieved my phone from my bag. It was 7:23, so I thought there was a good chance I would catch my parents' successor at home. He'd be in the kitchen, pouring coffee into a travel mug, getting ready to set out for his respectable grown-up job that nevertheless allowed him to spend ample time with his family and pursue several fulfilling hobbies. Naturally, his wife wouldn't answer—she'd be tending to the children, making sure everyone's homework had a name and a date on it before they all walked to the bus stop. When the deep voice answered, it sounded harried, and I smiled, imagining him holding the Reagan-era receiver with his chin, trying to stretch the cord out enough to get the half-and-half from the fridge. I wanted to tell him to pass it over the kitchen table, not around—that's the only way it would reach—but I was sure he would figure that out on his own.

I was pleased to hear him, as if we were old friends. He was easy to talk to. He didn't think it strange that I wanted the previous residents' forwarding address. Why should he? It was all perfectly normal. I might have anniversary cards or birthday gifts to send. As I explained that I was a niece, had made Auntie Pat's signature rhubarb-ginger jam, wanted to send her some, didn't have the address, but couldn't call and ask, wanted it to be a surprise, his syllables of understanding sounded polite but impatient. Of course they did; wasn't it about time for the recycling truck to be rolling by the house, blocking the driveway, and now it was 7:35 and time to leave? I waited for him to retrieve the card the previous owners had sent, printed the address neatly in all caps on a gum wrapper, thanked him, and hung up. I

folded the gum wrapper into fourths, careful not to smudge the pen, and tucked it into my wallet.

That week the weather finally turned. It had been an irritable kind of spring, squally and raw, occasionally teasing with a warm morning, but reneging by afternoon. But, now, in late April, the world delivered a succession of beautiful days, all soft and airy like a chiffon scarf. Ida was turning five. In the week leading up to her birthday, she told me in exquisite detail how Hector, her friend at school, had gone to Fun-Plex for his birthday, how he floated in the Lazy River, rode the Bumper Boats, won a fluffy orange gorilla at Skee-Ball.

"He got a funnel cake to himself," she said, looking up from the hippopotamus connect-the-dots she was doing. "A whole one." She pushed the eraser end of the pencil against her chin.

I knew exactly how much was in my bank account. After my final check from the convenience store deposited, there would be just enough to get to Madison and back: Grayson could lend me his car, but not the gas money. There would be some left for food, but not for two passes to an amusement park. And in my mind, Fun-Plex was filled with happy families, families who laughed, who teamed up at Whac-A-Mole, who held hands as their cars reached the apex of the roller coaster. Even if I'd had the money, we wouldn't have gone.

Ida watched me, expectant, hopeful, and heat pricked behind my eyes. But I shook my head and reset my face.

"How about this," I said, reaching for her hand. "We'll have our own birthday party right here. You can have anything you want for dinner, and I'll let you pick out a movie at the video store."

Ida considered the hippopotamus. "I can have anything I want for dinner?"

I nodded.

"And at the video store?"

"Anything."

She shrieked; her happiness had become particularly shrill lately.

The morning of Ida's birthday I went shopping. I sprung for the Hershey's chocolate syrup instead of the store brand with the diseased-looking chocolate cow on the label. I bought a roll of fuchsia crepe paper at the dollar store and draped it in crazy loops over the doorframes and light fixtures until the apartment looked like the web of a flamboyant spider.

When I picked up Ida at school, she ran into my arms. She hopped along the sidewalk on one foot, picked dandelion clocks and exploded them with a wet whoosh of breath. I bit the inside of my lip. Her party was small and pathetic, but Ida didn't know. She was satisfied with so little. I remembered my childhood birthday parties. They were big affairs with dozens of friends and specially decorated cakes and games my mother had devised around a theme. There had been an *Alice in Wonderland* party with a Painting the Roses Red relay race and a medieval castle party with princess hats for all the girls and knight helmets made of milk jugs for the boys. My mother would spend days on the handmade invitations, the goodie bags of homemade treats. One year it rained, forcing the party indoors. Everyone else adapted and went on, but

I was furious at my parents. It had seemed like their fault that the weather was bad, and I was sure that if they'd really tried, they could have brought out the sun. I was eventually sent to my room to have my tantrum while the party continued without me.

We stopped at the video store, and after much deliberation, Ida chose a documentary on the Gnostic gospels. I tried my best to persuade her otherwise, but she liked the drawing of the blue-eyed, bearded man on the cover.

"He looks like Grandpa Albert," she said, studying the picture.

Albert hadn't had a beard or blue eyes. I checked the impulse to hug her hard, said, "It looks like a great movie," and let her give it to the clerk.

We had our macaroni and cheese with hot dog slices while the oldies station played on the radio. Ida wiggled along to the music in her booster seat, chattering about school and roly poly bugs and how to make waffles. I didn't scold her for talking with her mouth full. She sang along at top volume, even though she didn't know the words or the tune. After dinner, Ida nestled in the corner of the couch where the springs were soggiest, and I brought her a modest ice cream sundae with a candle in it. We started the documentary Ida had chosen. She furrowed her brows, trying her best to pay attention, but it wasn't long before she nodded, a loose wisp of hair dangling into the melted ice cream at the bottom of the bowl. I turned off the television and led her to bed.

I didn't go to bed myself. I'd decided that it was best to leave during the night. I hoped that once she'd entered that deep sleep of children, the kind where I could brush her teeth and put her pajamas on without disturbing her, she might not wake until we'd reached our destination. We were actually going a bit past Madison, to the

edges of a small suburb called Sun Prairie, and the directions I'd printed at the library said it would take us seven hours. The house was on little Brazee Lake. I saw us pulling up to the house right as the sun began to ornament the water.

Around midnight, I gathered Ida from her bed, held her warm tangle of limbs against my chest and carried her down to Grayson's Bonneville, already packed with her most necessary possessions—clothes, shoes, toothbrush, a copy of *The Velveteen Rabbit*, a purple plush elephant, a ratty yellow blanket Jonas had dubbed Swiss Cheese. She mumbled and squirmed when I buckled her into the car seat, but didn't wake. I brushed a damp curl from her mouth and smoothed the cowlick on her forehead before I got into the driver's seat and headed east.

The pills I'd taken turned off my thoughts but left me lucid, and I was able to play memories on demand. I projected images onto the windshield, where they were warped by a long lateral crack in the glass, keeping the sound off, so as not to bother Ida. I watched myself, my parents, and my older brother live as our younger selves in total silence. My mother sang to me but no tune came from her mouth. My father lectured me about the value of hard work, but his lips merely flapped and no lesson was issued. I tried to learn the violin, but the instrument was mute. My brother revved the engine on his Victory Cruiser, but all I heard was the blood snickering in my own ears. When I reached the end of my childhood, I simply stopped the tape and rewound to the beginning.

I'd chosen a route with long detours around the cities—the key to keeping Ida asleep was steady driving, no drastic changes in speed or sharp turns. It was a quiet drive: mile upon mile of quilted farmland buttoned with cow ponds and silos. We hit

some pockets of rain as we crossed from Iowa to Wisconsin, but the sky cleared when we neared Madison. A murmur of pink suggested itself above the tree line.

The street written on my gum wrapper started as a four-lane county highway, but when the strip malls and housing developments thinned out, the road narrowed. As we turned away from town, fields unfolded on either side of us, vast expanses of corn, still bright and tassel-less this early in the season, stretching out to the blurred horizon. The line in the middle of the road vanished abruptly when we turned right toward the lake—no warning sign, no tapering off, just a blunt end where the engineers decided enough was enough, drivers should be able to work things out on their own by now. We bumped down from the crust of recently laid road to older blacktop, pitted, pale, graphed with winter's fissures. Trees returned. The lake was to our left, but hidden by just-greening sugar maple and beech. Houses became sparse, reclusive at the ends of long driveways.

I slowed the Bonneville to a crawl and switched off the headlights—the sun was up enough now that I almost didn't need them. I pulled off the road, which was now mostly gravel in between islands of asphalt, a paved road only in theory, and onto the weedy shoulder on the lake side, farther from the houses.

Ida stirred, burbling through vestiges of sleep.

"Are we there yet?"

I reached my arm into the backseat without turning around. After a few seconds of floundering, I found her foot, a measure of sock hanging past her toes. She'd had canvas sneakers on when we started, but Ida had always been good at

unshoeing herself on the sly. I had a box of single shoes whose mates had been tossed from the stroller or abandoned at the park.

I squeezed her big toe gently.

"Just about." I checked the time on the dashboard clock, a tiny round analog with glow-in-the-dark hands. I knew from riding with Grayson that the clock's ability to keep time was limited. After a while, it would start to lose seconds, then minutes and hours, until you realized it had stopped all together. But I had set the clock back in Omaha, and I was pretty sure it was still close enough to correct.

It was just half-past six—we'd made the trip more quickly than the map had predicted—so we still had some time to kill. I'd wanted to get there late enough that my parents would be up and about, but early enough that they wouldn't yet be off to work, though in truth, I didn't know what time that meant. I was judging by a long-outdated schedule. Maybe now they worked from home. Maybe they'd retired.

I twisted in the seat, giving my arm a few more inches of reach until I could pat Ida's knee. Her face was flushed with sleep, curls stuck wetly to her cheeks, and she was still bobbing on the surface of consciousness, only curiosity keeping her from sinking back under.

"We have to wait a little bit before we get out. Do you think you can make it?"

I traced the knob of her kneecap with my little finger, remembered how fat and dimpled the joint once had been.

Ida nodded. “I can wait,” she whispered, already mostly asleep again. She shifted, nestling her head against the side of the car seat, and sighed deeply. I kept my hand on her knee until my arm tingled and went numb and I drew it back to my side.

When the sunlight began to clarify, stabbing rays through the trees, I inched the car closer to the house. From the sloping bank, I could see it only in fragments: a dormer window with uneven blinds; porch railings, the ones on the far left leaning on each other drunkenly; a detached garage with a basketball hoop nailed under the eaves—remnant of previous owners, I supposed. It wasn’t exactly what I would have imagined, or wanted, for my parents. It was a newer house, and they’d always wanted something old, something, as my father said, with some history. The siding was vinyl and the front yard looked rumpled and weedy. But people changed as they aged. They compromised, made things easier for themselves. A few broken slats on the porch didn’t make the porch less functional. Vinyl didn’t rot. And what was a weed but a flower that grew without assistance? But some things, I knew, would be the same. I couldn’t see the front door, but I knew it would be hung with a wreath, a nice one made of seasonal dried flowers or herbs or living succulents growing from a coronet of sphagnum moss—my mother didn’t go for fake flowers, or artifice of any kind. There was nothing “butter-flavored” in our household, nothing an imitation of itself.

I wanted to see some signs that my parents were awake and beginning their day, but by quarter after seven, I hadn’t seen anything. No lights switched on or off in windows. My father didn’t come down the walkway to get the paper.

Ida’s awakening process was in its late stages. She twitched her fingers along the armrests of the carseat, drew her knees to her chest and let them fall again, wiped

the crusted corners of her eyes with tight fists. I'd often tried to prolong this liminal state to give myself a few more moments of quiet, but it never worked; she was too far along the irreversible path to consciousness. She'd be up soon.

Squinting into the trees, I thought I could see a light in the house, dimly, in a back room. That made sense. Kitchens are usually in the back, and that's where my mother would be this time of day, stirring oatmeal on the stove, waiting for my father to find his glasses. The curtain in a front window shivered, and I tightened my grip on the steering wheel, expecting to see a face, but none came. It took me a long minute to loosen my hands enough to move them.

The air outside the car was cold, still rang of the winter that dawdled late. I could see my breath out in front of me, predicting my steps before I took them. Ida waved sleepily at me as I walked by her window. I held up a finger to tell her to wait, and she nodded, corked her thumb into her mouth and looked outside. When I took Ida's bags out of the trunk, I realized they were too many and too heavy for Ida to carry on her own. I circled to the side of the car farthest from the house, crouching down so my head didn't rise over the roof. Ida's little cat backpack didn't hold much, so I had to perform triage on her belongings. One outfit, one pair of shoes, extra underwear. There wasn't room for both the elephant and the blanket, so I chose the blanket. I hoped she'd remember its name. I hefted the knapsack in my hands, judging its weight. It was heavy, but I thought Ida could manage it. She wouldn't have to carry it for long.

My hand shook as I reached for the door handle. I couldn't feel my face, and I had to put my other hand to my lips to see if I had succeeded in hitching them into a smile.

"Ida Bean!" I sang, as I leaned into the car. "We're here!"

She grinned and stretched out her arms to me, straining at the car seat straps. I unbuckled them, and she helped me; it wouldn't be long before she'd be getting out on her own. As I held her against my hip, straightening her blouse, she looked around, sniffing the air like a rabbit. I found her shoes on the car floor and slipped them back on her feet, and she craned her neck over my shoulder, eyes wide and searching.

"It smells like Christmas," she said.

"That's all the pine trees." I turned to point out a stand of them on the lake side of the road. "They make that wonderful smell. You've never lived somewhere with so many pine trees. You'll like the woods."

Ida studied the trees for a moment, then faced me again. She had gotten hold of a hank of my hair and draped it across one palm, petting it like a sleeping cat.

"Do we live here now?"

I looked over her head, following the jagged line of her part, past the whorl on her crown where I could remember the soft pulse of fontanelle, then out beyond her and down the road. The sun was up in full, and though I still couldn't see the lake, I thought I caught its glimmer, a million refracted shards of light glancing off the tree trunks and leaves. A barn owl screamed. I set Ida down and placed the backpack over her shoulders.

I say: Think of it like a game, a game with instructions to follow; you want to win the game, so you have to play by the rules; I can't play; it's a game just for you; if I play, the game won't mean anything; you won't win; ring the doorbell, or if there isn't one, knock, and make sure to knock hard so they can hear you everywhere in the house; tell them your name; it's okay to tell them, they aren't strangers, at least, they won't be for long; you don't know them and they don't know you, but they already love you; give them this; it's just a note from me, so they'll understand; eat your breakfast when they give it to you, I bet it will be oatmeal, and you can have sugar and raisins; show them how you well you can draw, draw them your best zoo animals, you do those so nicely; let them read to you, you can even ask for funny voices; tell them when your birthday is and how high you can count and your favorite color and what you're afraid of and what you'll be when you grow up; tell them all about yourself; let them give you everything you want; be good; be good.

Before she was halfway up the walkway, I was back in the car. When she neared the porch, I started the engine. She tugged the straps of the knapsack, fighting the weight, and I pulled onto the road, reversed over the gravel, pointed the Bonneville the way we had come. As she climbed up to the porch, placing one foot and then the other on each step because the steps were too tall and deep for her short stride, I crept forward. I could see the porch more clearly now, but the door was still shadowed. Was there a wreath? All I could see was a dark smudge. She found the bell, pressed it, and I crawled a few more feet, peered at the door, the image in the empty space refusing to hold still. There was a wreath. It was just a brass knocker. It was a wreath. The clock on the dash ticked away a distorted minute. She knocked,

and I could see her swing her arm hard to make sure she was loud. Did the lace behind the window by the door shift? Did eyes appear at the glass? I thought there was the outline of a face I didn't recognize; then I thought it was just a reflection of a cluster of pine boughs. Ida's hand was still raised, her fingers still balled into a tight fist when the handle on the door turned toward the ground, and the light shifted, and there was no wreath, and the door began to open, and there was a wreath, and my foot depressed the gas, and there was no wreath, and I was gone.

The period just after Ida is hard to remember. Everything until that moment is clear, but the time following it is a dull smear. Grayson medicated me out of pity and maybe to conceal his own shame. Eventually, he got scared and refused to give or sell me anything else. I lived on Grayson's couch. I slept for days at a time. I got clean, not because it was right or healthy, not to ease Grayson's worry or try to make something of my life, but because disappearance was too easy and too kind. Sobriety is my penance.

Now I go to AA meetings, just like Albert, though unlike him, I never tell the whole story. I have a collection of plastic coins, rewards for temperance. At each milestone, which now come only yearly, I get a new one, and all the people say what a blessing my success is. I always thank them and say that I know this life is what I truly deserve. I don't mean what they think I do, but it doesn't matter; they beam and move on. I keep the coins in a little sweetgrass basket on the nightstand. I sift through them to hear their tinny clinking.

I got a job at the information booth at Crossroads Mall. It's quiet, and people rarely need me. I will work there until there is no more mall or no more information. Floyd is my boss and the Crossroads Mall Operations Manager. He has an aluminum clipboard and an ancient mother who is always ailing and who will live to be one hundred and ninety years old. I have a co-worker, Juanita, who believes it is her job to love and scold the earth's population. She carries a fat tote bag that says, "The City That Reads!" but doesn't say what city, so it seems like it's referring to the woman herself: The City of Juanita. I would live there. It would be safe and everyone would have nice manners.

There isn't much to do. Sometimes I answer questions about where stores are or opening and closing hours. Sometimes there are announcements I have to make or boxes of new pamphlets I have to unpack and arrange. I periodically check the large cardboard box that serves as the mall's official lost and found. Before I began working there, someone wrote on it in purple magic marker "Lost In Found," and whenever I see it, the mangled phrase swells terrible and lovely in my chest.

Mostly, though, it's quiet, and I watch people walk by. I catalog their qualities, all the many kinds of wonderful strangeness: an old man with jutting hipbones and the glasses that are supposed to change tint but are set on permanent dusk; a beautiful teenage girl with orthodontic headgear protruding from her mouth like fishhooks; a bleached-blonde boy in a fraternity hoodie sitting alone in a corner reading *Twilight*. In a separate drawer I file all the stroller babies with one missing shoe.

On days when I go to meetings, Grayson picks me up. He'll even come in the church sometimes, though he only loiters around the periphery drinking instant hot chocolate and eating Hydrox cookies. When there's no meeting, I take the bus home. If it's dark when my shift ends, I pay to ride to the end of the line and back. I find a pair of seats I don't have to share and sit sideways with my feet towards the aisle. It reminds me of road trips as a child, when we'd been traveling all day and night would start to fall and I'd drift off, lulled by the security of my father at the helm and the knowledge someone else was certain of the way to go. As the bus trundles through the dark, I can give up a little. That's when I can see the other worlds.

There are hundreds of other worlds all around us, all the time, hidden. All these worlds are stitched together like a crazy quilt, and if I am still and thankful, I can see the seams, the limits of what happened and what could have happened, of what you said and what you only thought, of what you expected and what ambushed you when you were looking the other way.

If I look all the way to the left, I can just barely see the world in which Jonas didn't leave. The blades of grass there are made of aluminum foil, and all the words ever written or spoken can fit on the head of a pin. There, Jonas calls his father before the cancer ravages his brain. By the time Albert dies, they have made a delicate peace, peace like lace or a soufflé. I comfort him, we cry together, for the parents we had, for the parents we should have had, for the parents we want to be. We get married when Ida is old enough to hold the rings. We honeymoon holed up in the apartment, eating the leftover summer-flavored wedding cake and playing a game of Chutes and Ladders with Ida where the chutes are big enough to slide down and end

in swimming pools of soft, boiled wool. Jonas stops drinking. He loves my body even as middle age encroaches, and my thighs grow soft and pocked. He never seems to age. We die together and turn into trees, cherry and pear, and our branches bear both fruits.

It is an almost perfect world, this Jonas world, but it is not the only one. If I look all the way up, strain my eyes so far it hurts, I can see another world, one in which Jonas's departure doesn't rip a giant fissure in my world, in which escape doesn't seem so imperative, in which the alcohol and the cough syrup and the Adderall and the Dilaudid aren't so tempting, or at least, are harder to get my hands on.

In this world, Ida is still my beautiful girl. We buy picture books second-hand and read them lying on the rug of the living room. Whos and Wild Things romp through the bedroom; Toad and Frog have tea at our kitchen table. Every Sunday morning, we go to the zoo. We name all the meerkats after colors. When she is six, Ida learns to play the recorder, and marches around the house piping "Hot Cross Buns" for hours. I am irritated and turn up the radio. In third grade, Ida will only wear green. In fifth grade, she is obsessed with Australia and dresses as a wombat for Halloween. She makes the costume herself and doesn't care when everyone, even the grown-ups, think she is a mouse. Soon after, Ida begins to hate me. We have screaming matches, then late at night we make up tearfully and watch bad old sci-fi movies on TV. Ida goes to college in Oregon; she stops hating me. I knit her sweaters I am certain she does not wear. When I am old and Ida is married, she fixes up a room

for me off her kitchen, and she tolerates me when I can't remember her husband's name. After I die, Ida tells her children how much I would have loved them.

When we get to the edge of Benson Park, I lean my head against the window; it is always cool, in winter, from the weather and in summer from the air conditioning. Every jerk of the bus thumps my head against the glass, but I don't move. I imagine that each contact is all there is of me, just a series of pinpricks like a distant constellation. There is so little left, little enough that, in these moments, I can bear its weight.

The bus reaches the terminal—it does every time, no matter how resolutely I believe that I can ride forever. I walk home. I go into my apartment, but I don't turn on the lights. If I do, I'll see the other worlds receding away from me, the borders of the world I have made and chosen becoming firmer and the possibility of travel from one to the next becoming more and more remote. I undress and lie staring into the dark, wanting sleep, fearing it. Ida's shadow hovers beside my bed, and in my dreams I leave her and I leave her and I leave her.

The Hour Hand

In the beginning, she taught fifth grade. The children were ten or eleven, and they had long ago—long ago in child-time—learned to tell time, so when she told them her name on the first day of class, they gaped at her.

"Your name is Miss Hour Hand?"

She would then patiently explain that though her last name sounded much like this feature of the analog clock, her name was not "Miss Hour Hand," but in fact, Miss Hourihan. She pointed to the punctilious cursive she had labored over before class had begun, her name scripted neatly in chalk on the freshly wiped surface of the green blackboard, and tell the open-mouthed children about the Irish origins of her name. She pulled down the map and, with a finger she had always hoped would turn out slenderer than it was, circled the cramped little island. When she asked the students where their families came from, most often they listed neighboring towns or states in other parts of the country that were, for them, defined by the presence of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. After this short lesson, the fifth graders accepted her name, and there was no more talk of clock-parts for the rest of the one-hundred and eighty days until summer.

She appreciated their acceptance and appreciated, too, that a visual representation of her name was forever ingrained in her pupils' minds. She was twenty-one years old, and it was the first time in Miss Hourihan's life that her name had been consistently spelled correctly.

Teaching satisfied Miss Hourihan. She was young and had just begun, and so she suspected there was much more to discover in this profession, a world where bells

rang at precisely quarter-past the hour, where the cafeteria served milk in half-pint cardboard cartons, where the janitor whistled Harry Belafonte tunes as he pushed the polisher over the floor on Friday afternoons. True, it was not as exciting as the careers her college friends had pursued; that didn't make it any less meaningful. So she wasn't singing folk songs night after night in dingy East Village clubs, like her sophomore-year roommate—what relevance did these songs have, anyway, songs about ship wrecks and mining disasters? She hadn't been wrecked or buried, and neither had Elise. So she wasn't helping Somali villagers dig wells, like her senior-year boyfriend, Kevin, who had left her when he joined the Peace Corps. What did Kevin know about digging wells? He had grown up in Boston. It was 1972, she had said to herself after she had accepted the job at St. Charles Elementary School. In this age, everything was exciting. Everything had been made new. There were experimental teaching models to try, interactive lessons involving colors and songs and social consciousness.

And there were plenty of other young teachers at Hilltop Elementary who shared her optimism. Miss Beck came from Marblehead and spoke with a New England accent Miss Hourihan associated with her parents' generation. She taught kindergarten, where she used gymnastics to teach the alphabet: the children learned to contort their bodies into rough approximations of all twenty-six letters. Mr. Baumbach was Jewish and had lived for several years in Tel Aviv, facts that made him impressive at the school and in the town, without his ever having to try very hard to impress anyone. Mr. Reid began the after-lunch portion of every day of his second-grade class with a song. Sometimes, if her students were at the library or the gym,

Miss Hourihan would linger outside his door to listen to a tenor so sweet it was almost hard to bear.

Mr. Childers, also a recent graduate of UMass, though Miss Hourihan had never known him while he was there—he had been part of the radical crowd that stormed the ROTC building in ’68—taught sixth grade history. His version of history was inevitably a subtle, or sometimes not so subtle, lesson in materialist dialectics.

“Two forces in opposition,” he would begin, pacing in front of the rows of disinterested pre-teens. “They come into conflict.” Here he would butt his fists together like two rams’ heads. “They fight. They rage. But eventually, they merge. Then you have something new, made from something old.”

He was convinced that his proto-socialist rhetoric enlivened what otherwise was little more than, as he often said in the teachers’ lounge over burnt coffee, “the greedy machinations of dead white men.”

Miss Hourihan doubted his students had any idea what he was talking about, and suspected that at the end of each class, what his students really wanted to know was whether they would be expected to memorize the Tudor lineage for the test, or could they just use their notes.

But aloud, she often proclaimed how much she wished more teachers could be like him. This was true—she did wish more teachers cared as much about their jobs as Mr. Childers did. She liked the way his hawk-nose and bright green eyes looked nearly dangerous when he began to work himself into a good sweat about the oppression of the masses. She liked the way he stared intently at her when she offered that her blue-collar father had toiled all his life in a steel foundry only to be let go at

the age of 52, three years before his retirement, and had died less than a year later of what was supposedly pleurosis, but what Miss Hourihan privately knew was lack of a reason to get up in the morning.

Mr. Childers had banged his fist down on the table in the lounge, sending a fork skittering to the linoleum.

"Criminal!" he'd shouted. Then, lowering his voice to a hiss, "It's a goddamned tragedy, and it's happening every goddamned day."

When Mr. Childers asked Miss Hourihan to come to his basement apartment and watch a Cronkite special, Miss Hourihan accepted readily. An affair with someone as radical, as driven, as frankly unbalanced-seeming as Mr. Childers was just the sort of wild turn she expected her life to take.

Mr. Childers's apartment was carpeted all in green shag and the walls of the living room were covered with an ochre paper that had probably been meant to look like brocade, but instead reminded Miss Hourihan of the Charlotte Perkins Gilman story she had read as an undergraduate. She almost expected to see version of herself in bombazine frills creeping around beneath the floral arabesques.

He saw her looking around with what must have been an expression of distaste.

"Ugly, isn't it?" he said, flopping on the sagging couch, and patting the space next to him. She sat down, but did not lean back. "I'm only glad I didn't know the people who decorated it. They've probably been voting Republican since 1945."

Miss Hourihan laughed a little, but didn't quite understand why bad taste should correlate with conservatism. "Why don't you change it?"

Mr. Childers shrugged. “Not really worth it. It’s just decoration, mere trappings of the bourgeois lifestyle I eschew.” He smiled, only half-ironically.

Throughout the debate, Mr. Childers was a show of misery. He hated Nixon and after every sentence the man spoke, Mr. Childers would slam his palms on his knees and yell “Bullshit!” But he didn’t much care for McGovern, either, and kept calling him a “tool of the system.”

“That man’s got the backbone of an éclair,” he said, then took a disgusted pull from his beer.

Miss Hourihan wanted to ask him if he hated both candidates so much, why was he watching the special at all, and if neither party had anything to offer, what should the country do about governance, and did he honestly think the masses were rising up anytime soon, because she didn’t think it was worth holding her breath for. But then he swung his arm around her shoulders, as if casually, as if without the slightest internal debate, and Miss Hourihan had the both pleasurable and embarrassing realization that she suddenly had no interest in the men on the screen.

For all his talk about radicalism, Mr. Childers was a shy, even a conventional lover. He insisted that the lights be off during sex, and the platitudes he murmured in her ear were no more creative than those any of her college boyfriends had come up with. The long foreplay seemed luxurious at first, but as their relationship progressed, Miss Hourihan began to wish that Mr. Childers would get to the point a little faster. One night, frustrated with his inability to find her clitoris, she grabbed his forefinger and pressed it against the little button of flesh, hard. Mr. Childers’s eyebrows crumpled in surprise and hurt.

"I know what I'm doing," he said defensively, snatching his hand away from her as if he'd been bitten.

Miss Hourihan bit back the snide remark that rose in her throat like bile.

"I'm sorry; I guess I just can't control myself when I'm with you."

It sounded like a joke coming out of her mouth, but Mr. Childers was mollified and went back to fumbling in the nether regions under the coverlet as if nothing had happened.

As the weeks and then months passed, Miss Hourihan saw the boundaries of Mr. Childress's performance. His act—the radical, the activist, the man who leaned so far left that it only seemed a matter of time before he fell completely over—was convincing, but it was limited. His radicalism was in truth confined to pontificating to sixth-graders and television-side fist-shaking. When they were alone, Miss Hourihan tried to engage him in discussions about literature or even mild gossip about people at school, but if the subject didn't offer him a chance for righteous indignation, he'd shrug her off. Under the thin patina of revolutionary zeal, she thought there might be someone quite ordinary, maybe even boring: he loved pot roast more than almost anything.

There was a week off from school at Easter. Some time before, Miss Hourihan noticed Mr. Childers was arranging a trip for the two of them. Though he tried to be secretive about it, he couldn't seem to help but expose his planning. It felt as though every time she walked into the kitchen at his house or the teacher's lounge at school, she'd catch him shoving maps under the table, crumpling itineraries into a pocket, breaking off conversations mid-sentence.

One afternoon before the break, Miss Hourihan was on the phone with her mother. She talked to her mother once a week, every week. Her mother always had lots to say about nothing. She told Miss Hourihan about the sewing circle at church and the price of milk and the terrible thing the neighbors had done with their front yard flowerbed. Miss Hourihan had hated these obligatory talks when she was in college. Her mother's life had seemed pitiably limited and contained, sadly defined by little hedges of routine and habit. Lately, however, Miss Hourihan had begun to see her mother's life as a small, complete thing, neatly ordered and always pleasant, like a city inside a snow globe. She missed her mother.

Mrs. Hourihan wanted to know if Miss Hourihan was coming home for Easter.

"I don't know, Mom," Miss Hourihan said, trying to keep the regret from creeping into her voice. "Mr. Childers is planning some sort of trip for us. I don't how long that whole business is going to take."

When she hung up the phone a few minutes later, Mr. Childers was sitting at her kitchen table, tearing her paper napkins to shreds. She swallowed hard, downing surprise and a surge of anger.

"How did you get in?" After she said it, though, she realized the door was unlocked. The door was almost always unlocked.

Mr. Childers looked up at her. There were uneven red patches under his stubble and his brows were crumpled over his eyes; she couldn't tell if he was close to shouting or tears.

"'Mr. Childers?' You call me 'Mr. Childers?'"

Miss Hourihan sighed. At school, the teachers were required to call each other by these formal names, and even though she knew her colleagues' first names, she could not get used to calling them anything but Mr. This or Mrs. That. She knew them by these names; to call them something else made them seem like other people.

Miss Hourihan sighed again and said nothing.

Mr. Childers stared, his mouth slightly open, the red patches spreading to his forehead and chin. "Do you even know my first name?"

Of course she did. Of course she knew his first name. She had been sleeping with him for nearly six months now, for heaven's sake. But just at that second, she could not find the name in the jumble of her brain. It was a slip in a card catalogue that had been misfiled: there, but unreachable.

"Oh my God." Mr. Childers was on his feet. "Oh my fucking God."

"Dan! Dan!" Miss Hourihan blurted. "Of course I know your name, Dan!"

But the moment had passed, and she had failed.

"I can't believe this!" Mr. Childers stalked around the kitchen, but the room was tiny and he could only go four steps before he had to turn around again. "I cannot believe this. Do you know where we were going next week?" He turned to her and crossed his arms across his chest.

Miss Hourihan shook her head.

"Niagara Falls. Niagara Fucking Falls! I was going to fucking propose."

Miss Hourihan tried to clamp her lips between her teeth, but the words wriggled out anyway. "Niagara Falls?"

And she began to laugh. Niagara Falls was where her father had proposed to her mother, where her father's parents had taken their honeymoon, where she thought someone would propose to her—when she was eight. She tried to stop laughing, but she couldn't, couldn't stop thinking of Dan Childers, revolutionary, standing in the middle of a crowd of cooing tourists and handing her a half-karat cubic zirconium ring in a red velvet box while, in the background, hundreds of thousands of gallons of water rushed over a cliff every second.

"I can't be here anymore." Mr. Childers grabbed his jacket from the back of a kitchen chair, toppling the chair with the sudden change in balance, and stormed out. When he slammed the door, a framed photograph of the Alhambra fell to the floor in the hallway.

Miss Hourihan bent slowly, righted the chair, and sat in it. She waited for tears to well or a sense of loss to overwhelm her, but mostly what she noticed was how quiet the house had become and the muted, affable sound of the bells ringing in the Presbyterian church down the road. For a while, she watched a cardinal through the window, saw him flutter over and over again from the sugar maple to the ground and back again. She scanned the branches of the tree until she spotted her, the dun-colored female nesting between the budding branches. Then Miss Hourihan stood, swept the shredded napkins into a cupped palm, and put water on for tea.

Her relations with the other members of the staff changed after she and Mr. Childers broke up. Those who found Mr. Childers dynamic, inspiring, a man of principle, gave Miss Hourihan cool looks over Corelle teacups when she walked into the teachers' lounge. They made a point—Mr. Childers and his new posse—of

leaving for the Watering Hole in a group on Friday afternoons, of laughing especially loudly and looking especially happy when they passed her in the parking lot as she struggled to open the door of her Bel Air.

On the other hand, among the teachers who had always, she now discovered, found Mr. Childers more than a little grating, she was a hero, or had at least achieved a low level of celebrity. Mr. Reid, whose nature turned out to be as gentle as his voice, invited her to join a group going to see Carole King in Providence. Miss Alberti, a third grade teacher, was committed to world peace and macrobiotic baking; she often brought sprouted mung bean cookies for the teachers to share. After her first one, Miss Hourihan took the cookies to "save for later" and disposed of them once Miss Alberti had left the room. Mr. Gardner, the art instructor, did impressions of the members of the administration that made Miss Hourihan laugh until her stomach ached.

There were a few weeks during which school was uncomfortable for Miss Hourihan, but soon, stasis returned. Mr. Childers started dating Miss Shaughnessy, a bony kindergarten teacher, and his hostile glares turned into pitying glances when Miss Hourihan passed him in the hallways, Miss Hourihan found that she cared very little. She had new friends. She had a comfortable one-bedroom apartment. She had teaching.

Though she grumbled along about the work load when break-room conversation required it, Miss Hourihan liked the way the duties of teaching could expand to fill any amount of time she allotted them, the way a goldfish would grow as large as its tank would allow. There were always lessons to plan: teaching remainders

using M&Ms; casting children in plays about the American Revolution; mapping walks around the grounds so she could point out all the kinds of trees. There were long hours of dim frustration, but these were illuminated by scintillating moments in which a student finally understood what fractions meant, or the class found the humor in "The Cremation of Sam McGee," or a child brought her a bunch of pale fragrant lilacs, clipped that morning, most likely in secret, from his mother's garden. They were too old to hug her or be hugged, but Miss Hourihan was often washed by such a powerful love for her pupils that she wanted to gather them all into her arms at once.

Many of the young teachers did not return for a second year at Hilltop. For them, teaching had been a stopgap between college and graduate school, or a money-making venture before they moved to Kabul or Manhattan. Some had simply found teaching boring.

That fall she was restless. Maybe she would leave, too, she thought. Maybe this would be her last year. She researched graduate programs in Europe—to study Chaucer in London or Dante in Florence, how glamorous!—and she sent away for a packet about the Peace Corps. But by the time Christmas break came, Miss Hourihan realized that she was happy never to plow through medieval texts teasing out allegory and political satire. What was the point? What difference did her interpretation of a collection of words make? And the Peace Corps—well, it was condescension of a kind, wasn't it? Who was she, Miss Hourihan from Springfield, Mass, to tell a woman in the Himalayas that the way she kept her house was unsanitary? And why teach children thousands of miles away? There were children here, right in Woburn, who needed education, needed what she had to offer. Also, Miss Hourihan suspected that

the Peace Corps would mean showers would be irregular and toilets rudimentary, and she had always, always, considered nice indoor plumbing mankind's greatest technological advance.

So Miss Hourihan stayed for a third year, and then a fourth. By her fifth year, there were only four of the teachers left who had begun teaching with her. By the seventh, there were only two. By her tenth year of teaching fifth grade at Hilltop, only she and Mr. Reid remained of the original dozen. There was a new crop of young teachers, and though they, too, were brimming with optimism and naïveté, they were of a different breed. They itched to rebuild traditions, restore order, reinstate the nation as the world leader in rightness. And they wanted, even expected, to be wealthy.

A younger Miss Hourihan would have been disgusted by their ready acceptance of the Reagan administration's bleating about family values and the American Dream; but she was thirty-four. She knew that these new teachers would either move on, or they would accept, as she had, that the world was as it was. They would replace their lust for paradigm shift with the hope that the girl with the braces would for once pass a spelling test, or that the bigger boys would let the tiny boy with the cleft palate enjoy his recess in peace. They would let go of triumphal dreams and feel a surge of pride when listening to the class recite their threes times tables loudly and correctly. They would forget that they had expected ecstasy, and instead take pleasure in a row of uniformly sharpened pencils, a finely looped lower case 'g' on the chalkboard, a day off.

As a college student, Miss Hourihan had outwardly embraced the skepticism about marriage that was in vogue among her peers, but despite the institution's flaws, she had always assumed that she would end up married herself, in a quiet, but enduring relationship with a quiet but enduring man. She met no such man in her twenties or her thirties, and conducted instead a string of fairly unsatisfying and short-lived affairs with men who excited her, until they didn't, found her charming, until they didn't. And when she met a quiet and enduring man at the age of forty-two, she found that she did not want to be married; her life had become a small, complete thing. When the man realized that she was content drifting along as undefined partners, he quietly and permanently drifted away. Miss Hourihan took up Pilates.

Six days before her fiftieth birthday, the principal of Hilltop asked Miss Hourihan to meet her in her office after school.

"As you know, there's been some significant budget cuts this year."

There have *been some significant budget cuts this year*, Miss Hourihan mentally corrected. She nodded, and folded her hands to keep from picking at a hangnail on her left thumb. Her nails, once so pink and smooth, had become ragged and ridged as she grew older.

She knew there had been budget cuts. That was all anyone ever talked about these days. The second art teacher and the second music teacher had been let go. The children now went to gym only once a week instead of twice. The cost of even the reduced lunches had risen by a dime. Obviously she knew. But unlike the younger teachers, she wasn't worried. There would be changes. Some teachers might have to leave. But nothing would change, nothing fundamental. There would always be

teachers. There would always be students. Miss Hourihan took comfort in the everlastingness.

"There's also a new elementary school opening near Winchester. We expect to lose nearly thirty percent of our student body, especially in the older grades."

Miss Hourihan nodded again. She knew this, too. But surely, she was not being laid off. There were only three or four teachers who had been here as long as she had. Why, then, the preparatory speech?

The principal gathered some papers into a neat stack, tapped the stack several times on the desk to straighten it.

"We've decided we're going to cut two fifth grade classes. We won't have as many students, so we won't need as many teachers." The principal shifted her eyes around the room, settling on the china doll plant that Miss Hourihan had noticed needed watering.

"Am I being let go?"

"No! No, of course not." The principal laughed weakly. "No, it's just that…well, you are one of our most valued teachers, and we wouldn't even consider this if we didn't think you could handle it."

Such a sentence could only be prelude to something unpleasant.

"This coming fall," the principal began, still staring intently at the plant. "Hilltop will be offering three special education classes, divided by age. We have teachers lined up for two of them; the final class is still without an instructor. Before we continue our search, we—the other administrators and myself—"

The other administrators and I. Why did people insist on using the reflexive when the simple first person would suffice?

"We thought we would offer the position to you."

Miss Hourihan said nothing for several moments. She unfolded her hands and began picking at her hangnail.

After the second hand's ticking became painfully loud, the principal cleared her throat. "Of course, we would arrange for you to obtain your certification over the summer. Some of the classes you've taken through the Extended Learning Program will count towards the program, so the summer should really be enough time to complete an alternative licensure."

Miss Hourihan inspected the other hand. Hangnails on the index, the middle, and the pinky. Damn it.

"This certification, I might add, really would boost your resume. Special education teachers are highly sought after, one of the few education fields that is really growing."

Miss Hourihan looked up from her hands. "And if I don't take this new position?"

The principal looked like she was trying to keep from crying. "Then I'm afraid we wouldn't have a place for you."

That evening, Miss Hourihan tried to work on the afghan she had been knitting for the past four years, but she kept putting it down to go the kitchen table and look at the information packet the principal had left with her. The training program was in Boston. Miss Hourihan hated driving on the freeway, and it wasn't,

she explained to herself, just because she was old; she had never felt comfortable driving with all those other hunks of metal flying by her on either side. The training program was five days a week, from 8 until 4. Well, that was the end of the trip to San Francisco she had been planning as a birthday present to herself.

This was the way the world was, Miss Hourihan thought. You worked on one thing all your life, and then suddenly, someone who didn't have nearly the breadth of knowledge or depth of experience you did told you that from now on, your life would be different. She wished she could call her mother, but her mother had been dead for nearly ten years now. And what would her mother have said? "You do what you have to do, Lizzie. You have to be strong." Her mother was the only person who had ever called her Lizzie.

The classes at BU were grueling. Miss Hourihan had forgotten how long an hour could be. When her students whined and fidgeted through the fifty-minute periods, she'd usually been unsympathetic. How many times had she told some squirming child that if he could sit through three of his favorite cartoon programs in a row, then he could pay attention to an entire math lesson? Now, back in the classroom herself, Miss Hourihan felt the weight of every minute. At the beginning of each day, she was bright-eyed enough, but by nine o'clock, the clock started to tug at her attention. She'd defer and defer the need to look until she was sure the morning session was nearly over, but when she at last let her eyes rivet to the right wall, it was invariably only a quarter past ten. She had some strange knack for looking at the clock at that exact moment every day. On one such occasion, as the eager young instructor floated another raft of acronyms at the class, Miss Hourihan wondered if

this ability to somehow intuit when it was 10:15 a.m. indicated a skill she could parlay into a new occupation. She started a list in the margin of her notebook, but all she came up with was “Sideshow Career as the Incredible Time-Telling Woman.” Frowning at herself, she crossed out the words, and forced her attention back to the yellow image from the overhead projector.

The course seemed designed to teach both too much and not enough. Miss Hourihan emerged from the School of Education building with her brain feeling blunted and soggy from the deluge of information it had endured. On the drive home, she tried to reinforce what they had covered that day by intoning key vocabulary, names, and concepts out loud over the attenuated mutter of public radio. But by the time she pulled into her driveway, the new knowledge was already fading, and she was reduced to performing a kind of desperate mental triage: Dyslexia, that she already knew, no sense wasting time thinking about the definition. Sequencing dysfunction—that had something to do with auditory processing, didn’t it? She thought she might just be able to come up with the cause if she put her mind to it. Heller’s syndrome? No, she couldn’t remember word one about it; whatever she may have heard was already gone. She’d just have to look it up again later.

And though she felt thoroughly overburdened by the diagnoses and modalities and legislations and acronyms, the never-ending, everlasting acronyms, Miss Hourihan also felt certain in the very center of herself that she would enter the classroom that fall unprepared. It had been that way when she started teaching. Then, of course, she really had been unprepared; teaching hadn’t required training then. She was a reasonably intelligent woman who was willing to be patient, or at least appear

so. Little else was asked of her. Now, she was sure she could never hope to know all that she would require to attend to the needs of her new students, knew without question that this training, any training, would not be enough.

During longer breaks, Miss Hourihan crossed the footbridge over Storrow Drive and walked along the Charles River while her extremities thawed: the over-zealous air-conditioning in the School of Education activated her Raynaud's and she often finished class with her finger tips numb and as pale as blanched almonds. Sometimes she sat on a bench to have her lunch, brought from home to save time and money. Sometimes she preferred to keep walking after so long being still and so ate in motion; some food tasted better that way.

She rarely saw her classmates at the park; most of them were younger women who went to the student union at lunchtime. They were not unkind; they had invited her to join them, and she had gone once, early in the summer. They had inquired about Miss Hourihan's teaching background, admired her experience, asked her advice. Miss Hourihan believed they were sincere, but after the first time, she had not returned to lunch with them. It was such an effort, and she preferred the quiet of the river. There, she could walk and eat egg salad on pumpernickel, her favorite sandwich and one she ate only out of doors so the faint sulfurous stink wouldn't both anyone. Now that she ate all her lunches outside, she'd started bringing this meal twice a week. In her mind, she referred to it as the "Esplanade Special."

All summer, she made lesson plans. She made a gigantic checklist for herself and hung it on her fridge, and when she had made lesson plans for a subject, she used a thick red marker to cross it off the list. When a lesson was done, she read it aloud to

herself, and imagined how it would sound if she were not herself: What if I did not know the word “imagine”? What if numbers looked backwards to me? What if I could not remember the beginning of a sentence once I had gotten to the end?

Miss Hourihan thought about the details of her classroom, too. There should be fat pencils, easier for twisted fingers to grip. The reading corner should include colors the social worker who visited her BU class had said some children found calming: soft blues and violets. To help the children learn empathy, she adopted—she preferred that word to “bought”—a rabbit from a local pet store. He was a docile and sleepy lop-eared giant, splotched with fawn and white. He enjoyed slices of apple and having his quivering nose petted with a fingertip. Miss Hourihan pulled his ears to see how he would react to insensitive hands. After several vigorous tugs, the rabbit shook his head and sneezed, then went back to slowly licking her arm. She named him Flapjack.

On September 3, Miss Hourihan arrived at school even earlier than usual. She started down the hall for the fifth and sixth grade corridor, but stopped herself at a bulletin board that screamed “Drop Everything And Read!” Then she turned back around to head for the northwestern wing, where several first grade classes had been converted into the new Special Education Rooms.

Everything in 124B was in order. Miss Hourihan had been at school every day the two weeks before. She had hung posters on the walls, mostly the same ones she had used in her former teaching life, but with some additions she hoped would appeal to her new students. She had brought philodendrons to creep along the windowsills and keep the room smelling fresh. She’d made a reading corner and an arts and crafts

table. She'd set up Flapjack's hutch and playpen in the back corner, and labeled his cage with a sign bearing his name in letters of cut-out cardstock.

At her desk, Miss Hourihan sipped coffee from a travel mug and waited for the first day to begin. She noticed as she raised the cup to her lips that her hands were trembling slightly. She put down the mug and gripped it tightly between her palms, pressing inward evenly from all sides. The action made her think of pottery classes she had taken some years ago. Though she'd never been able to make much—her pieces always buckled and warped before she could coax them to rise tall enough to be vases or bowls—she had loved centering the clay. It required dedication and care, but also a certain amount of resolute strength; the clay wasn't going to center itself just because you suggested it. She took two sessions of pottery lessons before deciding she had more than enough ashtrays, but she still thought of centering when she wanted to still her mind, imagined the steady act of compression that gradually resulted in a perfectly symmetrical spinning mass.

She glanced up at the clock ticking away steadily on the wall opposite the windows. There were still twenty minutes to go before she could reasonably expect even the earliest of the students to arrive. What else was there to do? Suddenly, she sprang to her feet. She opened the cardboard box and shook out a fresh piece of chalk. The white stick sliding from between its fellow reminded her of a cigarette, and suddenly she had a craving for the sour bite of tobacco and the edge nicotine put on her mind, though she had quit smoking decades ago. Carefully, Miss Hourihan looped her name across the board. It was strange after all these years to still call herself

"Miss." But when she had started, "Ms." was something new and she had thought it made her sound too strident and too radical. Now it seemed too late to change.

By 8:20, all six students were seated in the classroom. She glanced down at her roster. Each name was helpfully accompanied by a photograph, but these were last year's school pictures and it wasn't always obvious which photo belonged to which student; they changed so fast at this age. After several moments of study, Miss Hourihan thought she had determined who everyone was. Bobby and Karl were absorbed in books, one reading a history of NASA and the other about marsupials. Patricia, the girl with cerebral palsy, was having her hair combed away from her face by her assistant. Gregory was peeling his shoelace into tiny filaments. Miss Hourihan didn't know how he would ever tie it again. Aaron was concentrating intently on a drawing in pencil. The final student, Josie, a very small and towheaded girl, was simply sitting, her hands folded on her desk, staring straight at Miss Hourihan.

After the bell rang and they had listened to the announcements and said the Pledge of Allegiance, albeit less coherently than Miss Hourihan was used to hearing it, it was time to begin class. She stood before the class, arms straight down by her side, warm palms pressed against her slacks.

"Good morning, class." She paused to let them reply with a half-sung "good morning." There was no response. After her work over the summer, Miss Hourihan knew enough not to have expected one, but as the silence stretched out over the seconds, she realized she had hoped nevertheless. Hearing their answering chime would have put her at ease, told her that while some things might have changed, the fundamentals remained the same. Ridiculous, she chided herself. You know very well

that this situation is entirely different. How dare you expect more than these children are capable of just to make yourself feel competent? She gave her thigh a slight pinch and pressed on.

"I am your teacher for this year. My name is Miss Hourihan." She pivoted fractionally to point to the cursive on the board. As she turned back to the class, she saw a hand shoot up in the air, straight and full of purpose.

"Yes, Karl?"

"Your name is Miss Hour Hand. That is the part of the analog clock by which a person can tell what hour it is."

Miss Hourihan smiled. Some things had not changed, after all.

"That's very good, Karl. However, my name only *sounds* like 'Miss Hour Hand.' Actually, it is 'Miss Hourihan.' That's an Irish—"

The hand went up again.

"Yes, Karl?"

"In that case, your name is a homonym, which is a word that sounds like another word, but means something different."

Miss Hourihan faltered. It was nonsense, naturally, but there was a certain kind of logic to the boy's conclusion.

"Well, that is what a homonym is, but I'm not sure a name could really be considered a homonym."

"Why not?"

"It's just that a name isn't really the same as an ordinary word; it doesn't mean anything exactly—"

"Doesn't it mean the person whose name the word belongs to?"

In any other class, Miss Hourihan would have known that the boy was merely testing her, plumbing this new experience to see how far he could go. She would have ended the conversation there, and asked him to step outside until he could be more polite. But Karl wasn't antagonizing her. His face was blank, his voice flat. He was relaying information.

"Well, I'm not sure about that." She felt her hands move toward each other, felt her fingertips seeking out the tiny strips of skin around the nails. "Let's just move on, shall we?"

Miss Hourihan went to her desk to retrieve the stack of worksheets she had run through the Ditto machine that morning. The ink, she hoped, would be dry by now, but there was still a strong chemical scent rising from them.

When she turned back to face the class, Josie had her hand halfway in the air.

"Yes, Josie?"

The tiny girl opened and closed her mouth several times. When she finally spoke, her words were crowded together and blurred. Miss Hourihan had to ask Josie to repeat herself, and she felt her face reddening; she hated to appear so lost and uncertain. Finally, on the third time through, Miss Hourihan understood:

"You can't be a teacher if you are part of a clock." Having delivered her pronouncement, Josie continued staring at Miss Hourihan, her irises wide and rimmed with white.

Miss Hourihan couldn't tell whether she wanted to laugh or scream. She swallowed the feeling. This absurdly literal interpretation of the world was common

for children like these. She couldn't, she reminded herself, depend upon her students adhering to the rules of the world as she knew them; their worlds operated on different principles.

"I can be a teacher because I'm not part of a clock. My name just sounds like that." She gestured back at the board, appealing to the concreteness of letters and chalk dust. "In fact, if you'll pay close attention, it doesn't even sound exactly like 'hour hand.'" She pronounced her name again, placing greater emphasis on the second syllable than normal.

Josie's hand was in the air, and she didn't wait for Miss Hourihan to call on her before she started speaking.

"You can't be a teacher if you are part of a clock."

Miss Hourihan looked to the other students, hoping they would show some sign of understanding the wrongness of Josie's position or at least readiness to move on from it. But Aaron was bent over on his drawing; Bobby had returned to his marsupials; Gregory was still attending to the destruction of his shoelaces; and Patricia was struggling to just to steady her neck. Karl, the only student besides Josie who was paying attention, was looking at Miss Hourihan like he wasn't sure he could trust her, like he suspected her of being part of some vast timepiece conspiracy. When Miss Hourihan glanced at the aide, the woman just shrugged, as if to say she had seen this before and would see it again.

Miss Hourihan turned around, facing the board. As she counted to ten in her head, more slowly than might have been necessary, she traced the curves of her name with her eyes.

She turned back to face them.

"Let's talk about what we did over summer vacation."

Every day for a week, class began much the same way. The children who could engage were primarily interested in why her name was so strange, so wrong for a person, so clearly belonging to an object. The more they talked about it, the more they were fixated on it, and no amount of explanation from Miss Hourihan could satisfy them. It seemed to grow worse, not better, as the days passed. Though the students struggled to interact with each other, this was one standard around which they could rally. By Friday, Miss Hourihan was sure most of the class seemed to believe that Miss Hourihan was perpetrating some kind of horrible trick on them: she was the hour hand of the clock disguised as a teacher. She came to expect that the first fifteen minutes of the day would be lost to this subject, and always Josie would insist: You can't be a teacher if you are part of a clock.

When she finished bus line duty on Friday afternoon, Miss Hourihan went back to her classroom and let herself fall onto the plush purple beanbag in the reading corner. She had exercises to mark and reading lessons to plan, but for a long, she simply sat, taking up most of the child-size chair, her mind an exhausted blank. She had never been so tired. She felt as though she had been squeezed through the wringer her grandmother had used on laundry days. The teaching was difficult, yes, but that she could do. She'd already noticed what classroom management strategies didn't work for these students, what ways of phrasing instructions produced results and which produced stares, or worse, tantrums. The world geography lesson had seemed to upset some students and the group work activity about the rainforest had been a

bust, but she would learn how to do these things. But how, she wondered as she listened to the fading sounds of the last of the carpool, how could she ever convince them that she was a person?

On Sunday night before the start of the second week of class, Miss Hourihan looked over the syllabus for the year. In mid-November, the week before Thanksgiving break, were printed the words "Telling Time." Miss Hourihan put down her pen—she still insisted on fountain pens—and went to the hall closet. There was a canvas drop cloth on the bottom shelf that she used for various messy jobs: covering the floor when she was retouching the trim in the living room; testing out the baking soda vinegar volcano she had made for a lesson on geology. The sheet was stained, but clean, and smelled like baking soda and lavender sachets. Spreading the sheet on the floor, Miss Hourihan traced the largest circle she could, then started cutting.

"Why are the desks wrong?" Bobby was standing in front of where his desk should have been, his arms crossed, his chin jutting out in anger. "The desks are *not* supposed to be this way."

"Don't worry," Miss Hourihan said from her own desk at the front of the room. "I just put them in a circle for now. In a little while, we'll change them back to rows."

"How long is a little while?"

Miss Hourihan had already learned the value of precision when speaking to Bobby. She checked her watch: five minutes until all the students were here, ten

minutes for announcements and pledge, and five minutes for what she planned next. “I would say not more than twenty-two minutes.”

Bobby nodded, and sat.

Once everyone was settled, announcements heard, pledge recited, Miss Hourihan reached into her ample tote bag. She removed the Tupperware container of leftover lentil soup and placed it in the bottom drawer of her desk. The Ogden Nash collection she laid on top of the desk, giving the drawing of Custard the Dragon on the cover a fond little pat. She’d been probably been silly to bring the book; it was highly unlikely any of these students would find anything to enjoy in the poems. The humor often came from incorrect use of language, which was only funny when you knew what the words were supposed to sound like. But it was a personal favorite, and she’d used this very edition in poetry units every year since she started teaching. Let her read it to complete silence, let no one laugh at a single pun, let them complain and tic if they must; there were some things she couldn’t give up.

Usually, Miss Hourihan made sure that her supplies were arranged before class started, but today she hoped the suspense would keep them attentive, at least briefly, so she unpacked deliberately. As she did, she saw from the corner of her eye two hands go up. She knew that one belonged to Karl and the other to Josie. They were preparing to begin their inquisition into the nature of her being. She ignored them. When she reached the bottom of the bag, she pulled out a tape measure and the sheet, now cut into a circle and painted around the edges with numbers one through twelve.

She brought the sheet and the tape measure into the center of the circle of desks she had created that morning. With a flourish, she snapped out the sheet flat in the air and laid it on the ochre tiles.

"Only seven more minutes, Miss Hourihan."

Miss Hourihan smiled at Bobby, who had his shins resting on his chair so he could lean over the desk toward her. His fingers gripped the edge of the desk like he was afraid he might fall.

"Thank you, Bobby. I'm lucky to have someone who can help me keep an eye on the time. Now, please sit in your seat."

He lowered until his rear was hovering over the chair. When she continued gazing at him, he dropped down with a thud she thought sounded painful, though Bobby didn't seem to mind.

Josie and Karl still had their hands raised. Karl was getting anxious, rocking very slightly in his seat, occasionally lowering his hand, shaking it, and raising it again, as if it were a flashlight with dying batteries. Josie was utterly still, her arm locked at the elbow, her fingers spread as wide as they could go.

Miss Hourihan looked again at her watch. 8:21. Stretching out the tape measure to its full six feet, she clicked the button into place to keep the tape extended, then placed the metal square in the middle of the circle with the bright yellow tape pointing in between the four and the five.

The class watched. Even Aaron had paused in his drawing of a whale to look at her. Patricia moaned softly, her usually rolling eyes stilled on the woman in the middle of the room.

Slowly, gently, Miss Hourihan lowered herself to the floor. Her knees creaked, and her lower back twinged. She lifted her arms above her head, pressing them to her ears as she had been instructed to do many years ago when she was learning to dive.

"Look at me, children," she said. Her voice sounded strange coming from the floor. "This sheet is the face of the clock. This tape measure is pointing between the four and the five. That is the minute hand. I am pointing between the eight and the nine. I am the hour hand. It is eight twenty-two, and I am the hour hand."

Lying on the sheet, Miss Hourihan was suddenly very conscious of her body: the soft spread of her thighs and belly; the increasingly sloped angle of her shoulders; the raw-looking bunions on her feet at the middle point of the sheet-clock; the folds of skin around her neck that now fell away toward the center of the earth. She thought of the woman she had always imagined she would become, a woman who was tall and lovely, elegant and witty, successful, assured, beloved. For as long as she could remember, she had been poised on the cusp of becoming this self, never getting any father from or coming any closer to her, the woman's vague shape flickering at the limit of her vision.

Silence stretched on, fractured only by the ticking of the clock on the wall. Miss Hourihan counted the seconds, waiting for someone to speak, for someone to gasp in sudden comprehension, for the world to change, for the instant when she would know it had, for something, she didn't know what, but at that moment, she felt she could wait forever.