

ABSTRACT

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In *The Waterpark*, the Mississippi river offers the promise of escape while also freezing the fictionalized version of Cape Girardeau, Missouri, forever bound to that body of water. The novel begins with Helen detailing her father's desire to create a waterpark in the middle of Midwestern fields. In her mid-20s in the main storyline, Helen begins to learn that family responsibility and the desire to please one's parents never stops, even after death. As she takes control of her father's waterpark, she is conflicted by contrasting memories of the waterpark of her childhood and the realization that the park will ask for more of her than she is prepared to give. Furthermore, Helen realizes the consequences of her self-created loneliness as she isolates herself continually from the people around her, purposefully or not, and begins to thrive more in the memories of the waterpark than in her current life.

THE WATERPARK

By

Katherine Elizabeth Kipp

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DEDICATION

To my parents for their continued support.

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Thank you to Maud Casey for helping me find the shape of this novel. Also, for reminding me that a lot of novel writing involves “crashing around” until you find the heart of the story. Additionally, many thanks to Howard Norman and Emily Mitchell for their kind words and helpful advice.

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CHAPTER 1

In the Midwest, water is everything.

The fields are endless. Great, big corn stalks that rustle like paper in the wind. If you are desperate, you can convince yourself that the sound of corn in the wind sounds like the ocean's waves, but you know better. The horizon is dry, the blue of the sky deceptively promising. But every morning, the fact remains: you are one tiny speck in the middle of a square piece of land, in the middle of other square pieces of land, for miles and miles on end.

Water represents the way out. Rivers, especially. A river leads to other places, passing through because that's what it's always done. The river was there first. Not the town. It's important to remember this. The towns are stagnant, dusty, old. By the time you're born everything in the town has already been discovered. It's the river that can promise things: the idea of a much larger world, just waiting to be explored. Not just by anyone, but by you. You are the one that can pass through time and space and small town conventions and make a new discovery. You are the one that can change the rest of your life.

This was the speech I heard on a daily basis from my father. He had inherited a plot of land from his father, just on the outskirts of Cape Girardeau, Missouri. Now developed, the land at the time had been just another expanse of land meant for farming. My father decided he didn't want to contribute to the endless fields, the dull colors of crops. Instead, he took roughly 800,000 gallons of chlorine-blue water and built a waterpark in the middle of farmland, embodying the eternal fact that water is everything, when you live in the Midwest.

On weekends, when my brother Atlas and I had special dad time, leaving mom home alone to catch up on her reading for the classes she taught at the university, he would strap us into his father's pickup truck, which was falling apart—the drooping fabric ceiling was held up by push pins that we arranged into different designs at traffic stops—and take us to his waterpark. For hours on end, we followed him around, cleaning the pool, sweeping the concrete, throwing away expired snacks. If the park was open we would “test out the slides,” help check people in who had yearly memberships, supply bottles of sunscreen to those who had forgotten it. The park was located at the intersection of Kingshighway and Lexington, when the two roads dipped down to meet each other. From the view in the main pool, it felt like you were sitting in the bottom of a basin, the trees enormous and towering.

With my father's waterpark, there was the promise of new adventures in the dusty town. The waterpark breathed new life into Cape Girardeau. It was a standout in the travel guides for the area that otherwise listed antique stores, or riverboat shows, which were often unpredictable and unreliable. Wild Rivers Waterpark offered not only the promise of water, of sparkling blue colors in the middle of a brown landscape, but of assurance. Five months out of the year, the waterpark was open for business. Visitors traveled from all of the eight states Missouri shared a border with to our little town in the Southeast corner to do some antique shopping, dine at the Mississippi riverfront restaurants, and spend long, hot summer days at our park. The river, a point of measure for everything in the town, was relatively four miles away, a ten-minute drive, a lifetime in small-town distances. Yet, my father insisted we had brought the riverfront downtown back to life: that we had reminded the town of the river's promise, of the power of water.

This was the story my father always told me about the park and, as a child, I believed it. It made our tiny speck of a town, barely large enough at the time to show up on maps, seem more magical than it was. Of course, he left out of the story the struggle to gain the county's permission to use the land, land he rightfully owned, for anything other than crops. He had to order magazines and books and hired help—mostly teenagers that hung out outside the Food Giant and would work for cheap—to assemble the slides, gigantic pieces of plastic that were bigger than Atlas and I combined. He started building the park the year I was born, but wasn't able to open it until I was three years old, Atlas a year younger, so that my first memory was of the four of us, floating in the shallow end of the pool, my father paying the same teenagers to try out the slides. One of them disassembled in mid-slide, the gangly teenager on it scraping his arm as he tumbled into the water with the parts, and my father had to pay him more money to lie to his parents about what had happened. He threw so much money around while he was building it that he absolutely needed the park to break even within the first two years. We struggled to pay our bills on time and my mother started teaching more courses at the university to bring in more cash. But she never complained, because she, more than anyone, supported my father's ideas. He was flesh and blood representation of mom's "life is what you make it," philosophy, a test subject that was successful in eschewing the life pre-destined by all the men in his family before him, farmers who had been living in Missouri before there even was a Missouri. My mother talked about it like this had been her goal all along; to prove her theories on life were worth something. But in reality my father was a dreamer, with big ideas and a big heart. He made it his personal goal to talk to every patron if possible, running around the park grounds in his cowboy boots, the only thing

he held on to from his upbringing. Inscribed in the stone at the entrance, one of the very first additions to the park, were the words:

If you can dream it, you can do it. Always remember that this whole thing started with a dream.

As a child, that quote inspired me to approach my life with open arms, to accept the possibility of new adventures and open doors. That life was more than just a few maps taped in a closet. It was only as a teenager that I realized the quote was stolen from Walt Disney, and ended with “and a mouse,” which my father had cut out for obvious reasons.

In the beginning, the waterpark was a simple attraction. A few slides and a lazy river, with big, cheerio shaped floats that Dad branded the “laz-y-boys of the waterpark world,” which dumped into a large swimming pool. Pool chairs surrounded the pool end of the park, with a snack shack and an area cut out for the lifeguards to take breaks. On the other side, near the park’s entrance, was the small office and storage space, a building that always smelled like chlorine and always looked blue, like it was underwater itself. The slides were painted obnoxiously bright, an explosion of color at the entrance that distracted kids, leaving the undisturbed pool section in the back for the parents to relax—pull their magazines out, rub dollops of sun screen on themselves and keep the bottle waiting for their children, put small, inflatable floaties on the arms of the smaller kids.

Atlas and I spent our summers at the park, sliding repeatedly down the turbo slide, our favorite. We would float down the lazy river over and over on slow days. We’d spend hours in the snack shack drinking sodas with Mrs. LeGrand, the smoke from her ever-present cigarette floating around our faces as she told us stories of New Orleans and what

the *real* Mississippi River looked like. We never knew how old she really was—she wore shirts that exposed her midriff and pushed up her boobs, yet she had wiry hair that she dyed regularly and wrinkly olive-colored skin—and we doubted the truth of about half her stories. Regardless, we loved her like a grandmother and turned to her for advice that often turned stale in the hot summer sun. As business grew, my father’s interests refocused from simply owning a waterpark to owning the best waterpark. He had read in *World Waterpark Magazine* about a park in Texas that was breaking records with a 12 story high slide, the slide so long the picture could barely contain it. He had pictures of an enclosed flume slide in Germany that was so extensive, it took several minutes to travel down it, taped to the wall of his office in the chlorine building.

He decided soon after that Wild Rivers was going to break world records. We were already listed as one of the best waterparks in the lower Midwest, an achievement he had taped up in his office as well. But now he wanted to appear in *World Waterpark Magazine* as a best American park; he wanted to break Guinness records. He added an enclosed flume slide that was so high, the park was now visible through treetops, the tie-dyed color of the slide a stark contrast against the trees. The turbo slides were lengthened, and a long slide was added that ran parallel the last twenty feet of the lazy river, the splash from the slide dumping water in the wave pool he had added in the back, adjacent to the undisturbed pool area. We repainted the whole place, all primary colors that blinded you in the sun.

For a while, the park held the record for “highest flume slide in the Midwest,” but that was the only record we ever topped, a snazzy line added to our blurb in Cape Girardeau’s tourism brochures. He had it printed on t-shirts that he sold for \$5, and

stitched into our pool towels that a few patrons rented for \$2 a day. On Wild Rivers's diagram of success, it was undoubtedly the park's highest point.

*

Every Wednesday at noon, from the time the park opened until I was 14 years old, Dad held a relay race in the shallow end of the pool. The rules were simple: everyone competed against each other, no matter if you were five or fifteen; cutting corners got you immediately disqualified (for instance, hoisting yourself out of the pool instead of using the ladder); and no special preference was given to pool stakeholders, meaning me and Atlas. We had to compete fairly against the other kids, and were to keep the whining to ourselves if we lost.

The last rule added a twinge of excitement to the game for me. I wanted to impress my dad; I wanted to be faster than the other kids. Every Wednesday, the morning would creep slowly toward noon, as if time had been expanded just to torture me. Ten minutes to 12, I would bob slowly toward the shallow end, moving discreetly through the crowd. Sometimes I'd take big gulping breaths and sink underwater, swimming with chlorine filled eyes as I pushed past the plastic-colored bodies. If I passed Atlas, he would grab my foot and tug, smiling mischievously. He never understood my desire to impress our Dad, and competed only because he wanted to beat me and make me angry. He had finished faster than me a few times, and would chase me around the park taunting me. One time I pushed him in by the turbo slide, a tiny scream followed by a splash of water. But I wasn't concerned; we had been swimming on our own since we were old enough to spell our own names.

When Dad whistled the bell for the game time, I'd scramble to find my place in line with the other participants. My hair slick to my head, my bathing suit dripping water, I'd dance back and forth on my tiptoes as he read through the rules of the game in his booming voice, so loud he didn't need a microphone: "When it's your turn, you swim two laps around the shallow end, then swim zig zag through the mushroom cap sprinklers, touching each of them, before finishing down the slide." It was one of the smaller slides, but it had an actual ladder as opposed to some of the more complicated slides that had wooden staircases leading to the top instead. "May the fastest kid win!" He'd direct the kids with a big swinging arm, like he was pitching baseball, and all you'd hear for the next ten or twenty minutes was the sound of water splashing and kids cheering as the lifeguards kept time on stopwatches. The parents hung out in the background, drinking sodas lazily and shielding their eyes from the sun. I was a good swimmer, but still not fast enough. I'd race around the pool and nearly slip making my way up the slide, holding my arms up as I prepared for the splash. But I was never fast enough. Instead of winning, I was rewarded with a water-logged bathing suit and a pat on my head from my Dad, with a "Better luck next time, Hel." I'd retreat to the shade of the snack shack with Mrs. LeGrand and pretend to smoke cigarettes with her, moving my straw in the same motion as she, blowing out pretend smoke. I'd wish to be a thousand years older than I already was, an adult that didn't have to participate in these silly games.

One summer, he started letting us compete in pairs. It was the summer after Emily and I had become best friends, two gangly sixth graders that were still waiting for the rest of our bodies to form. She had moved in down the street from us and was often sighted

wondering around the neighborhoods. One day I was bored and followed her to the river, where she looked at me with world-weary eyes and told me she wasn't looking for any friends. She lived in one of the boxy, shoddily built houses that never kept any of its tenants for long, and I assumed in a few weeks she'd be gone. But then we started walking to the river together weekly, observing the nuances of our dusty town, and when summer came, she joined Atlas and me as we ventured to the park daily. It was a given that we would be partners at the relay. We wore identical two-piece bathing suits that we'd picked out of a bin at Fred's, and we tied our hair back in thin ponytails that sagged from the weight of the water. Emily was a fast swimmer too. The relay remained pretty much the same, except each partner would swim one lap and the second partner would go down the slide, finishing the relay. Emily and I paper-rock-scissored to see who would go last, for the coveted slide part. I couldn't help but beam with pride when I won the spot.

It was mid-summer, the sun blinding hot. The moisture of the river had seeped into the air, turning everything soupy. My dad called the beginning of the relay, a coke with peanuts in it sweltering in his hand. I bounced back and forth on my toes as the line diminished in front of us until, finally, it was our turn.

Emily dived into the pool gracefully and sped around the shallow end with a professional ease. She darted through the mushroom cap sprinklers and ducked on the ladder as I dove over the top of her into the water. The cheering faded to a muffled noise, the water filling my ears quickly. I had devised a plan before jumping in: imagine I was swimming for some great piece of treasure that only I could find. I started after it. My legs and arms slapped over the water loudly. When I came up for air, the roaring crowd would consume my ears briefly before I darted under again, chlorine blue water

spreading out in front of me. I finished my lap around the pool and darted toward the first mushroom cap sprinkler. You had to come out of the water and touch the cap and I sprung into the air, the sun blinding my water-sensitive eyes, before disappearing again. I did this for the five caps and felt anticipation welling inside of me as I made my way, quickly, to the other side of the pool. I knew to onlookers I must have looked like a madwoman, my limbs flying through the water haphazardly, but I didn't care. I squished my toes together so I could run over the slippery cement with expert ease and flung myself up the ladder. The crowd was applauding and cheering. Emily was jumping up and down, her wet ponytail spraying everyone around her. And from the top of the slide, I was able to see my dad, in the back of the crowd: smiling as he clapped for me.

I splashed into the water and made my way out of the pool as the next contestants started. The other side of the park, the one most populated at all other times, was completely empty. The slides looked gigantic and purposeless, dumb pieces of plastic just waiting for someone to slide their wet bodies down them. I wondered if the other kids even realized how hard it had been to assemble those slides; how much effort my dad had to put in to create the park for their enjoyment. I felt a rush of butterflies inside of me knowing they didn't; that it was our little secret. We were the ones that knew how to truly love this place.

I took my spot next to Emily and watched the other contestants. As the line thinned, Emily and I were both bouncing on our feet, anxious for the results. We had swam fast, both of us. We were a dream team.

One of the lifeguards called our team name—Helem—and we embraced each other and jumped up and down, completely oblivious to those around us, completely

careless that we might slip and fall into the pool. Nothing else mattered but us and this moment. I closed my eyes and pictured the park as I had gone down the slide: kids lining the side of the pool, all waiting for the results of something my father had invented. There was nothing else to focus on but the game. That was the magic of the park.

We played the games until one of the children of the wealthy Wexler clan, a well known family in the area, mostly for their money and their enormous family mansion that overlooked the river, slipped and broke his leg trying to climb the ladder rungs. One of the Wexler women threatened to sue and that was the end of our game. We tried to pretend that it didn't matter, that any other game was fine, but it was obvious: the park wasn't the same without it.

*

Nine years after the relay games ended, and one year after my father died, the park had begun to look like most everything else in the town: faded and crumbling. It was a whole landscape of architecture constructed in a forgotten era, buildings disappearing into the earth at the same speed.

Winter pattered to an early stop. Cape Girardeau started to emerge from the low gray winter to discover that nothing had changed during the short days. The first signs of spring appeared the same way they always did: leaves turning green on the river, farmers dropping new seeds into their fields and then sitting on the edge, their eyes trained on the soil, as if new crops would appear instantaneously. Cultivated crops, like the ones by my house, turned dull shades of green, stalks rustling lazily in the wind.

The only difference in the season was the early floods. In late February, water started leaking from the sides of the Mississippi like a slowly overflowing sink. We all

looked out our windows and sighed at the upcoming spring days that would be full of water, covering the land in an ominous way. Down by the river, it pushed up against the floodgate walls, the streets of downtown happy and oblivious; but once the walls ended, the water encroached on the earth swiftly, moving up the slope of land in the way only a massive body of water can, to meet the edges of the river dwellings, one room houses with grimy windows, and to soak overgrown properties with muddy water.

From my house, in the middle of a cornfield—a few houses clustered together under towering trees, like an oasis in the middle of a desert—I could practically smell the river water, seeping into the earth. It didn't matter that I lived four miles outside of city limits, four and a half from the river. I was constantly aware of its presence.

It wasn't just the river's presence that I could sense. The waterpark was a gem of the past, only featured in the guidebooks because it had been there for so long. The place had exhausted all its charm: walking through the gates was like emitting a sigh that never seemed to end.

The waterpark's condition was my fault. My father had died the year before, signing the park over to me. I was the oldest, and he had said that it made sense for me to be the heir, as if he was passing down a throne and not seven acres of chlorine, plastic, and concrete. I respected my father, and so didn't tell him I had little interest in continuing with the park's upkeep, just like he had had no interest in continuing the upkeep of the fields his father had left behind to him. I loved the park, but I was terrified of the responsibility; of the change in my life it would mean. In my stubbornness, I would see nothing else. I let the water turn brown, the pool tarps sag. The slides gathered leaves, the pool chairs turned gray, the paint chipped. The pool water reeked of rain. High school

students hopped the fence and graffiti'd the office wall, taking the year-long closure as permanent. I purposefully avoided driving by the park, taking complicated routes through the town to stay off Kingshighway. I ignored phone calls. I was a well-practiced avoider, demonstrating my skills to the town with great flourish.

The river flooding early was a reminder, a near threat of what I had failed to do with my father's legacy. The water encroaching on the land, spreading its thick fingers over the soil, seemed to whisper, more urgently with each passing day, *you're a disappointment, Helen. This is my legacy, Helen. What's going to happen to all that water, HELEN. All that land my father left to me, we don't want it to go to waste, do we?* My father was never one to guilt-trip, and would never have dreamed of saying these sorts of things, even if he had sensed my stubbornness. But death does something to a person's imagination, and after a while it became hard to discern the fabricated words from the real ones.

At first, the voice was just a gentle tug in the back of my mind, a reminder of the approaching date on which my father had always opened the waterpark, for 21 years in a row: April 15. In February, the date was far enough away that I could ignore it, but also close enough that its presence couldn't be denied. I was nearing it, every day, just by the simple matter of time passing. As February came to a close, the voice started following me: on my drive to work in the morning, while I shampooed my hair, as I helped my mother water her plants. Eventually, I started responding: pithy retorts, expressing my desire to be allowed to do my own thing, even though my father, in real life, had never forced me down any path or decision I didn't want to make. But, in death, his voice was a persistent drone, a disappointment in me that I couldn't ignore.

CHAPTER 2

On the last day of February, the waterpark started to take on water from the flood. Water pooled in places it didn't belong—on the edges of the concrete, in the worn spots at the bottom of slide ladders. Small streams formed that delivered muddy water to the center of the pool tarps, like an inverse well. A regular park surrounded the waterpark with a ravine cutting through, parallel to the running track for a bit, that had turned into a second river and flowed over. Charlie, the head of my father's park maintenance staff, took it on himself to occasionally check in on the place. He would call often, and was outraged when the graffiti appeared. I made excuses each time to avoid visiting. He always sighed and said "okay" and hung up the phone before saying goodbye.

This time he said, breathlessly, "The flood has gotten to the park." I said okay, I'm sure it will be fine. The floodwaters would recede like they always did. But then it occurred to me, from some unknown place, that it was raining almost every day; that the river was slowly becoming a churning beast, enraged at the amount of water it was being forced to take on. That in the 21 years of the waterpark's existence, I had never seen it covered with anything other than rain and splattered artificially blue water. I closed my eyes and pictured what these moments would be like. When I opened them, I had decided it was time for me to visit the waterpark before the thought process had completed.

It had been raining sporadically for the last few days, a dreary drizzle that left everything sappy. The gray sky hovered lower and lower with each storm, as if threatening to crash into the earth if not stopped. I watched the trees droop under the extra weight as I pulled on a pair of rain boots, slipped into a raincoat.

I took the route down Lexington. At the last bend in the road, by the Methodist church, I gripped the steering wheel, my knuckles whitening. The road straightened and I pulled to a stop at the light. Just ahead, the waterpark rose out of the grayness.

The colors had dulled considerably but, even still, were clearly visible. The flume slide looked absurd, a gigantic piece of plastic reaching toward the sky aimlessly. When the slide had arrived, the contraption had seemed unreal: a round piece of plastic that never seemed to end. While the pieces were laid out around the park, Atlas and I, along with Emily, had made a game of entering the slide on the opposite end, seeing who could reach the center first. Now the middle was hidden by the trees. I turned left on to Kingshighway and from the road I could see where the ravine had overflowed, covering the running path completely in certain parts. The grass surrounding the track contained giant puddles. And then, the waterpark: it looked as if the whole thing had been lowered a foot or two, a thin layer of water covering the whole place.

I parked in my old spot, directly behind the office, and entered into the building first, instead of through the gates. The small office building still somehow managed to smell like chlorine. My boots squeaked on the hallway floor as I made my way to the front, where my father's office was. I stopped, my hand on the doorknob, and took a deep breath.

The office hadn't changed in the ten months since his death; in fact, it hadn't changed since the last time he used it, a little over a year ago. *World Waterpark* magazines were stacked all around the office and in piles on his desk. Sketches of different slide ideas were crinkling at the edges. Pens scattered all over the different documents, as if he picked up a new one each time he needed to write something down.

He had a few pictures of the four of us at various stages, and I picked up the closest one. We were standing down on the riverbanks after my college graduation. I'd taken the robe off already, but the cap was still on top of my head, the new bridge rising sturdily in the background. The river, ever present, rushing away from us out of the picture.

I opened the blinds on the office window. It provided a perfect view of the front half of the waterpark, where most of the slides were housed. Dad loved being around his customers, but when he needed a break, he retreated here. He could still keep his eyes on the park, but in a more removed way. I pressed my face against the glass. Up close, the slides looked worse off. Chunks of paint had fallen off in a few places. The ladders were rusted and looked as if they might crack if someone tried to climb them. The enclosed slides were dented in a few places, as if someone had tried to rip a hole in the sides. The concrete faded and dipped, the surface dangerously uneven. How had this much changed in the ten months since we closed? I pictured the waterpark in its prime: blue water, dotted with people. Slides with kids waiting in line for their turn, chattering noisily. This imposter park seemed like a completely different place.

The gates swung open and I saw Charlie wading through the water. He was wearing black rain boots and a wide brimmed hat; he almost looked like a fisherman, the pool leaf catcher in his right hand. He looked older than I remembered, as if the year-long closure had caused him to age considerably. He walked to the first pool, where the tarp had fallen in, leaving half the pool exposed, and started dragging the contraption through the water.

I ran out of the office building and in Charlie's direction, water splashing around me. The pool chairs had been pushed to the side, some stacked on top of each other.

“Charlie!” He moved his head briefly in my direction, but continued working. “Charlie, what are you doing?” I came to a step beside him and put a hand on his arm. “What are you doing? Why are you cleaning the pool?”

He looked at me as if I had just asked him why he was wearing pants. “Well, because it’s dirty, you see.” His eyebrows were bushy, the same color as the sky around us. His hands were thick with veins. He had worked for my grandfather, a man I’d never met, tilling crops and laying seeds. He became an employee of my father’s when we no longer had farmland to call our own, and had stayed loyally by his side. “I’m just trying to get them out, you know, because we can’t let it muck up.”

“It’s just leaves, Charlie, they’re fine.”

“No, we leave the leaves in, we gonna have to replace the water, and there’s no money for that, at least I don’t think so anyway.” He stopped working to look up at me, as if waiting for some kind of confirmation.

“Money for what?” I seized the opportunity to take the leaf catcher and throw it a few feet away from us.

“To replace the water. Your father was probably out right? Of money?”

“Charlie, what are you talking about?”

Charlie looked at me, stumped. He then turned in a slow circle, shuffling his feet in the thin layer of water. “You gonna open the place back up, ain’t you? That’s why you’re here, huh?”

“Charlie, I’m here because you called me. Because of the flooding?” He stared at me blankly. “You said I had to come.”

Charlie's eyes brightened. "No, I didn't say you had to come. No, not that. I said the park was flooded."

He paused. I looked around, as if offering confirmation. The water was still, but there was enough to create a current, if I so desired.

"I said it was flooded to see if you would come. And you did, so now we can start working on the park."

"What?" I felt my eyebrows furrowing angrily, a trademark expression my mother had passed down to me. "What are you talking about?"

Charlie moved around me to pick up the leaf cleaner. "Well, you obviously still care for the place. Otherwise why would you be here, after all this time?" The way he was talking, it was as if he created the flood on his own.

"Of course I care for this place. What's the matter with you?" I knew the words to be true yet they still felt strange as I said them. After all this time of trying to figure out why my father had given the park to me, the answer was as simple as that: *Of course I care for this place.* My breath caught in my throat and my chest expanded, as if a balloon had been inflated inside of me. I moved in a slow circle and looked around me. I had seen all of the decay already, but now I felt as if a veil had been removed and I was really seeing the place: dull colors, rusted gates, tree branches scattered haphazardly across the concrete surface. Some of the tarps had started to mildew, leaves in pulpy clumps. I started wading through the water toward the center of the park, where all the slides were gathered together as if in conversation. Each one seemed to be struggling from some ailment: crumbling paint, dented section, missing ladder rung. In the shallow end of the pool, just to the side of the slides, the in-pool umbrellas, the ones that sprinkled water on

kids when they stood directly underneath, stuck out from underneath the tarp like mushroom caps.

Charlie was saying something behind me, but I wasn't listening. It had started sprinkling and I didn't pull my hood up, even as the raindrops caught on my eyelashes and clouded my vision. I blinked a few times. Moving past the slides, the rest of the park came into view. The sectioned-off lifeguard break area was undisturbed, the tarps back here still secured. Mrs. LeGrand's snack stand, however, had started to cave in on itself. I wasn't surprised—it was just a bunch of wood nailed together—but I felt my stomach sink. There were still snacks stacked up inside, and I felt as if I was failing my dad all over again for not even thinking to clean out the snack stand after his death. I came to a stop on the other side of my dad's office window and looked at my reflection. I looked tiny among the slides, a displaced traveler lost in a world of plastic and chlorine. The sky was even darker in the reflection and, in contrast, my pale skin and hair stood out harshly.

I looked to the left of the window and gasped. I stumbled over my feet as I moved backwards and would have walked into the pool had Charlie not rushed over to place a hand on my back. He still had the leaf cleaner in hand, full of leaves, and moved toward the shallow pool, muttering something. I scanned my eyes over the exterior office wall, trying to compute the image. Covering half of the wall was a mural of the Mississippi river and downtown Cape Girardeau. The river, painted an electric blue, was expansive and wide. Dark blue streaks marked the river's current. The river was painted diagonally on the wall, and I almost expected water to come pouring out of the concrete, the river joining the park's floodwaters. On the mural, it pushed up on the grid of downtown, just as it did in real life, except there was one noticeable difference: whereas

the real downtown was separated, blatantly, by the floodgates, the painted downtown welcomed the river, the water filling the streets of downtown gracefully. The buildings were painted in bright Mardi Gras colors, shaped in a way that gave them depth. Instead of denying the river and its indomitable presence, the mural did the opposite.

“How long has this been here?” I asked, breathlessly, glancing over my shoulder at Charlie. He was leaning forward, looking at something in one of the tarps.

“Oh, I don’t know. ‘Bout three-four months maybe.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about it?”

“I did, girl. I called you.”

“You said it was graffiti, this isn’t graffiti.” I couldn’t take my eyes off the painting and, the more I looked, the more I felt something foreign filling up inside of me. Is that what it would be like if we accepted the river’s water instead of shutting her out? Would downtown fill up so gracefully, to where it seemed as if the water had been there all along? I moved forward to touch the electric blue waves, the buildings of downtown. Up close, I realized everything was labeled appropriately: Buckner’s Brewery, Somewhere in Time Antiques, Broussard’s Cajun Cuisine. Down to even the smallest details, like the little alligator on the sign outside of Broussard’s, wearing a red hat and holding up a crawfish pierced on a fork. It was all there. The mural made the town seem magical. I traced my hands on the river as it coursed through the painted version of Independence Street; the street I had grown up on. The mural stopped at the window, the brushstrokes cutting off blocks before my house.

Charlie was mumbling something under his breath; as he got closer, I realized he was saying, “Don’t touch it!” He reached out and grabbed my arm. “Don’t touch it, you don’t know where it’s been.”

“It’s just paint.” I jerked my hand away. The rain was starting to pick up, joining the floodwaters in tiny splashes. “Do you know who did this?”

“Do I know?” Charlie sucked in air, clucking his lips. “You think if I know this still be here? All I know is I drive by one day and it’s just *there*. You can see it straight from the road.” Charlie shook his head. “If I knew, I’d get that rascal right back up here to cover it—”

“No, you can’t do that.” The words surprised me, but I knew I meant them. “It should stay.”

“Are you crazy?” I could hear Charlie going on about why I was nuts for wanting to keep the mural, but I tuned him out. I ran my fingers through the other streets I hadn’t touched. A tiny version of the bridge was in the back, the river rushing through it and past it, away from us. That was the elusive magic of the river: the fact that she was never really ours.

I kept moving my hand and stood board straight when I reached the corner of Broadway and Water Street, where the open floodgates stood. Sitting atop the waves, hands in the air, were two blonde-haired girls. They were small, wearing bathing suits, and they were smiling. I felt my breath quicken. I quickly scanned the rest of the mural to see if any other people had been painted, but no. It was the just the two blonde girls.

Two blonde girls, down by the river. Two blonde girls, like Emily and me, on our weekly river walks we had taken for so many years. Two blonde girls, fascinated by the river and the promise it offered.

“Emily,” I said softly. I pressed my fingertips to the painting, Charlie clucking behind me. We hadn’t spoken in years. When we were young, she had been fascinated with maps and the thought of leaving Cape Girardeau; the fact that the world had a thousand other cities to live in. But it was more than just a Midwestern desire to follow the water to see where it took you. Hers was a different animal: a want to be pretty, to be wealthy, to be better than others. She wanted to sit on a throne above her parents and let them see how much better she was than them. She wanted to leave behind her closet full of maps, covering every inch of the wall, and move on to something grander. She wanted it so badly she would pick the wrong guy, and the wrong direction in life to get there, which was the last thing we spoke about before she moved away six years ago and I never heard from her again.

I had done well not to think about her since then, chalking up our years together as childhood friendship, one of those that rises and fades just as easily as the sun. But the hours we had spent together as children always caused me to rethink things.

“Who painted this?” I asked again.

“Girl, I already told you I don’t know. Get your face away from it, you’re gonna get lead poisoning.” Charlie frowned at me. He moved off toward the opposite side of the park, still carrying the leaf cleaner. I watched him go, one hand still pressed against the mural. Somewhere between the time I’d arrived at the waterpark and now I had decided

the park couldn't remain like this any longer. It was going to take a lot of work to get the park ready to re-open, but at least the leaves were a place to start.

CHAPTER 3

My father had died from an indescribable disease, something that struck him in his last few years and started slowly taking over his body. It was the kind of disease where one doctor would bring in four or five other doctors and they would all stare at him like he was some marvel of the world and leave the room looking stumped. No one could figure it out. Over the course of two years, he was told he had seven different diseases. When he died, they wrote “heart failure” on his death certificate, even though it was a lie. But as the doctor explained to us in the cold hospital room, and the caretaker in the funeral home: “Sometimes it puts people at ease to have that reason for death. That cause, you know, that you can point to and see yes, you. You did it.”

My mom latched on to this idea. At first, her attachment to the statement manifested itself in small ways: she’d spend a few hours tracing his medical history on poster board, trying to pinpoint where his sickness started. She’d obtain medical records and study the terminology, hoping to stumble upon some missing link and that everything would fall into place; that even though we weren’t able to save him, the reasons could be pinpointed in his death. Soon she was obsessed, determined to figure out what had caused his body to give out, his words to fail him, his inability to breathe on his own.

Mom taught world literature and classics at the university; she wore long, prairie skirts and beads around her wrist. Once a student had asked her in class if she had been a hippie, and my mom laughed and said, “Isn’t it obvious?” She practiced yoga, drank herbal tea, and refused to see the movie versions of things like *Troy* and *Percy Jackson* because she said it was preposterous to try and replicate those stories in film. She and my father had fallen in love over their shared love of Shakespeare and had taken that as

enough symmetry to get married and raise a family together. In life, she had clearly cared for and doted on him; in death, she couldn't let him go. More than that, she couldn't let the reason for death go. She started keeping plants, placing them on top of her piles of books and on hooks dangling from the ceiling. It wasn't uncommon to visit her and find her standing in front of one of her plants, a watering can in hand, muttering to herself: "You know, it's just that there's no answer to it. It'd be nice if he'd been, you know, *shot* or something. Then at least we'd know why." She meditated more frequently; she kept books on different religions and their treatment of death on her bedside table, calling occasionally to update me on a different ritual: "You know in Hinduism, they put rice in the mouth to feed the person's soul, and flowers on the body. We should have done something like that." She always ended the conversation that way, a lament on our failure to properly bury my father, and I always left the conversations feeling exhausted, as if I was standing under a low archway that bricks were slowly being added to.

Atlas's reaction was simpler. He had been planning a backpacking trip around the world for many years, keeping a list of places to visit with an indefinite start date. But after the funeral, he hung around long enough to make sure Mom was okay, emptied most of his bank account, and flew to South America. I was upset that he left so soon, not even half the grief casseroles eaten. But Atlas had never been one to stay in the same place for long; bouncing around colleges when he got bored, changing jobs when he lost interest. He was restless, prone to dissatisfaction even when in cities with endless opportunities: he left a summer study program in New York City early once because he was tired of the constant noise. But growing up on a river town can do that to you. Years

of watching the river twist away from you, oblivious of your presence; years of watching everyone around you settle further and further into the dust of the town.

I had always wanted to travel the way my brother did; I had always wanted to follow the river and see where else it could take me, what places I would find that were not like home. But, out of some strange obligation, I stayed. I rented a house just outside of town. I visited my father daily, listening to him as he slowly told me his plans for the waterpark to ensure its continued survival, as I transcribed them into a yellow notebook. I helped my mother grieve; I visited the river often and stared across to the other side, imagining that it was a place much more exciting and promising than just Illinois fields. Atlas never asked if I was okay taking this responsibility solely, but then again, I never offered that I wasn't. But sometimes I just wished he had been able to see that, and I resented him for leaving me behind.

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“I'm re-opening the park.”

“Well of course you are, why'd you say it like that was a surprise? Come in, you're letting in the air.” Mom held the screen door to our house open wide enough for me to slip inside. It was raining, the front yard waterlogged, and I kicked off my rain boots by the front door. It had been three days since I had visited the park, and in the meantime I had started calling all of my dad's people—vending machine suppliers, pool cleaner, painters, slide checker, pretty much anything that existed in the park had a guy that did something for it—to bring the park back to life. “Plus, Charlie called me and told me.”

“Does that guy do nothing but call people?” I moved to follow Mom to the living room and abruptly stopped. “Oh my god.” I turned in a slow circle, surveying the room. Plants covered every spare surface, which I had grown accustomed to. It was the things that she’d added in between the plants that gave me pause. Incense sticks, decorated candles, small sculptures of Hindu gods, of Buddha. Her curly hair, pinned on top of her head like it always was, brushed against a wind chime as she walked into the kitchen. It was wooden, with decorative symbols carved into the sides. “What the hell happened to the living room, Mom? It looks like you bought out a World Market.” I tiptoed through the room, as if the new objects might explode. “Are you visiting garage sales again?”

“Leave my things alone.” She poked her head around the corner of the kitchen, two coffee cups in her hand. “It’s just some things Atlas brought back for me from India, I wanted to display them. It is *my* house after all.”

“What do you mean Atlas brought back for you? You’ve seen Atlas? When?” Ever since the mural, I had felt a gaping hole inside of me, like part of my guts had been removed, and I felt it warming at Atlas’s name. “When did you see Atlas?”

Mom winced. “I mean—he *sent* them to me...” she trailed off, retreating into the kitchen. I heard a scuffle, a ‘dammit Mom!’ and then Atlas appeared.

“Hey Hel,” he said, smiling. He wrapped me in a big hug. His blonde hair, the same forgotten color as mine, hung in loose ringlets to his ears. He had a full beard that scratched my face, and he was thinner, his frame leaner. “Surprise!” He glared back at Mom, who shrugged her shoulders in apology. “Although we seem to have forgotten the meaning of a surprise around here.”

“I can’t believe you’re here! You picked a time to come, too.”

“I know, the plane glided in over the water instead of flying.”

“What?” Our mother’s voice rang out in distress from the kitchen.

“It was a joke, Mom!” Atlas yelled back. We moved to sit in the living room, the tendrils of a large vine resting on our shoulders like it was trying to comfort us. “So how is she?” He lowered his voice to a whisper.

“What do you mean?” For a moment I felt as if we are kids again, sharing stories underneath a tented bed sheet, taking turns holding the flashlight.

“With—you know, Dad and everything.”

I wrinkled my eyebrows. “She’s fine.” What a strange question to ask, nearly a year later. But then I saw how concerned Atlas looked, and remembered that he’d been gone for most of this time, a fact I was able to forgive him for in the moment. That he had missed her mourning period almost entirely and just wanted to know, without any fuss, how his mother was doing. “Fine, she’s fine. Found some new hobbies.”

Atlas laughed an unfamiliar laugh. “I can see that. And she’s still working?”

“Yep, not as many classes, but still doing her thing.”

“And you’re working?”

“Yep.”

“At the press?”

“You should come by, while you’re here. It’s totally hipster, my interns do nothing but talk about boys and coffee all day and the best thing is they think I can’t hear them.”

Atlas smiled. Our love for books had been ingrained early, just as early as our ability to swim. “That’s awesome.”

“So—traveling?” I asked. An ache persisted deep in my gut, thinking about Atlas far away in all those places, but I ignored it. “I hear it’s a thing kids are doing these days.”

“Yeah, along with drugs and petty crime!” Atlas joked. We heard our mother faintly say “what?” from the kitchen but ignored it. “It was great, a good journey—spiritually—to deal with some things..”

I wanted to make a joke about *Eat, Pray, Love* but held it back. We had a special sense of humor that existed within just the two of us. But the way he held his shoulders, and looked at me with vibrant eyes that were deep with a level of seriousness I had seen only a few times before, I held it back.

“Oh. So, you visited...like temples and stuff?”

“Yeah, I spent a lot of time in the mountains visiting monasteries. They’re so peaceful, and so old, it makes our religion look pathetic by comparison.”

“Our religion?”

“You know, like the churches in the town,” he said, quickly. We hadn’t been raised regularly at the church, even though it was something our town highly valued. “Makes the Catholic church down by the river look like a joke.”

“You know, the Buddhists have some interesting opinions on death.” Mom rounded the corner from the kitchen and handed us two mugs full of herbal tea, the bags bobbing in the hot water. She continued talking as she moved back and forth between the two rooms, returning with her own mug. “They say death is not the end of life, just the end of our body. Our spirit lives on, and based on how we acted in life, we get sent to six different realms. There’s heaven, hungry ghost, hell—”

“I know this, Mom,” Atlas said.

“I know, but Helen might not.” Atlas’s face turned red. “The others are...oh! Asura, human beings, and animal.”

“What do they all mean?” I asked.

Mom’s eyes narrowed as she considered this question. “I’m not absolutely sure. But it’s karma based. You know, do good here, live better later.” Mom took a slow sip of her tea. Her eyes were cloudy and seemed focused on something in the distance.

“So I guess Dad’s in heaven, right?” I said. Atlas laughed nervously, but I meant it, seriously. “He was a good person.”

“He was the best person,” Mom said, reaching out to touch my knee. Atlas placed a hand on both of our shoulders and for a moment we stayed like that, a family of three trying to close the gap left by the fourth.

It occurred to me that Mom had found solace in other religions, while Atlas had found peace in traveling to religious sites. What was my comfort? I hadn’t once thought of seeking out a church to help me grieve but, at the same time, I hadn’t really grieved at all. I had mourned his death and moved on, like Dad would have wanted us to do. But now, with the waterpark—maybe that could be a form of religion for me, providing reassurance when I needed it the most.

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“This is...insane.”

“Beautiful, right? Don’t touch it!” I snapped at Atlas’s hand as he reached to brush his fingers over the mural. He gave me a confused look. “Sorry, it was what Charlie kept saying. You can touch it, if you want to.” But as he spread his fingers over

the paint, I felt my body tense up, as if he was going to leave a hand-shaped mark on the mural.

“And you have no idea how it got here?”

I shook my head. “No. But I want to find out. It’d be different if there were things like this popping up all over town, but I haven’t seen another one like it.”

“The mystery at the waterpark,” Atlas said, in a faux-scary voice. He turned to face the park. In the few days since he’d come back, the waterpark had started to look more like herself. All of the leaves and tree branches had been cleaned, and the water had been vacuumed off the property, sandbags placed around the periphery to keep any more flood water out. The park surrounding us was still covered, though, and water lapped at the edges of the waterpark eagerly. It was now March, but we were still stuck in a persistent gray period, the skies not clearing enough to let any sort of sunlight in. I had yet to bring in new water, so the pools were still empty; massive holes in the ground that looked lost without chlorine to fill them. I was glad, though, that I was the only one in my family to see the waterpark at its worst. It was something I could keep to myself, and shield from them.

“So you’re really doing it?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well, it took you a year to open the place back up. Thought maybe you’d given up on it.” Atlas put his hands in his jeans pockets and walked to his right, toward the smaller slides. When he reached the shallow lazy river he jumped in, a trickle of water still persisting at the bottom. “This just feels so weird!”

“I know. Feels too empty, you know? Like something happened here.” I thought of all the children that usually occupied this space and shuddered. Even in our off seasons, the park hadn’t felt this way. But that was probably because Dad took the time to make sure the park was well-maintained, even in the dead of winter. He would have extended a protective tarp over the whole place if he’d been able to.

Atlas walked a few feet in the lazy river and then hopped back out. It was sprinkling again, but he didn’t bother pulling up his hood as he came to meet me. He was staying in my house, and the rain boots on his feet were mine, as well as the rain jacket, a spare. “This weather is depressing.” He stopped in front of the mural, his eyes scanning the whole thing again. He suddenly jerked forward, releasing one of his hands. “Hey look!” He placed a finger on top of one of the blonde heads. I felt my heart jump in my throat. “I didn’t notice that before. Did you?”

I smiled and shook my head. “Yep, I did.”

He looked at me incredulously and then back at the mural. “That’s wild. It really looks like you and Emily. You know?”

“I know,” I said, too quickly.

“Y’all did used to walk to the river.” He leaned in close and stared. “You even have on matching bathing suits.”

“It’s not us.” I spoke defensively. For some reason, I don’t want to share this part of the mural with him.

“Whatever you say.” Atlas’s fingers lingered. He was staying with me until he figured out his next “move,” so I called on him to help me with the waterpark, but I wasn’t in the mood to answer so many questions. “Have you spoken to her since—”

“She moved? No.”

“I was going to say since you argued and told her she was throwing away her life?”

My cheeks flushed. “That’s not what I said, Atlas! You know that!”

“I know that, but you might as well have. You *know* she wanted to get out of here. That was her way out, you just had to let her go.”

“No, not like that! She could have done it in the *right* way, under better circumstances.” Our last conversation bubbled up fresh in my mind, pushing through years of ignoring its existence. “She could have gotten out, she just needed to wait, for the right person, for the right time.”

“And you know what that sounded like to her?”

“It didn’t sound like anything other than what it meant.”

“It sounded like ‘you’re making the dumbest decision of your life. I can’t believe you’d be so stupid.’” Atlas shrugged his shoulders, as if what he was saying was proven fact.

“No it didn’t!” I felt a lump form in my throat, as it always did with the memory of this conversation, at the possibility that I *had* said the wrong thing. “I was speaking as her friend, someone that loves her more than her own family. She needed to know—”

“But sometimes you have to let people go out there and make their own mistakes. You can’t prevent their failure, sometimes it just needs to happen.”

“Oh my god!” I groaned loudly. “You are impossible, I don’t want any of this Eastern love hippy-dippy shit.”

“It’s not that, that’s what I said after she left!”

“Yes, and we argued about it then, too.” I stopped and exhaled loudly. It seemed as if I’d been holding in my breath for several minutes and felt agitated as I waited for my exhale to end. “We see friendships differently. I felt the need to stop her—”

“You were trying to control her—”

“Because I knew what she was doing was wrong!”

“You couldn’t let her go! You always had to have the upper hand with that friendship, even here, when you guys would be spending time in *literally the happiest place on earth* outside of the other happiest place on earth, you’d get upset over the dumbest things!”

“I knew what she was doing was wrong!” I yelled, louder, stomping my right foot. Atlas moved his face an inch back, as if the exclamation had physically pushed him. “I knew it wasn’t going to make her happy.” I sucked in a few jagged breaths, his words ringing in my ears. “I am NOT controlling.”

The drizzle had turned in to full on rain and I realized we were getting soaked, the water slipping over our jackets. I turned away angrily and stormed inside the office building. I closed the office door behind me, but he followed me in. I didn’t want to look him in the eye, so I started rummaging through the months’ supply of mail stacked on the desk.

“I don’t want us to argue. It doesn’t feel right to argue—not here.” Atlas’s tone had changed, but I kept my eyes focused on the mail. Waterpark magazine subscription reminders, pH level testers, offers from water filtration system companies, maintenance reports. It was the oddest collection of mail I’d ever seen. This was another side of the

operations I hadn't been privy too, but I was sure my dad had left some sort of instructions for me for this too in the yellow notebook filled with his words.

Atlas was talking about spending time with Dad in the office when he was younger. I wanted to listen but I felt myself still tuning him out. I flipped through the mail until I got to an envelope that looked different than all the others. It was a wide boxy envelope whose return address read "Wexler Brothers Development." And in the center, stamped in red, was "30 DAYS NOTICE."

"What!?" I said, out loud, as I tore into the envelope. I wasn't aware of Atlas, or the rain outside, or any other surroundings. Everything turned to white noise as I pulled a single sheet of paper out of the envelope and started reading:

Dear Ms. Hayes,

This is a friendly reminder that you have 30 remaining days to claim the property of Wild Rivers Waterpark before the land rolls over into the hands of Wexler Brothers Incorporated. We have tried to reach you several times to discuss this. If we do not hear from you by March 31, 2013, the land and all property contained within will immediately belong to the Wexler Brothers.

Please contact us with any questions or concerns.

Please contact us with any questions or concerns? I felt my brain slowly expand in anger, threatening to burst. I gripped the letter until I tore a hole through the paper and then I sat it down on the desk, where Atlas picked it up quickly.

My mind raced as I thought about the phone calls I had ignored over the past few months. Occasionally I'd get a call from the same number, but I never thought anything of it, as they didn't leave a voicemail. That seemed like a snake-in-the-grass technique, to

call but never leave a voicemail, knowing I wouldn't answer the phone, but that was exactly something the Wexler family would do. Of all the people in the town that wanted to claim my father's property, it had to be the Wexlers. It made sense. No one else would have dared turned the waterpark into anything else. The place was just as much of a part of the town as the river itself.

The Wexlers had a large family tree, with cousins and grandcousins spreading out in long roots, ingrained into the soil of the town. They probably had more money than anyone else in Cape Girardeau combined, and weren't shy about throwing it around either. They were believers that money gave you power, and didn't really give anyone else a chance to disagree, as they simply used their money whenever they needed to. When one of the youngest Wexlers nearly choked on a tough ice cream cone at Culver's, the store didn't stock cones for three years, even though the largest profit came from their custard. When one of the girls close to my age got drunk at one of the bars downtown and pulled over for drunk driving when she was 17, the bar closed and the policemen was reassigned. And when one of their sons broke his legs racing to climb up the ladder during the Wild Rivers Relay, the game ended abruptly, never to be held again.

They were crooked in the sense that they wanted themselves to succeed and no one else. They swung their money around to protect their family members, so in certain respects, they were better than a mafia. But they were their own kind of cult, brainwashing their kids into believing money could fix everything. I didn't need my parents to tell me that. I had figured out their system at a very young age and resented them for it.

I especially resented them for absorbing Emily into their family, marrying her to one of the sons close to our age, and promptly moving them both out of town to invest some of their money “elsewhere.”

“What the hell?” Atlas said. His eyes were wide as he clutched the letter in his hands.

“Look for others,” I instructed. I started digging ferociously through the pile of mail, tossing the magazines and offers aside. He joined me, our hands buried underneath papers and envelopes. I found no others on my first search, so I clawed through the mail a second and third time, dropping to my knees to rummage through the papers that had fallen.

“I’m not finding another one, Hel,” Atlas said after a while.

I tore my hands through the papers a few more times before sighing loudly and collapsing to a full seated position. “They can’t do that, right? Just take over the land?”

“It seems they intend to do just that.”

My mind was racing. I tried to figure out how to react and I came up with nothing. I was always the problem solver, the one that could fix anything. I should have been able to find a solution for this issue, no problem. But I was coming up empty and, the more I thought about it, the more I felt as if my skin was crawling, my body trying to escape itself.

I stood up quickly, unopened mail scattering around my feet. “I have to get out of here.”

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I drove to the river. I couldn't visit my usual spot; the one Emily and I had spent so much time in as children. Because of the floodwaters, the gates were closed. Instead, I drove to an opening further down, a good mile from downtown, where the road swooped down low to greet the water and the adjacent train tracks. The road was flooded there, too, and so I parked my car in the trees and waded until my boots were almost completely covered.

Even when she was swollen and miserable, the Mississippi was still beautiful. She was a strong creature, forcing through the land majestically, not apologizing for the destruction she left behind. I wondered if she understood what an oxymoron she was: a life force for so many people, yet a harbinger of the inevitability of life catching up with you at the same time. With the river, it was impossible to forget that everyone and everything ended, while the water remained, undisturbed.

Dad had brought us to this part of the river before. He would take us on "fact-finding missions" and we'd go down to a part of the river where the train tracks disappeared under the water when it flooded. We'd wade into the water, our ankles turning brown from the mud, and throw sticks into the river to see how quickly the current carried them away from us.

Even though this part of the river was more peaceful, more secluded, I loved the river downtown. It was the part of the river that hugged downtown closely, a thick floodgate the only thing separating the two. It was the part of town visitors took pictures of, in between antique and thrift store shopping; the part of town the old train station was built on, back when commuter trains ran through, so a brief glimpse of the river, still, was

available to them; the part of town showboats docked in for days at a time, offering evening shows, long card games, and saltwater taffy. The bright colored wrappers littered the streets for weeks after one of these visits. Dad had taken us to the showboat once, when we were both young enough to think adults were all just knees and thighs. He lost poorly in cards and was so quick to leave, his face red from anger, that he nearly forgot us on the upper deck, Atlas sick from eating too much taffy.

But all those things had happened in the past and then ended. Cape Girardeau was the sort of town that you could tell thrived during the 20s and 30s and 40s, before it slowly evolved, like many other river towns, into a place where people just happened to live. The river's presence couldn't be ignored, but it also wasn't especially recognized anymore, other than in phrases in travel brochures. "Nestled along the Western banks of the Mighty Mississippi River;" "the jewel of the Mississippi;" "Cape Girardeau's friendly river giant," and so on. At the same time, we needed the river to survive. We were yet another Missouri river town, not as loved or known as Branson and Hannibal, but there all the less, using pictures of it's wide expanse, flowing by the banks of our small downtown, as a way to get people interested in visiting. I knew on a map Cape Girardeau hugged the river, tightly and closely, and that it was the town that desired the river's closeness and not the other way around.

The river had tied me to Cape Girardeau; the river was why I stayed. The river reminded me of my roots, and calmed me. I stared out at the brown water and turned over my recent discovery in my head. To claim the waterpark's land was just like the Wexlers: they saw the land as theirs to own, no matter if someone else was already occupying it. I would have at least appreciated an honest offer for the property: but no, they wanted to

sneak in unobserved and pull the land out from underneath me. I couldn't allow it. My father would've never dreamed of giving the land to anyone outside of the family, and I had to honor that.

The Wexlers had visited our waterpark many times and now they wanted to call it their own. They had already taken Emily from me; what else did they want? But they didn't see Emily's joining of their family as a personal affront; just another "charity case" they took under their wing and revitalized.

I felt angry tears forming at the corners of my eyes. I focused intently on the water and stared. My beautiful Mississippi; the reason our town existed. I closed my eyes and listened to the water move.

CHAPTER 4

In the spring of 6th grade, Emily and I started walking to the river every Tuesday. Whose idea this was I can't remember, other than the very important fact that we had met at the river, both wanderers of the town. We had a routine in place for these walks: We lived two blocks from each other and we started our walks to the river with \$1 sodas at Rhodes 101 Convenience, the one on Independence that always had Jimmy working behind the counter. He chuckled when we entered the store, commenting "you girls thick as thieves" when we sloshed our two large cherry cokes on the counter. For as long as we could remember, one of his front teeth had been missing, and we would theorize on its absence as we tripped out of the store and made our way downtown, the river glittering in the distance like a mirage. Sometimes we thought it was—that we'd get down there and the whole thing would be dried up, a deep valley of dirt and dust instead of a brown mass 200 feet deep at places. But it was hard for us to imagine 200 feet of water descending into the ground at our very feet, so we decided it was probably 50 feet, if that. 50 feet was easy. We could picture 50 feet; count it out with my dad's tape measure.

After leaving Rhodes, it usually took us 26 minutes to reach the floodgates. Like most of the other streets that fed into downtown, Independence was a straight line that dead-ended at a cemetery near the interstate on one end, and the river on the other. We walked by small single family houses, different from ours only in paint colors, low apartment buildings with children eating popsicles, parents smoking cigarettes, situated on the thin railings of second floors. We tried not to stare but sometimes we couldn't help it, their blots on the otherwise colorless scenery unavoidable. We passed a Fred's, the storefront wilted in the sun; the Catholic church, with the fountain out front that always

operated, even during dry seasons; Indian Park, with a basketball court that was slowly being taken over by the earth. We passed all of this before the river finally appeared ahead of us, flowing steadily past the open floodgate wall. In the rainy season, swollen spring days, we usually found closed floodgates. Instead of facing the slow churn of the Mississippi, we were met with murals that depicted the town's history, the other side of the wall holding in the push of water, the stone deteriorated from years of protecting the streets of downtown from flooding.

The grid of downtown pushed up against the floodgate and evolved into antique shops, coffee houses, small restaurants and diners, a brewery that overlooked the river. The walk down Independence was our right of passage to the travel-friendly, orderliness of downtown, no matter how many times we did it, like traversing through the desert to find the lake.

We would turn down Main Street, slurping on our cokes, where the heart of downtown was located. The bike pavilion to the right was lonely and low to the ground, as if trying to disappear into it. The statewide Katy Trail cut through town and eventually locals would capitalize on that, turning old homes into bicycle shops and organizing bike tours that led you out of town and on to the roads that stretched away from Cape Girardeau, like wide vein marks, passing through fields with tall grass and lonely farm houses, leading away and circling back all at the same time.

But at that time, the bike pavilion was just a pavilion, and the roads were just a way to get from one Missouri town to the next. We walked down Main Street, stepping around benches and others occupying the sidewalks at this time of day. It was easy to distinguish between the locals and the tourists. The locals watched us with a

knowledgeable, judging eye—some probably mistaking us for the high school girls who liked to rob antique stores, their faces periodically appearing in the local newspaper, and the others knowing exactly who we were—whereas the tourists watched us with a nervous, careful eye. Even though they were probably just down for the day from St. Louis, visiting the antique shops, it was as if they had been transported to a different country and were afraid of what the locals had up their sleeves.

Cape was a small town, especially back then, and we knew a few of the store owners by name—Mr. Lewis and his video store, tucked a block underneath City Hall in an old wiggery storefront. He waved as we walked by, the old clock in the intersection of Main and Themis blocking my view momentarily as we waved back. Across the street, Mrs. Nicholson was sitting in the front of her antiques store, rolling pin in hand, watching the street—but that’s what she always did, I quickly learned, prone to trust no one, even though she had spent her whole life in Cape Girardeau. The storefronts themselves were unimpressive—large windows, crowded with antique dolls with eyes that blinked, or Buddha statues of all different colors, or pictures of babies so small they fit in your hand, depending on what the business was. Above, the buildings’ façades resembled what the town used to be: high windows with fancy brickwork.

We passed the bars and restaurants that were clustered together at the end of the street, anyone inside urgently drinking, as if the beer in front of them might disappear if they looked away. The sun turned the interiors into a dark pool. Finally, the river so close we could sense it, we turned on Broadway, the brewery that the Keenan’s owned, frequent visitors to dad’s waterpark, rising above us on the right. And the river directly in front.

Even though we made this trip in all kinds of weather, all of my memories of our walks consist of sunshine so bright it turned the surroundings into a white, glowing glob. On those days, I borrowed my mother's old Hollywood sunglasses, pink and diamond-studded, leftovers from her childhood. The sun seemed permanently situated in the sky, and we would walk to the water's edge and sit down simultaneously, both of us hanging our legs over the walkway's edge. We were both thin, tan in the summer, with hair that turned bleach blonde in the sun. This was where we developed our foundations. There were a lot of strange things that we found ourselves relating to each other over, and not because they were so similar, but because almost no one else we knew our age had the same story to tell. Then we'd talk about other things: places we wanted to visit, the kids at our school that kept giving us W.W.J.D. bracelets in every different color, the swiftness of the river, how long it would take to swim to the other side, if it was possible. It was the golden age of our friendship, when we had nothing but time and conversations. Our lives spanned in front of us like books yet to be written.

We always sat on the edge of the concrete walkway, dangling our legs over the edge, inches above the water's slow churn. Some invisible force seemed to be the driving factor that kept the river moving, and we'd sometimes speculate on how long it would take the river to dry up, if water stopped sprouting from its inception somewhere in Minnesota. We said it wouldn't happen the way you'd think a river would dry up—water slowly vaporizing and vanishing in the air, the whole of the river drying simultaneously until nothing remained but patchy, dry spots—but starting at the river's beginnings. At first, no change would be noticeable. But then slowly, all the water would be sucked into

the Gulf, river-dwellers watching in amazement as the water literally disappeared before their eyes.

Usually just a few other people frequented the sidewalk, emerging from the other side of the floodgate as if from another dimension, suddenly appearing and disappearing. On one side was the slow crawl of the town, the drizzly business of a work day, but on the other side was the slow crawl of the river, captivating in its lolling waves, minimal sound, deep mysterious color. We'd see people pause to eat their lunch on a bench, watching the water, or runners bending over, red-faced, or parents walking slowly behind running kids who all got dangerously low to the edge. We had made a bet that one of them would fall in one day, the force of their kid-running too much, and be swept away to our right, the river moving methodically toward the Gulf.

One day we were sucking down our cherry cokes, passing a bag of skittles between us that Jimmy had given to us for free, when a large group of people suddenly pushed their way through the other side of the floodgate. There were so many of them so quickly it literally felt as if the air had expanded to allow space for them, their bodies and their voices taking up more space than was even available. There were about 25 of them, of all ages, all wearing khakis and white shirts. It was May, the summer humidity trickling up on us, waiting for the day it could full on surprise us, like a ghost in the closet. We didn't really think anything of them, just watched with straws in our mouths as someone dressed all in black directed them to stand in a huddle together, like a preppy sports team. He turned to look around him, a hand shielding his eyes, and we noticed he had a camera in his hands. One of the older women was fussing with hair, licking her hand and patting down strays, wiping smudge off a little girl's face. I couldn't be sure

how long they'd been there when Emily turned to me and whispered, her eyes lit up, "The chorus."

Emily was fascinated with the wealthy of our town, the privileged who could afford what she dreamed of daily, and observed them like a long-lost lover whenever the opportunity was provided. She had gotten even more excited when I shared with her the word my mom used to describe large groups of people like this, people susceptible to sharing emotions collectively, to writing the histories of themselves and others: the "chorus" of a Greek tragedy, and of a small river town that was a tragedy of its own. Often we'd joke about it— if we threw our Styrofoam cups in the river, just to see how far they floated before sinking, we'd say, "The chorus! The chorus will be so disappointed in us!" And if there was any kind of crime downtown, we'd say, solemnly, "the chorus is very sad." We didn't fully understand, then, the detrimental effect of a town acting together, like a chorus. There were times when Emily applied it differently, to the elite, and her eyes glittered with excitement as she watched them group together, the whites of the shirts all blending together.

They stood motionless for a few moments, slack faces waiting for the photographer's direction. I recognized a few of the kids in the front from the waterpark—they were the youngest of the Wexler clan, kids pulled out of Ralph Lauren catalogues wearing preppy clothing and riding horses. Kids who were expected to understand how the world works at a very young age. The photographer suddenly waved his arms wildly and yelled something. He turned around, scanning his surroundings, and stopped on us. He cocked his head to the side, then threw his arm in the air and motioned the group. "Yes, yes, over here, it's perfect!" He yelled over his shoulder as he walked briskly

toward us. He walked right up to us, to where his shadow hid the sun. “Girls, can you move please?”

Emily shrunk down, her shoulders collapsing into herself. I could tell she was nervous around these people, even though we had no association to them. She stood up, gripping the coke in her hands tightly, too tightly, and the Styrofoam popped, ice and dark brown liquid pouring down her hand and leg. Emily’s mouth widened in shock as the sticky liquid trailed down her calves to the sidewalk. I scrambled to my feet, a sinking feeling in my stomach threatening to pull me back down. I felt ridiculous holding my intact coke, and so I threw into the river, not thinking twice. I heard a gasp behind me, from the chorus, but all I could concentrate was on Emily’s face. She had squeezed her eyes shut, tears threatening to spill out the side.

“It’s okay, it will be okay,” I assured her, reaching to put my hand on her arm. She jerked her arm away, moving around furiously and running off toward the floodgate doors, leaving as much space between she and the group as she could allow. She didn’t even look at them. Her cut-off jean shorts were covered in cherry coke.

I watched for a few moments, trying to figure out what had just happened, before I realized almost every single eye in the group was on me. The men were oblivious, but the women had looks of hideous hatred on their face, their lips snarled. My stomach turned. They didn’t know me at all, yet had already decided I was a waste of space, a bother they needed to remove to accomplish their menial task. Yet I found myself smiling at them, with no teeth, as I followed Emily’s path away from the river.

The air shifted as I crossed to the other side of the floodwall, the dusty brown low buildings of downtown coming into view. I glanced around me, finding Emily in front of

the Port Cape restaurant, its grimy doors propped open, a teenage girl looking bored in the ice cream window that faced the street. Music poured out of the restaurant doors as I crossed the street to Emily, a few bodies already situated at the bar on the other side of the window. She was leaning against the side of the building, where an old painted ad for Coca-Cola—3¢ relieves fatigue!—was slowly fading. She was kicking her feet against each other, her hair falling in her face.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“What were you thinking, throwing your cup into the river like that?” Emily snarled. She looked up at me with such intensity in her eyes I had to take a step back. “I can’t believe you did that. What do you think they’re thinking right now? Dumb girls, don’t know how to use a trash can.”

I felt shame coating my insides like a thick coat of paint. Emily was the only friend I cared about; I hadn’t meant to disappoint her. “They probably won’t remember—”

“You embarrassed me!” She cut me off, staring at me with her deep blue eyes. She watched me for a few more moments, the fire in her eyes slowly fading but persisting all the same, before turning on her heel sharply and marching up the sidewalk. I watched her move away from me, considering whether I should follow her, or make my own way home. Eventually, I picked my feet up and ran after her, and we walked home in silence.

When I saw her at school the next day, I was nervous, but she smiled at me at the lunch table and offered to share her fruit cup. It was if it had never happened.

*

Later that same year, as summer started to slip away from us, we encountered the same group again, only in a different form.

As time had passed, we had slowly started to explore the rest of the town together, making walks to other places than just the river and my father's waterpark. Even though we had both been born and raised in the little stamp of land, we had never explored the place as extensively as we did now, turning the city into a cross-section of locations to visit together, as friends.

"We're troubadours," I announced one afternoon as we kicked our feet down Broadway Street. The street was relatively short, but bordered the edges of the hospital, a "world class regional system" as the brochures said, and the university, before ending at the Mississippi river, like so many other streets in this town. We had decided to visit Capaha Park, across from the hospital. Fall was upon us, the first slow edges of the crisp air sneaking into the wind, and we wanted to visit the geese before it was too cold.

"Troubadours?"

"Yeah, like wanderers. People on the road." I skipped a few steps before crossing Pacific Street in two big leaps, Emily doing the same. "I heard my mom use it."

"My mom can't even remember how to spell her own name." We laughed at this, two spindly girls with homemade friendship bracelets wrapped tightly around our wrists. I know now how false the statement seemed, how hollow, and know that one of us surely picked it up from something we had watched on TV.

"It means we're marking our own territory. Exploring our own land."

"So, like...explorers?" Emily said slowly and carefully. We were close enough to Capaha Park that the pond was visible, the one with the fountain in the middle that sporadically worked.

I considered this. "That's a better word, I guess."

“But I like yours too!” One thing I had learned about Emily upfront was that she was someone who seemed afraid to be herself. It was as if she viewed her personality as an inconvenience and did everything to minimize it. Or, as my mother phrased it, she was someone who was afraid of “taking up too much space in the room.”

It made sense, then, that most things we bonded over were outside, in open spaces. The many antique stores downtown made her claustrophobic, and she couldn't sit in the common areas of my house before my mother's texts and my father's stacks of *World Waterpark* started to make her feel as if she was suffocating. *Imagine living in that kind of space every day*, I wanted to ask her. But, if I had learned anything from the Christian kids at our middle school who had claimed to already know Jesus and were out to save all the rest of us, you couldn't judge someone when you didn't have all the facts yet. And I had yet to see where she lived.

“The Troubadour Explorers of Cape Girardeau,” Emily said and started giggling. I knew how to make her laugh, but there was little else I knew about her that wasn't defined by the people around her or the things she had told me. I knew she was fascinated in the *Titanic*, all those rich people occupying the same space in luxuriousness captured in the Atlantic ocean forever; how she used the little money she had to scour discount bins at the Fred's and the Dollar Store to make her wardrobe like the other girls in the school. Sometimes if she found two of something that she could afford she would share with me, buying matching scarfs or headbands. My mother would comment on the new item, if she happened to notice, before turning back to her books. Emily had probably noticed my mother's occupations with worlds that didn't exist in a 3-D dimension, not anymore at least, and the fact that my father was hardly ever home, spending more time

at the waterpark than anywhere else. She knew my brother and I had been named for the characters my mother so loved, placing the weight of the world on Atlas's shoulders, and the looks of the world on me. She knew Atlas was scared of thunderstorms and that we were so close in age, we sometimes felt more like twins than brother and sister. But these were all things I told her, just like she for me, both of us taking small steps into the Venn diagram of friendship we shared.

"I see them!" Emily announced excitedly, pointing out a few visible geese surrounding the lake. She jumped up and down a few times before seemingly remembering herself and dropping her head. I grabbed her hand and we ran. We ran directly through the empty playground, the swings twisting side to side as we passed them. We ran over the crunchy grass and the few leaves that had fallen. We ran so fast that when we were finally close to the geese, the ones on the outskirts flapped their wings in agitation and fluttered a few feet away from us, some drifting into the pond. The pack leader—evident by his infamous orange beak and scowl—fluttered his wings at us before smugly walking a few feet in the opposite direction.

We had a bag of leftover breadcrumbs. Emily and I sat down on the cold grass and started throwing them aimlessly into the water. A few of the geese that were floating by drifted over and pecked at the crumbs, and at each other when the crumbs disappeared. It was a gray day, and really too cold for Emily and I to both still be in cut-off shorts. But we were determined to keep summer alive.

There was really no one else at the park, the two of us captured in the mid-afternoon lull of the town, the anxious period right before work hours ended and people exploded on the crisscrossing streets like they were racing to see who could get home the

fastest. We were quiet as we tossed our breadcrumbs. The geese maintained a safe distance from us as they pecked at the pieces, flapping wings at each other when two fought over one piece of bread. I turned my gaze toward the lackluster fountain, the bronze geese that rose out of the lake's water and flew over Broadway toward the hospital, where they congregated on the sloping lawn on the hospital's side. In the winter, a life-size nativity occupied the space with the geese; right now, there was a billboard size poster, propped up on stilts. I could just make out the text on the top:

“Congratulations to the Wexler Brothers Incorporated, for 20 years of committed service to the Southeast Missouri Region!” The text was a tacky bright red printed over a picture of the river, with a large group of people smiling at the river's edge. Before I had even fully digested it, I was tapping Emily on the shoulder, who was scattering the last of her bread crumbs in front of her.

“Look, look.” I pointed across the lake. Emily hadn't mentioned the incident at the river since that day. She brushed her hands off, smiling as she watched the geese fight over the last pieces, and turned toward the poster. Her eyes quickly darkened from the early-morning blue they often were to dark, choppy waters. She stared at the picture for some time, thinking what, I couldn't tell. But as she did, her shoulders straightened gradually, as if she were trying to impress these people that weren't even here, just flat pictures on plastic. Something about them served as mirror to her, in which she saw a reflection of herself in which she wasn't too pleased.

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When I asked Emily, after she and John were engaged, if she realized the river family, poster family, and John's family were all the same, her eyes turned cloudy. She furrowed

her eyebrows and looked past my earlobe, as if waiting for something in the distance. She hadn't left me yet; she hadn't shed her former life like a snakeskin, evolving into someone else completely. Eventually she said no, she hadn't realized that, and was I sure that it was? An answer that was clearly practiced; a revision of the truth.

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Not long after we saw the Wexler's poster, she invited me over to her house for the first time.

She said she had something she wanted me to see, and that I would understand everything else when I did. Her eyes were dark pools, an unfathomable depth containing more than I could ever pretend to understand about her.

I couldn't figure out if she always intended to do this, or if the events prior had convinced her to share a part of her life with me she had shared with no one else. No one was home when we went in, and I remember thinking how dark the whole house was. The house was almost identical to mine, but the furniture was dusty and stained, dishes stacked in the sink. A dog barked, and I noticed a mid-sized mutt chained up outside, his eyes crusty. I hadn't realized her family had a pet.

She took me to her bedroom. Her room was plain—a bed with a knitted blanket, a dresser with a handheld mirror and a small bottle of body spray. There were no personal artifacts.

Then she showed me her closet.

It was just large enough for us both to sit in. She closed the door and turned on the light. I gasped. Covering the walls, completely, were maps. Maps of cities, countries, states. Places I had never heard of before—Sri Lanka, Mozambique, Tortuga. She had

circled things in red marker, placed star stickers on the places she was particularly interested in. There were no pictures of the places, just maps. But even then, a picture formed anyway—of the world and the way she saw it. A confined space that worked against its own restrictions—the whole world was contained, making the room larger with the force of it.

She looked at me and smiled, a smile more genuine than I remembered seeing before. “I want to see it all.”

CHAPTER 5

On the wall of my dad's office, he had tacked up an old map of Cape Girardeau. At the time it wasn't old: it represented the town when the waterpark opened, back in the early 90's. The map was a dull yellow, faded from the sun, and he had circled in bright red the waterpark's location, still just a field on the map. I could remember, vaguely, the field before the waterpark, but I wasn't sure if it was a memory that was genuinely mine, or one that I had developed after hearing my dad talk about it so much. The field that he measured out and separated from the rest of the land before he burned the grass away and covered the land with concrete.

This was a practical map; not a means of seeing the world. I traced the path from the waterpark to my parent's house, to my house, to Emily's house. To the river, a thin blue line on the map.

I looked from the map to the window. Even though it was still gray outside, the waterpark was slowly coming to life. A painting crew was moving methodically over each of the slides, transitioning them back from dull blues and reds to their original primary colors. They were so bright they looked out of place, but I knew, after everything else had been fixed up—the rusted slides, the crumbling snack shack, the empty pools—that the place would look just the same as before, maybe even better.

I felt a tightness in my chest. I didn't want the waterpark to become distinguishable from my father's original vision. This was his place, and I wanted to honor that. But surely he knew when he passed it to me what would happen. Otherwise he wouldn't have left me with such a clear set of instructions, with an open safe containing close to \$50,000 with a note that read "For the dream" taped to the top of it.

When I told Mom, she said he had emptied out his savings before being confined to the hospital.

I jumped when I heard a voice in my ear. I had been on hold with the Wexler Brothers for so long I'd forgotten I was holding my cell phone. I scrambled to keep from dropping it. "Ms. Hayes?" The voice said again.

"Yes, I'm here."

"Connecting you to Lynn Wexler."

"But I'd really rather speak to one of the brothers!" I said, urgently. I wasn't quick enough; the line blipped a few times and then started ringing.

Great, Lynn Wexler. A curtain of dread slowly descended over me. Of all the Wexlers, she was probably the worst.

"Hello?" A crisp voice spoke on the other end of the line. I could practically hear her pleated pants rubbing up against each other. "Ms. Hayes?"

"Helen," I responded, instinctively, before realizing I should have let her call me "Ms. Hayes," and keep the upper hand as long as possible.

"Oh, yes, *Helen*." She said my name delicately, as if it was unfamiliar to her. "Glad we're finally hearing back from you."

"Well, yeah, that's why I'm calling. I just saw the notice—"

"We've been trying to get in touch with you dear."

"But you only sent one notice. That's not really fair."

"We tried calling you several times."

"But, you see, I never got any of those calls."

"Your phone works doesn't it?"

“Well—yes—”

“Then you got them, you just didn’t answer them.”

I felt a flash of hot anger course through me. Of course she would argue semantics, reducing the whole situation to some small error that was going to be my fault, no matter what.

“You didn’t leave any voicemails.” I spoke in clipped words. “How was I supposed to know?”

“It’s a small town; I just assumed you’d figure it out eventually.”

I squeezed my eyes shut tightly. I wanted to resolve this issue, but not in this way. I was unable to disassociate myself from her, knowing that she was Emily’s mother in law. Every time she spoke, I pictured her perfectly coifed hair and her always-manicured hands that she placed around your forearm when speaking to you, which had the same effect as being slowly poisoned. Whenever she shared Emily’s story with other family members or country club members, she’d whisper it out of the side of her mouth, and even then what she said was a cosmetic form of the truth. “Oh, she rose above her circumstances,” Lynn Wexler would say, drawing out each of the words. “Isn’t that graaaaand?”

She had never liked me, either, even as she was pretending now to be so formal. I had always thought she arranged the job for her son out of town to move Emily away from me, but I knew that had to be a paranoid assumption.

“Helen? Did I lose you there?”

I sighed. “No, I’m still here. Listen, you’re not getting the park.”

Mrs. Wexler gasped, as if this was a huge surprise. “Why would you wait until the

last minute like this?”

I glanced at the calendar on the wall, even though it was three years old. “It’s March 10. This isn’t exactly the last minute.”

“But we have our plans all drawn up and everything—we’re going to put a lovely shopping center there, with consignment shops and a little café.”

I felt my pulse jump. “A *shopping center*?”

“Yes, we’ve asked around and have determined it will fill a need expressed by the community.”

“What part of the community?”

“Concerned citizens; citizens invested in Cape Girardeau’s well-being.” Mrs. Wexler was placing emphasis very intentionally, and I could picture her reading the words from a script. But at the same time, I knew she didn’t need a guide to help her with her wickedness.

“I’m a part of the community too. So is the waterpark, it’s been here almost longer than you have.”

“Watch your words very carefully, my dear.” Mrs. Wexler’s voice darkened. I held the phone away from my ear, as if I expected black smoke to come pouring out. She coughed and her placated voice returned. “I know this is a lot to take in, so we’re sending someone over to help you decide.”

“I don’t need help, I already know—”

“What time will work best for you?”

“Mrs. Wexler,” I said calmly and slowly, hoping that would catch her attention. “I appreciate the offer, but you don’t need to send someone. I don’t want to sell the

property.”

“No one is forcing your hand. We’ll just come around and take a look and see what kind of agreement we can reach.”

“But that’s not necessary.”

“Will tomorrow afternoon work? Say around 3 PM?”

“No, I—”

“Lovely, someone will be out then.”

I opened my mouth to retaliate, yet again, but the phone line was already dead. What just happened? I pulled my cell phone away from my ear and stared at it, as if it would offer me an answer. This must be how they were so successful in always getting their way; they gave no chance for anyone else to get another word in.

The office suddenly felt miniscule, as if it was shrinking in on me. I had straightened up some but the place was still cluttered with my dad’s magazines and park plans. I groaned loudly and pushed one stack off the desk, just to hear it crash to the ground.

I hadn’t given much thought to the Wexler’s attempts to buy the property, but then again I had underestimated their determination. I couldn’t help but feel like this was a personal attack, either. Mrs. Wexler had brought her children to the park countless times when they were young, and now she was suddenly trying to destroy it. She never liked me. I was the part of Emily’s life that she clung on to until the end, before she moved, like a parasite that she couldn’t shake off.

I pressed my face against the window. Two painters were tag-teaming the turbo slide, one standing on a ladder to paint above the other. A few more were re-painting the

stripes on the mushroom cap. And then two more, arguing with Atlas and Charlie directly to the right of the window.

By the mural.

I rushed out of the office, my rain boots squeaking on the linoleum as I pushed my way outside.

“I really don’t think she wants to get rid of it—”

“The girl is crazy, you just paint over it, ya hear?”

“Charlie! Stop steamrolling!”

“I’m not steamrollin’, son, and you be best if you remember your place. This your father’s place, now, I don’t know how he’d feel about this mural.”

“Hey—” I said, but the two didn’t notice. I was standing just behind Charlie, but his shoulder hid me from Atlas’ view. I realized it was the two of them arguing, the painters looking on with wide eyes, their brushes suspended midair.

“What are you saying, my father was against art? Against lovely depictions of our town?”

“Now, son—”

“Don’t call me son, I’m not your son!”

I closed my eyes and yelled. “HEY!” When I opened them the four men had their eyes focused on me. “What the hell is going on out here?”

Atlas’ eyes were wide and exasperated; I recognized the look. It was the same look he’d give me when he thought I’d cheated at a board game, or when he wasn’t being heard, like now. He opened his mouth to speak but Charlie beat him.

“I told them to give this wall a fresh paint.” He nodded toward it. In the drizzly

weather, the colors looked muted. He was still holding the leaf catcher, as if he carried it with him everywhere.

I held back a groan. As much as I wanted to take the leaf catcher and hit him with it, I had to remind myself that not only was he likely close to 70, but he had been working for my father so long he was in some of my earliest memories. Instead, I focused my eyes on his. “We’re keeping the mural. I like it, and I think it completes the park.”

Charlie scoffed. “Completes the park? I never seen a more ridiculous thing in my life!”

“What about the murals downtown, huh? Think those are ridiculous too?” Atlas said. One of the painters smirked.

“Those are different, m’boy. Those tell the story of the town.”

“Well then we’ll paint ‘Welcome to Cape Girardeau’ at the bottom and call it a day,” I said.

Charlie stared at me for a few minutes, his eyes bewildered. He eventually snorted and moved away from us, brandishing the leaf catcher in front of him like a weapon. “I swear to God...never used to be this sassy...” Charlie mumbled. “If only your father could hear you now, I swear...just wait ‘till you get Mrs. LeGrand back in here, she’ll agree! She always used to side with me...” He yelled the last bit, twisting slightly so the words carried over his shoulder.

The painters remained by the mural. I smiled when they didn’t move and asked them to touch up other spots on the walls, just not this one. I moved to where I was standing just inches from the wall. The colors mixed drastically. As much as I wanted to look elsewhere, I was hyperaware of the two girls down by the river, their hands in the

air. Even as I looked at other parts of the mural, my periphery vision edged back to those two girls with yellow hair.

We couldn't get rid of it. I had to figure out who painted it.

Atlas was talking, but I hadn't been paying attention. "Did you hear me? I said I've never seen he and Mrs. LeGrand speak in all our years here."

"He's probably going senile," I muttered, not looking away from the wall.

Atlas laughed. "Wouldn't doubt it. Plus, he's crazy, she loves this shit! She was probably a painter in one of her past lives." When I didn't say anything in response, he continued. "Well at least you had me here."

"Yeah, whole lot of good you were doing."

"Are you fucking kidding me, Hel?" Atlas was incredulous. "I was *helping* you, without me, those painters would have painted right over that thing in five minutes."

"You didn't have to have a whole argument about it." I wanted to contain the words, but I felt aggressive after speaking to Mrs. Wexler. I wanted to find a stick and poke a sleeping bear. I wanted to scream until my voice was hoarse.

Atlas didn't say anything. I could feel his presence, hovering close to mine, and looked at him. His eyes were narrow slits, his teeth gritted together. He looked angry, the kind of anger I had only before seen him direct toward others. "Hey, I'm sorry, that was out of line."

Atlas breathed out heavily. "You know, I know you don't like taking help from others, and that you like being locked up in your own head space, but maybe you could chill out for at least like five seconds, okay? This isn't just your park you know, I spent just as much time here as you."

I felt a stab of pain, like he had just stuck a needle through my arm. He was right; this was our place that we had shared with our father. Was he jealous that it had been handed down to me and not him? But he would have surely said something a long time ago if he had been, instead of jetting off to tour the world.

“Considering I’m your only friend in the whole world, you might be thankful that I’m at least helping you.” Atlas started to walk toward the office. “You’re only 25, too early to be a bitter old hag!” He opened the door angrily and disappeared inside the building.

Under normal circumstances, we would have laughed over the last comment. Instead the words settled in my gut, a sick taste filling my mouth. Maybe he was right; maybe I needed to calm down. I could use his help with the Wexlers; I could use his help in general. Since he’d been staying with me, it had been like we were kids again: adventurous and with a sixth sense that enabled us to sense the other’s presence near us without having to look. We’d carry on conversations for several minutes without even looking the other in the eye.

The only other person I was ever that comfortable with was Emily.

I stared at the two blonde girls again. I almost expected one of them to start moving. Emily’s shape, probably. She’d stand up and start walking down the river, away from me, away from Cape Girardeau. Like she’d always wanted to do as a kid; leave her family behind and never look back.

Leave me behind. Did she ever stop to think, even for a second, how her departure would affect me? Didn’t she want to take me with her? I felt a familiar old longing creeping up inside of me, one that I had become skilled at quelling. An emotional pull

that I preferred to stay a safe distance from, like caging a bird and watching from a few feet away as it eventually figured out it was no longer free.

*

“Do you think I have a hard time making friends?”

“Of course not, honey!” My mom responded too quickly, her voice sugary sweet. I was sitting in her living room, a cup of tea in my hands. Atlas’s words had stuck with me for the remainder of the day until I had started to believe him. So I had driven to my mom’s house for company, and because I didn’t want to be around my brother. She was busy watering her plants, moving methodically around the living room with a watering can in her hand.

“Mom. Real answer, please?”

She pursed her lips. “Well, alright. Sometimes I do worry.”

“Worry how?” The part of me that didn’t want to fail at any part of life, especially the parts that involved impressing my parents, started to sink inside of me.

“Well, you were never good at having *many* friends. And we did worry when Emily left.”

“Who worried? You did? Dad?” She leaned over me to water a plant behind my shoulder, water spraying on my back. “Mom, can you stop watering for just a second!”

She looked flustered. “Fine.” She sat the can down and joined me on the sofa. Atlas had brought her back packages of bangles and she had taken to wearing ten or so on her wrists at all time. They jangled together as she sat next to me. “We worried. All of us.”

“Why?”

“Well, because you were so attached to her! And she to you, don’t get me wrong. But then she—left, and you just moped for a while.”

“Because I was upset!”

Mom held up a hand. “I don’t need an explanation. I’m just answering an opinion.”

I hung my head. “Okay.”

Mom smiled at me, softly, and took my hands. “But you have friends now, right honey? You busy yourself?”

I wanted to laugh at my mom’s poor effort at questioning her daughter to make sure she was happy, something she hadn’t done in over a year. Something I hadn’t expected from her, either, but now the question felt obsolete and pathetic. “Yeah, Mom. I’m okay.”

I ignored the sinking feeling in my stomach, the ache that covered my insides thickly. I ignored the fact that Atlas was probably right.

CHAPTER 6

The next day, I found the clipboard.

I had worked an early morning at the Press so I could leave and meet Mrs. Wexler's lackey at 3. Even though I told myself there was nothing to worry about—they couldn't force me to sell the place and no amount of incentive would make me reconsider—I was still nervous. An anxiousness had persisted, growing from a small tug to a full-on panic. I fixed my hair in the mirror; I re-tucked in my shirt. Once in the office, I switched from rain boots to flats, even though the park was perpetually slick from the constant rain. I placed new business cards with my name on them at the front of the desk, a rush order I had placed at the printing place on Broadway. I sat behind the desk, my hands folded, practicing my best stern looks, my most efficient “get out of here,” in case it came to that. Eventually I realized I still had two hours until the meeting and started straightening the office. I stacked all of the *World Waterparks* in one corner, their dusty covers leaving my hands black. I fingered through old notes written on post-it notes and threw away the illegible ones, collecting the readable ones in the top drawer of the desk; notes like “change water filter” and “call Jeff back.” Things that didn't matter but I formed a sentimental attachment to regardless.

While most of the office was cluttered, the bottom desk drawer held only three things: a spreadable folder with receipts and park sketches, copies of his claim to the land, and the clipboard. Emily's clipboard, that she carried around with her at the waterpark, charting the park's population and visits to the snack stand and what slide was the most popular. It still had all of her notes, clipped together neatly. The pages were worn and crumbling, the writing smudged.

I buried the clipboard underneath the other items from the third drawer and closed it, hard. I felt ridiculous sitting at the desk with no one on the other side, so I moved to the window, staring outside as if the low, gray skies could predict what was going to happen in less than an hour. 2:30. I wished time could pass faster than normal; so fast, perhaps, that it would blow the meeting and the entire need for its occurrence over the river and away from the town.

There were no outside workers at the park that day, just me and Charlie, and I watched him move methodically around the park. The longer I stood, my eyes focused on the waterpark that was slowly starting to resemble the one from my childhood, I felt an itch. An itch from Atlas' words the day prior; an itch from the clipboard in the desk. Was Atlas right? Was he my only friend? I felt ridiculous asking myself that question, but I didn't have an answer. Instead, I thought pathetically: *I know people, Atlas*. I'm not alone.

2:33. In one swift movement, I opened the bottom drawer again and took the clipboard out. I held it in two hands, like it was a precious object. I stared down at the pages, still waterlogged and heavy.

*

The summer after our 8th grade year was especially hot. Heat pooled during the night, waiting for the first sign of light to release it's muggy fingers over the town, spreading thick and providing no room for escape. I knew Florida was supposed to be the worst, with swampland so thick you can cut it with a knife, but there's something that a river does to a town that can't be replicated. Moisture seeped into the town as the humidity gradually grew worse. Parents were desperate for activities that didn't involve their kids

sitting inside all day. My father's business boomed like it never had before.

Emily and I embarked on another summer together. We planned out our weekly walks to the river, what days we would visit different places—the library, the Fred's, the gas station for sodas—our time spent in her closet looking at the maps, dreaming of other places. And because it was hot and because it was free, we visited the waterpark daily.

That year in school we had read *The Giver*, *The Hobbit*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. We had practiced algebra equations until our palms were gray from smudged pencil. We had learned, again, about how our country came to be, and Cape Girardeau's very small place as a Mississippi River port town in the 1800's. We had learned other things too: that girls knew how to cut you to your core faster than boys, that kids in our grade were kissing each other and touching each other just to see what it felt like. We knew Chase Mayfield would take any girl behind the bleachers and feel her up, as long as he got something in return, and that Emily had been back there with him more than once because, as she said, "what did she have to lose?" She said one time they went all the way, his palms sweaty, his eyes nervous. We knew we were suddenly expected to understand the world and how it worked and our place within it.

There were a few things I learned individually too. Kids talked about Emily and called her "easy" or "slut," words we didn't even fully comprehend yet. The Sonic on Broadway was torn down after being closed for a few years, and I learned that Emily's father had been the manager and had gotten busted for cooking meth after hours, selling his product to the people who lived on the river's edges, one flood away from being sucked into the water. Her mother was home less and less frequently as she worked to keep their house. I began to truly recognize the disparateness between the Emily that

appeared among others at school and the Emily I shared all my time with afterwards.

As we were pushed into high school and adulthood, the waterpark was the last thing that allowed us to remain really, truly young. But that, too, slowly started to change. Emily became less interested in the waterslides and spending hours floating on our backs down the lazy river. She started asking my dad questions about the park. Five weeks into the summer, we were walking to the waterpark when I noticed she was carrying something in addition to her pool bag.

“What’s that?” I asked Emily. We were walking down Broadway, the sun slowly creeping up the sidewalk.

“A clipboard. Your dad said I could chart the park’s traffic.” She had the board tucked under her left arm, the pool bag swung over the other.

“For what reason?” I held my arms out to balance as I walked in a purposefully straight line, one foot directly in front of the other. Usually, Emily joined in. This time, she just glanced my way.

“Because I want to know. Plus, then he said I could sit in the lifeguard rest area!” She smiled at this but when I looked at her, she looked away guiltily. The lifeguard rest area was a safe haven for the lifeguards, a part of the larger rest area that the children didn’t have access to, except for Atlas and me. We were granted special privileges as the owner’s children. They were all high schoolers who doted on us probably because they were bored and it was easier than establishing relationships with the other kids at the park. But I hadn’t given the lifeguards much attention with Emily’s companionship. I felt a bubbling jealousy inside of me, learning that she had things that were so separate from me. Things all to her own. I suppose I should have caught on to that by that point, though.

All of the places she wanted to visit on her maps involved her traveling alone.

“That’s cool, I guess,” I said nonchalantly. “As long as the lifeguards are nice to you.”

“Why wouldn’t they be?”

I shrugged in response. It was the only thing I could think to say at the moment, and it felt utterly pathetic.

We turned on to Kingshighway, the sun on our left slowly moving to the top of the sky. The waterpark was barely visible in the distance, the tops of the flags sticking out from between the trees of the actual park that surrounded it. We picked up our pace.

“We’re still going to the river later, right?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t we?” Emily smiled at me.

When we reached the park, Atlas, who had been tagging along behind us, ran off toward the slides, dropping his towels and t-shirts haphazardly by the pool chairs we usually occupied, next to Mrs. LeGrand’s stand. My father wasn’t in sight, but the lifeguards were already in position, meaning we had missed the morning meeting. I started rubbing sunscreen on my arms and legs, spotted with freckles from the time in the sun. Emily sat anxiously, perched at the edge of the pool chair with the clipboard balanced on her knees. Her hair had turned white gold from the sun, like mine, and she had it fixed precariously atop her head in a messy bun, much like the female lifeguards did.

“How’s your Dad?” I asked. Jealously was boiling inside of me and I wanted to make her feel bad.

“I don’t know. I don’t think my Mom’s sad about it anymore, though. She has a

boyfriend, I think.” Emily didn’t turn when she said this to me, only speaking quickly over her shoulder.

“Really? Why do you think?”

“Because I’ve seen a man leave her room three days in a row now. And I’m not stupid.” She turned to me when she said this, sounding accusatory. But I knew she was directing the attitude toward her mother, not me.

“I didn’t say you were.” I looked down at my feet and starting picking at my toenails. “But that’s kind of a big deal, don’t you think?” I looked up, but Emily was gone. She had spotted my father across the park and was dashing toward him, sliding efficiently across the slick poolside.

*

“Your friend, she’s quite the little worker bee.”

“I guess.” I was sitting behind the counter with Mrs. LeGrand, drinking Fanta with a straw. She had wide brimmed sunglasses on, in addition to her scarves, and was smoking what was surely her thousandth cigarette.

“You guess?” Mrs. LeGrand harrumphed. “She was over here earlier asking me about the pattern flow and hourly number of visitors to my snack stand. I don’t know boutchu, but I never seen a child talk like that.” She smushed her cigarette in the ashtray, a small trail of smoke disappearing in the hot air. “No offense, my girl.”

I sucked Fanta through my straw eagerly, leaning forward on my elbows. I had borrowed my Mom’s old rhinestone sunglasses and used them as a way to watch Emily without her noticing me. She was sitting with the lifeguards in their section, laughing about something as she scribbled something on her clipboard. I looked closer and realized

they were laughing too. What was so funny? I had never seen the lifeguards as peers. They were all so much older, with cars and boyfriends or girlfriends. Any conversation I ever had with them was trivial, over what slide was the best and what boys were the cutest. They always looked bored during these conversations. Why wasn't I just as interesting? What was Emily saying to them? What were they talking about?

"It's all probably boys and sex," Mrs. LeGrand said, as if she had been reading my mind. "She looks like an early bloomer."

"Just cause she already has boobs doesn't mean anything." I was surprised at the snap in my voice.

"Oh, my girl. Sweet girl." She rubbed my head, her sharp fingernails digging into my scalp. "It means everything." I looked up at her, the sun reflecting off her sunglasses so sharply I couldn't focus. "But I wouldn't expect you to know that, with that mother of yours."

"What does that mean?"

"Eh." She pulled at the edge of her hair scarf. "What did I say? She's just not—you know." She motioned toward her own breasts. "She's got little mounds is all." She pulled a cigarette out and lit it quickly. My brother went running by, his blonde hair bouncing on his head even though it was wet. "Oh, hey, Atlas! I got a coke for you, sweetie." He smiled his face-covering grin and grabbed it from her before running off. Atlas had gone down the torpedo slide fifteen times already. The pool chairs were already half gone, mothers tanning with magazines in their hands as their kids ran back and forth between them and the water.

A young boy and his mother approached the snack stand and Mrs. LeGrand

stashed her cigarette on the ashtray to help them. The smoke drifted to the top of the shack—a few pieces of wood added on as an afterthought—and collected there. Mrs. LeGrand never noticed this, or just wasn't bothered by it. She handed the boy a coke and then leaned forward, lifting her sunglasses up to her forehead. "You know, down in Nawlins once, I met a little boy looked just like you. He was a street performer, you know what them's are?" I got up to leave. She had told this story countless times before—always to young boys, with a hint of near seduction in her voice. It always made the boys retreat into the shadow of their mothers.

Outside, the sun was high and direct. When it caught on the pool, it turned the water into a canvas of crystals and bright water. Kids went down the slides in even succession, the enclosed flume slide the favorite of the day. Even though the park was geared toward children, some parents followed their kids down, citing "safety" as the reason, though the smiles on their faces told a different story. Water splashing from the slides was the soundtrack of the park, never ceasing. The on-duty lifeguards patrolled the sides of the pool diligently, whistling carelessly and pointing to parents when their child misbehaved. It was rare to see one of the lifeguards actually jump in after someone. When one did, it was usually one on duty by the shallow end, jumping in the water in a straight line to pull a struggling toddler up to the side.

Instead of walking around the pool to join Emily, I watched her from the other side. I got the distinct feeling that I wasn't welcome. Not from anything she had done—she had glanced over at me occasionally, even waved. But the way she looked at the lifeguards was the same way she looked when she had decided she would lose her virginity to Chase. Determined. Focused. All traces of the Emily that was afraid of her

own shadow, of taking up too large of space in a room, put aside. This wasn't the Emily I had become friends with, and I wasn't sure which one I liked better. And I felt guilty for that.

I assumed the walk of the lifeguards, walking slowly along the edge of the pool, keeping my own glassed eyes carefully on the lifeguard rest area. How many were over there? I counted quickly. Twelve total. Six on pool duty, six off. Seven girls, five guys. All students of Cape High School. I knew this because most of the private school kids went to the country club on the edge of town. What were they doing? She wasn't writing anything in her notebook anymore. She was laughing with the girls, who were all smiles and tans. I got a sickening feeling in my stomach, that this was all a ploy to separate us, so she could go off and do her own things without me. Mom always sermoned on how "spending time with yourself should never be wasted." But Emily and I had made promises to each other to do *everything* together.

One of the lifeguards reached out and fingered Emily's white-gold hair, turning to say something to one of the other girls as she did so. They pointed and Emily ran her fingers through it, like she did when she got nervous, and smiled. I touched my hair of the same color, same length even. What made hers so special? Why did she deserve the attention? I felt a fluttering inside of me, my face growing hotter than it already was in the heat. Did they know of her Dad's imprisonment? Of their house that barely stood on its foundation, any hard storm or even gust of wind threatening to knock the thing to pieces? Surely they did, because everyone did. It was town knowledge, the things the chorus talked about in public places, places like these. She hadn't been with me when I overheard the gossiping trio—a group of mothers who chatted nonstop under the patio

umbrellas while their children nearly drowned in the pool, performing a variety of foolish tricks—whispering about her “poor mother,” left to raise Emily on her own. Who, as they put it, “would probably end up right where her father was.” If only she could hear the things that were said about her, she would think twice about being so chummy with the lifeguards.

But wait. My pulse quickened. Maybe that’s what the lifeguards were laughing about. They were laughing at her, about her. Taunting her even, ruthlessly. Emily had no idea the lion’s den she was subjecting herself to. Kids could be cruel, we knew this, but these weren’t kids. They were mature in a way we had yet to experience. And Emily had just entered their world without a second thought. What had I been thinking not to stop her, to pull her away from the flames? I was supposed to save her. What had I been thinking, not to stop her—

“Ahh!” I lurched forward as someone pushed me from behind. I teetered on the pool edge, momentarily catching a glimpse of my reflection in the pool before a splash rippled it away. It was only then that I realized how tightly I was clenching my fists. I turned to see Atlas smiling at me wickedly.

“Lass! You almost pushed me in.”

“Stop calling me that!” He shoved me, again, and I bounced off the heels of my feet toward the deck to get away from the water. “I don’t want to be called Lass anymore.”

“What? Everyone calls you Lass.” I turned sideways so I had eyes on Atlas and on Emily across the pool. I felt stealthy, like all those times I pretended I was Harriet the Spy when I was younger.

“I’m an 8th grader now, Helen.” he said, smartly. He crossed his arms across his chest, water dripping off his elbows. “That’s almost an adult.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, my god. You haven’t even started 8th grade yet.”

He held up his hand, palm flat, the way my father did when he didn’t want to be interrupted. “I’m closer than I was this time last year. Which means I’m almost 13, which means I’m almost a man. And a man can’t have a name like *Lass*. Plus, Dad said he’d give me his old cowboy boots on my birthday.” His face lit up as he said this, in a way I found surprising.

“Yeah, the same Dad that sat by and let you be named Atlas?” I said the words distractedly, my eyes focused on Emily as she accepted a soda from one of the lifeguards, Beth. *Beth*, who was so tall, tan, and thin, she looked like she had walked out of a magazine. *Beth*, who drove her father’s old corvette to work and always made up the best challenges for games of Categories. *Beth*. What kind of name was that anyway?

“I like the name Atlas.” I heard my brother’s words and I snapped out of my trance to find him staring at me, his eyes crinkled downward. “What’s with you anyway, you’re acting strange. Why do you keep looking at the lifeguards?” He looked across the pool. “Oh, I see. Emily’s over there.”

“It’s not a big deal,” I said quickly.

“But you guys spend all your time together,” he said, evenly. Every once in a while, he switched into this mature voice—one that liked to impart wisdom, ask questions about things he didn’t know, expand knowledge on certain subjects. A voice that made it clear he was wiser than he seemed, but he only used it with me, despite his teachers’ complaints for him to act “more his age.” He knew I was the one to take care of

him when our parents were busy, and he knew I checked his homework for him even when he didn't ask me to, and he knew I valued Emily's friendship more than I valued any other relationship, except for maybe his. "She's all you talk about." He paused. "It's like you're in loooove, or something." And just like that, he switched back. "You're in love, you're in loooooove."

"Shut up!" I snapped, shoving him away from me. He bounced back quickly, a shit-eating grin covering his face.

"Emily and Helen sitting in a tree. K-I-S-S-I—"

"Stop it!" I said, shoving him again. I realized a second later I had said the words louder than I meant to, as a few mothers looked up from their magazines or sunscreening to stare at us. I started to walk toward the snack shack, quickly, my face turning red. That's when I noticed Emily staring, as well, the soda half raised to her lips and her forehead crinkled, in a way I had seen my mother's do when she solved crossword puzzles.

"Fine. But I know it's bothering you," Atlas said as he breezed by me, swinging his arms long and high. When he was close enough to the deep end he took off in a run and jumped into the pool. The water splashed around him, producing a million droplets, before settling again, the movement soon joining the natural pull of the water, as if he had never disturbed it.

I had been staring at the spot where he had jumped in for only a few moments when I saw Emily's reflection, approaching from the other side. My throat seized up. I turned and walked briskly toward the snack shack. I had almost made it when Emily caught up to me, joining my stride.

“What was that all about?”

“What?” I asked flippantly. I reached into the snack shack, through Mrs. LeGrand’s cloud of smoke, and grabbed my soda, the straw sticky from the carbonation.

“You and Atlas. Everything okay?”

Everything okay? What kind of question was that? I smiled, my lips thin and pursed, and said, “Mm-hmm.”

“Oh. Okay,” she said, cheerfully. She was smiling, her face covered in her summertime freckles. Her blonde hair was tied back in a messy braid, and I knew that had to be the work of one of the lifeguards. The clipboard was gripped in her right hand, a few pages flipped over with her bubbly writing covering the pages. She peered through the small window of the snack shack and asked for a sprite. Mrs. LeGrand slowly put down her cigarette before reaching into the refrigerator and handing it to her.

“Didn’t you just have a soda?” The words were out before I could catch them. I suddenly felt a few centimeters tall, and that Emily could pick me up with her forefinger and thumb and flick me away if she so pleased.

She cocked her head to the side and said, “So? What does it matter?” She popped the tab and took a few sips. “It’s hot anyway, so it doesn’t really count, right? You’ll just sweat it out.”

I furrowed my eyebrows. “What are you talking about?”

“That’s what Beth said anyway. That the sun makes you sweat away everything and lose a bunch of weight. That’s why so many people go to saunas.”

“Beth’s an idiot.” I glared across the pool at the lifeguard section, where they were laughing with each other, seemingly uncaring that Emily was no longer with them.

Didn't she recognize that?

"Beth's nice. I like her." Emily took a few more sips of her soda. "Oh, there's Peter! I need to ask him something." She pointed across the park to one of the older lifeguards, college-bound in the Fall.

"What do you need to ask *Peter*?"

"It's nothing, don't worry about it. Here, will you hold this?" She shoved the sprite and clipboard into my arms before jogging in Peter's direction. I watched as they high-fived.

I felt my face fall, realizing I'd been left behind again, but this time as her caddy. I turned in a semi-circle. Mrs. LeGrand was leaning out of her shack; when she saw me, she shrugged, as if to say, "I don't know what to tell you kid." She then retreated into the darkness of her stand.

Impossible. Mrs. LeGrand always knew what to say. I sat the Sprite on the ground and started thumbing through the clipboard. Only a few pages were covered, her bubbly handwriting getting lazier as the pages wore on. It was mostly logistical stuff, like what time each of them clocked in and who ate what for lunch. Some notes from my dad, like the required pH levels, how often the pool had to be cleaned. But then it turned more personal: John's favorite movie, Larissa's natural hair color, Melanie's favorite nail polish color, Lucas's favorite sports team. Trivial stuff. Then the last page, which contained each of their names and a word or phrase written beside it. And at the top: Describe your typical day at the waterpark.

The answers varied. *Long. So fucking hot I want to kill myself. If I hear another child scream and he's not about to drown I'm going to go crazy. Fun. Exhausting. How*

can there be this many hot kids in the small town?

I felt something bubbling up inside of my chest. It wasn't really jealousy; no, I had already gone through that stage. It was more than just jealousy. It was anger, a frustration at her need to ask them these dumb questions. Why did she need to know how they felt? They were all here, weren't they? Clearly something kept bringing them back every day, so what did it matter if they were apparently bored and miserable? I suddenly wished I had gone to the lifeguard section with her, distracted them from answering her questions, from entertaining the notion that the waterpark was anything but enjoyable.

I continued to scan the answers. The last one read *Fun because of cool girls like Emily*. From Peter. Of course it was Peter; she didn't need anything, she just wanted to demonstrate she knew how to flirt! I felt my chest turning hot, my head threatening to expand twice its normal size. What did she need all these people for anyway? I never thought she was the kind of girl that needed affirmation for her coolness; it had been a given, from the start. She was stronger than that.

I read the last line again. My face was hot; my mind fuzzy. *Cool girls like Emily*. I reached forward and tossed the clip bard into the pool. The pages fanned out, water seizing them and holding them, momentarily, on the water's surface before each page started to slowly sink under. The metal of the clipboard dragged the papers down at a faster rate and soon the whole thing was submerged, invisible from the water's surface.

My chest expanded. I expected to look up and see the whole park staring at me, or notice a visible shift in the atmosphere in reaction to my actions. But no. No one even seemed to notice I was standing there, kids grouped in thick lines at the bottoms of the slides, parents fanning their faces with magazines. I leaned over the pool to peer in. The

clipboard was gone, swallowed by the chlorine blue. I looked toward Emily and noticed she was walking around the pool's edges, back to me, her eyes focused on her toes. I jumped in the pool. The water was shallower here, and it didn't take me long to locate the clipboard, the pages disintegrating at the bottom. I grabbed and swam to the surface, holding my arm straight up so the clipboard emerged first.

Emily looked at me, her expression quickly dropping. Her shoulders slumped, her small boobs disappearing in the two-piece she was wearing. "What happened?"

I grimaced. "A kid ran too closely by me and knocked it into the water. I jumped in as fast as I could." I smoothed out the pages, water squirting out as they settled. "I'm sorry, I know you had written down a lot of stuff."

"Yeah, I had." Emily sounded glum. I handed her the clipboard and she looked through the pages, the ink now smeared. I felt bad; I had never lied to her before. I didn't intend to make it a habit, but these days at the waterpark were ours. I just wanted her to remember that.

"I guess I can get a new one," she said slowly, fingering through the pages. The cardboard back had started to expand. She stared at it, dismayed. I felt pride at my accomplishment and swallowed to keep the feeling down.

Then, suddenly, she smiled. "Oh, so I got something for us through Peter!"

"What?"

"A canoe to go out to that little island in the middle of the river! You know, the one beyond the bridge?" Her eyes lit up as she spoke. I knew instantly what she was talking about. Ever since our trips to the river, we had been fascinated by the mini island in the middle of the river. It seemed to be just a patch of land, lost in the middle of the

river for all eternity. We had talked several times about exploring the island, but we had no means of getting out there. So, instead, we continued to watch the river from our spot, the water rushing past us unawares.

But now Emily was demonstrating that she'd been thinking about the island, and our desire to find out more, and was doing something about it. I felt sick to my stomach. I desperately longed for a hairdryer; something to return her pages to normal. Something to undo the message I had sent her just before the one I received from her.

*

That afternoon, Emily, Atlas, and I canoed to the unnamed island.

The canoe came from an old man down by the rock quarry. He didn't say anything as he handed it over to us, and Emily told us once we were in the water that it was Peter's uncle. We realized quickly that the island was further from the shore than we expected. We thought we'd find some kind of marker in the river that distinguished the state line, something similar to the floodgate wall, but we were met with brown water, the color of mud in springtime.

The moment we landed on the island, we realized we weren't the only ones. Several tents were erected on the lush land, white with drooping roofs. The wind pushed against the sides, pitching the sides inward, then back. We stood beside the canoe, paddles still gripped in our hands, as we watched a group of 30 or so sway and singing a soft medley of an unrecognizable song. They were in a circle and they were all holding hands. Most of them wore loose summer clothes, but the circle was dotted with a few people wearing nothing at all. The smoke from a burnt-out fire drifted over the tops of the tents and trees and disappeared into the blue of the sky. We had never seen anything like

it. But the scene reminded me of an image from one of Mom's books—like the fairies in *A Midsummer's Night's Dream* or the witches in *The Crucible*. I was thinking how I couldn't wait to get home to tell her when someone from the group noticed us and waved. Then suddenly they were all waving, a few motioning us to them to join. Smiles jumped off their faces like other beings.

We later learned they were members of a commune, who had drifted crookedly across the country from Washington State and taken up residence there, after spying the island while crossing the bridge. They lived there for a few months until the locals drafted enough signatures to push them off the land.

Atlas spun around quickly and ran off toward the canoe and we had no choice but to follow him, jumping in just as he pushed away from the bank with a strength I had never seen before. Emily and I watched the island shore fade away, our eyes wide with excitement. That was something unlike either of us had experienced, and I felt a tingle run the length of my body. I forgot about the clipboard and Emily's strange quests and for a moment, we were just two girls again, fascinated by the world and what it had to offer.

Then her expression changed. Her eyes darkened, and she studied the island, as if seeking out signs of life through the trees. She was jealous of their journey; she wanted to be one of them.

*

A few days of normalcy passed at the waterpark, Emily and I carrying about our days as we usually did: spending time chatting with Mrs. LeGrand, floating on our stomachs down the lazy river, drinking endless sodas. But she seemed off, like a metronome that

had been knocked slightly off-kilter.

She showed up one morning at my house, a new clipboard in tow, and announced we'd be sitting with the lifeguards that day. All of my objections—what about Atlas? They're too old for us!—she had a response for, as if she'd been practicing.

It was a cloudy day, and the waterpark was emptier than usual. Only the dedicated patrons—people who had bought in to my father's "Summer Pass"—decorated the poolside. She grabbed my hand, told me to stop worrying so much, and pulled me toward their section with a determined look on her face. The last thing I remember was Atlas watching me, skeptically, as she pulled me away.

"Don't be nervous. And stand up straight!" She put her hand on my back and pushed me up, like Mom did when we occasionally went to church. It wasn't that I was unusually tall or anything—Emily and I were the same height—I just found it difficult to constantly stand up straight. I didn't have much in the boobs area yet. Emily and I would compare ours every so often, holding up our shirts to see who had progressed the most. She already had small, round dumplings, that fit nicely into a bathing suit meant for a much older girl. I still wore my two-piece from 5th grade, but that morning, she had forced me into her other bathing suit, built the same way as the first with string ties and a V-shaped bottom. She had purchased both bathing suits for \$5 each after rummaging through the pile at Goodwill for a good hour. I still didn't have much other than small brown nipples to show, and so she stuffed Kleenex down both sides. Just months before, we had made fun of Anna Walker for doing this in the school bathroom. Now we *were* Anna Walker.

She pushed open the gate to their section with confidence and marched us to the

back of the patio tables. The area was empty, the lifeguards still working on their morning tasks, like checking the floaties for any deflated ones, or cleaning the bathrooms. A few were mingling around Mrs. LeGrand's snack stand, stocking up on the sodas and chips that they would bring to their section and store in coolers for the day, eating with the sandwiches they brought from home. A few of the girls had their boyfriends bring them snacks from Sonic, but the frequency of this had decreased when the number of Sonics was reduced to two, the third one Emily's father's meth lab. I wonder if any of the lifeguards had put that together? Maybe that's why they were so interested in her, because she had a "story."

Emily sat down on one side of the patio table, stretching her legs out and crossing her ankles. She had a pair of cheap sunglasses pulled down on her face, even though the sun was barely out, and she looked cool and relaxed, like she was posing for a magazine. I sat on the other side of the table, keeping my body as close together as possible. What if one of the lifeguards asked to sit with us? I didn't want to be the chump that moved her legs first.

Emily didn't speak much while we waited, just simply looked through the pages in her clipboard. That's when I noticed she had re-written many of the notes from her other clipboard. My heart jumped. Had she copied down the legible notes, or re-created them? I felt crushed, as if something was firmly pushing me into the bench. My actions had been pointless, and that made me feel like a fool. Just by re-creating a few words on a page she had outdone me. I leaned over the table, trying to see what she had written in there, but it was just a bunch of scribbled notes and numbers, with arrows that didn't really point to anything.

“What are you gonna do with the notes?” I asked, half-heartedly.

“I’m just interested, you know?” She shook her hair out, which was clearly freshly washed. “Plus, your Dad said he could use the data.”

“My Dad said...what?” He was always talking in terms of numbers and figures, how incoming profit would help cover the cost of a recently purchased slide, or how the intake numbers on a particularly popular pool day would help make up for the days when an unusually low amount of customers showed up. Those days had been rare in the past few years, ever since he put an ad in all the travel brochures in the area. So I wasn’t thrown off by her mention of data. But the fact that she had something secret with my Dad felt like a betrayal twice over. Like both of them were trying to keep something from me.

When Emily told stories of her Dad, she sometimes asked for stories of mine. I would tell her about the pizza nights we had as kids, when Mom would be off lesson planning, or reading, and Dad would order a large pepperoni for us all to share. I told her about how I couldn’t remember a time when I didn’t *not* know how to swim. I told her how we used to take long trips to other cities, sometimes in Tennessee, to visit relatives my Mother no longer spoke of or to, my Father always strumming the steering wheel and singing along to the radio as we made our way down Interstate 55. I had more—makeshift t-ball in the front yard, getting the first try on one of the new slides, wearing his cowboy boots around the house when I was barely old enough to walk—but I wasn’t absolutely ready to share those with her yet. Some things are sacred.

“He would take the data.” Emily repeated herself. Just then, my dad appeared on the other side of the lifeguard gate. He was grinning so much it almost looked dangerous

and he had a bunch of rope swung around his shoulder.

“Hey girls!” he boomed, his voice seeming to reach every edge of the waterpark. Even now, my clearest memories are of him towering over me, seemingly so tall I can’t see his face clearly. “Whatchaupto?”

“Just waiting for the lifeguards.” Emily pointed at her notebook proudly.

“Is that right, Hel?” He looked at me. His stature made it impossible to see around or behind him.

“Yep, just—waiting.” I smiled for emphasis.

“Well, good golly girl, I’m glad to see you socializing with them. You and Atlas used to spend so much time over here, they start asking questions about ya when you don’t.” This statement puzzled me. Always asking questions? Why didn’t they just come and talk to me and Atlas directly? I didn’t understand this. What was so interesting about us? I noticed a flash of jealousy cross through Emily’s eyes, and something else—hurt, pain even.

“Well, it’s really Emily doing the talking.”

My Dad looked at her, shifting his great weight. “Is that right, sweet pea?”

Dad used nicknames like this for everyone, but I could tell it made Emily feel especially special. “I’m gonna ask them a few more questions. Hey, what’s the rope for?”

Dad pointed at the part of the pool where the shallow and deep ends met.

“Replacing the divider there. See, where that rope is starting to fray?” The blue striped rope was frayed at the ends, and also faded, nearly blending in with the color of the chlorine. “Time for a new one, otherwise kids ain’t gonna be able to see it anymore.” He chuckled, even though I knew this was one of his biggest concerns, next to the kids

who stood on top of the rope to launch into somersaults in the deep end, or wrapped their bodies around the rope like it was a security blanket.

“Oh I see.” Emily scribbled this down.

“Well, I won’t bore you girls any longer. Helen, you bring a lunch?”

“It’s in the fridge at Mrs. LeGrand’s.” I pointed, where Mrs. LeGrand was holding a scarf over her head as she smoked.

“And Atlas?” I shook my head yes.

“You too, Emily?” She beamed, as if he had just congratulated her for something. “You’re growing gals!” He reached over and patted me in the back before marching off, his cowboy boots clicking on the poolside cement. It had grown even cloudier and the darkening sky seemed to wrap its arms around him and pull. He ruffled Atlas’s hair as he passed, before he took a few steps back and cannonballed into the pool.

“There you are!” Beth the lifeguard said as she pushed the gates open to enter the lifeguard section. Emily sat up straight so fast I thought she was going to knock her spine out of place. Beth’s hair was braided and her skin glistened, like she had just rolled around in salad dressing. The red lifeguard swimming suit stuck to her skin. She smiled at us, and I understood, slightly, why Emily was so mesmerized. She made it seem as if she spent her entire morning just waiting for us, that her whole purpose for being at the pool was to talk to us. “How’s it going?” In one swift motion she put her drinks and snacks into the cooler and sat down beside me at the patio table.

“Good, we’re doing good,” Emily answered automatically. “Bummer about the clouds, though.”

Bummer? I thought. Who was this girl?

“Yeah, total downer,” Beth said. “But hey, it means we might get to go home early!”

Emily’s eyes darted frantically at this before landing on me. “Really? Why?”

Beth answered. “Mr. Hayes doesn’t keep the park open in rain. It’s not safe.”

Emily calculated in her head and I could tell we were both fully realizing at the same time that it hadn’t rained once yet that summer. How was the river so choppy, then? It didn’t logically add up. Where was the water coming from?

“Oh, there’s Adam!” She waved her hand and he skipped over in large steps to join us. For a teenager, he was impossibly good looking, with curly blonde hair he kept cut short. Trailing behind him was one of the younger lifeguards, just 15 years-old. Dad wasn’t technically supposed to hire anyone younger than 16, but he had seen the kid pushing shopping carts for spare change at the Aldi and felt bad. He only worked a couple shifts a week and wore a baseball cap to hide the baby hair he still hadn’t shed.

“Oh, hey, Marky. You know the girls?”

Marky’s face turned red as he smiled at both of us awkwardly. Emily had noticed him before, sneaking looks at us across the pool from the lifeguard stand, or while we leaned over the counter for drinks at Mrs. LeGrand’s. I wondered if he knew we were only fourteen.

“Sup,” he said, quietly. He quickly stuffed his snacks in the cooler and sat down at one of the far-away tables.

“So, who’s on first?” Adam asked in his newly deep voice. I swore he accentuated it for emphasis.

Beth popped up, her braid swinging. “I am. You guys are on towel duty.”

“Oh, come on, man!” Adam groaned. He threw his t-shirt on the table in frustration.

Beth shrugged. “Well, that’s what you get when you show up late to morning meeting! I can only cover for you for so long.”

Emily looked at me. “Oh, you must be confused.” She sounded as if she was talking to a baby. “See, the lifeguards all work in pairs. One pair takes the lifeguarding shift, the other the dirty work, and they switch every few hours. So six pairs, six lifeguards always on duty.”

I gritted my teeth. What made her think I didn’t already know this? I mumbled, “I know.”

“Helen’s got it! She’s been coming here for years!” Adam said loudly, slipping on his water-proof shoes. He smiled at me before following Beth out of the lifeguard area, hitting invisible drums with his fingers.

“I thought you didn’t like talking to them,” Emily said, accusingly.

“I don’t.”

“Well, I guess we’ll see about that.” Emily had never spoken to me this way before, and I couldn’t help but pull my head back in shock. Where was this jealousy coming from?

*

That afternoon, the sky released rain.

Dad closed the park the moment the first few droplets fell, ushering everyone out with plastic bags tied around his cowboy boots. The new rope jumped and thrashed around in the rush of wind, the water lolling in choppy waves. The few kids squealed and

ran eagerly through the rain, their parents covering heads with magazines and towels. The lifeguards ushered people out, their bodies glittering in the rain, as the rainfall increased from a sprinkling to a full-on downpour. Atlas, Emily, and I all grabbed each other's hands as we left the park, my Dad rushing us on despite Emily's attempts to stay behind and help close down.

We sprinted the whole way back to Emily's house, our flip-flops plattering loudly on the sidewalk. Cars raced by, wipers flying, throwing raindrops on us as we passed. When we reached her house, Atlas tugged my arm to keep going, eager to get home. Mom had told him story after story of thunderstorms being a product of Atlas's struggle with keeping the world steady and he never liked them because of that. The Atlas who was insisting he was ready to be a man just the day before was gone; only fear and desperation flashed in his eyes as we said our goodbyes and headed toward home, Atlas practically dragging me the whole way. We both walked with our heads down, water dripping off my forehead and clouding my vision. My bathing suit cover clung to my skin and I could feel the tissue paper stuffing disintegrating inside the bathing suit. I was afraid if I looked behind us, I'd find a trail of tissue evidence, like some kind of Hansel & Gretel story.

When our house was in sight, Atlas let go and ran for it desperately. It only occurred to me now, as I watched him struggle with the front door, that we could have just waited for Dad to give us a ride home. Atlas opened the door, finally, bursting inside like an inverted pop-up doll. He turned and looked at me, desperately, and waved me inside. When I didn't move, he waved again. I felt rooted to the ground, as if I have never lived anywhere else but here, on the sidewalk outside of my house looking in. The rain

continued to fall around me, thickly. It picked up, steadily, and I could barely see Atlas anymore, calling to me from the front door.

I was halfway to the river before it even registered that I was running, or what I was even doing. I slowed down and looked around me, recognizing the low houses and dusty playground of the end of Independence Avenue, where it dead-ended in front of the flood gate. The faces of well-known Missouri residents, painted on a decade before, looked as if they might melt away in the falling rain. I picked up the running pace again and didn't stop until I was teetering on the edge of the sidewalk on the other side of the floodgate, the river rushing past me just inches away. The river looked unfazed at the added water from the raindrops, the rain melting just as seamlessly into the river as it fell out of the sky. I fought the urge to dive in. Sure, it would be difficult to swim in the waters, but I'd make it, I'd push my way against the strong currents and swim on downriver, past the pyramid in Memphis, past the desolate banks in Mississippi, making my way through Louisiana, where the river curved like a ribbon twirling in the wind until it finally spat me out into the Gulf of Mexico, the muddy river water swirling and mixing with the massive, soundless ocean waters. There would be nothing but waves. Maybe a few ships on the horizon.

Or maybe I would push against the current and go north, through St. Louis, and the fields of Iowa, and make my way towards the river's origins, so close to Canada you could probably see it. I knew the river started there because I had learned about it in school. We had looked at pictures of the Mississippi River Headwaters, where water appeared out of the ground from nowhere and started flowing, already understanding what it meant to be a river. On a larger map I had traced the river, through its hoops and

curls, all the way back down to Cape Girardeau, so small on the map it was almost skipped over. I moved closer to the edge of the river. The water was so close I could taste it. I held my tongue out and caught a few raindrops.

I had gone to the river, alone, before meeting Emily, but this was my first single journey since ours had started. I wonder if she could feel me, out here by myself, as she sat alone in her closet at home. The world was bigger than any of us could imagine, but she wanted to contain it, neatly, in maps and pictures in a small space.

I walked home, slowly, my arms crossed and my head hanging. The rain had slowed to an even drizzle and I realized it was June 21st, the longest day of the year. I tried to make sense of this: rain on the day that was supposed to hold heat the longest, provide sunshine the longest, keep creatures out in the full light of day the longest. But sometimes, things don't have a deeper meaning. They just are.

*

It didn't take long for Emily to take up with Marky. As the summer drew to a lazy close, school set to start in the middle of August, three weeks away, she began spending more time with him than any of the other lifeguards. She started to forget about her notes on the clipboard, about the other lifeguards she had spent so much time trying to impress. Pretty soon, he joined our walks home. We learned that he hated being called Marky, but he didn't say anything because at least he was being noticed at all. We also learned he was about to start the 10th grade and he was nervous. He lived in even worse conditions than us, a small house down by the river, and he was afraid his classmates were catching on to his social standing.

“How do they not already know?” I asked. Emily looked at me like I had just

asked him to walk naked in the street. “I mean, in this town. People talk so much. The chorus, you know.”

“The chorus?” Mark asked. Atlas, ahead of us, turned around and made a dramatic face, like that of a Greek tragedy, and kept walking.

“It’s our term for describing the way people all think together,” Emily said, smiling at me. I was surprised to hear her say “we,” excited that she was acknowledging it was our thing.

“You know, like groupthink,” I added.

“Wow. You’re smart.” Mark sounded impressed. I didn’t tell him I had found the term in a dictionary, marking it to use in this very context.

“People really don’t know us, I guess. My parents keep to themselves. Even from me.” His voice lowered on the last part, but it was still audible. His eyes flashed with sadness so quickly I wasn’t sure if I had imagined it or not.

Emily snorted and said, “Wish I had that problem,” even though she already did. It was in their keeping to themselves that they got noticed.

But Mark didn’t know about her parents either, like the rest of the town did. He was a quiet boy, who always said “sir” to my dad and stayed in the background of conversations, like someone who was used to not being noticed. Like Emily when I met her.

Emily started meeting up with him at night and told me on one of our river trips a few weeks later, right before school was due to start, that they were having sex. That’s how she phrased it, “having sex,” as if they were adults. I didn’t know of any other kids our age who had had sex more than once or twice, the awkwardness of it shying them

away from trying it again. But here she was, subscribing herself to a pleasure we weren't even old enough to understand.

"Whose idea was that?" I picked up a handful of rocks and started throwing them in the river.

Emily stopped slurping her cherry coke and looked at me seriously. "It's sex, Helen. You don't just decide on your own." She put her lips on her straw, staring thoughtfully across the river to the Illinois cross. "It's a decision you make together."

"It's nice," Emily continued. "He always holds my hand after. Plus, he keeps his condoms in his wallet, which I think is cute." This was before we realized most boys did this.

I threw the last rock in the river and turned to look at her. She had been getting in the pool more, at Mark's request, and her hair was turning green from the chlorine. A thin layer of salty sweat covered both our bodies, the humidity so thick you could grasp it in your hand and squeeze. The sun bore down, uncaring, carrying us into August, when everything would reach its boiling point and then break, slowly, as September arrived. Even the river looked sluggish, resentful as it lolled on to the Gulf. I had on one of Mom's old sundresses, Emily's bathing suit that I had never returned. These things would turn me into a woman.

"Let's go back. It's too hot." My soda was leaving a ring of water on the concrete that was evaporating as soon as it was appearing. Emily agreed and we walked through the floodgates, the town nearly invisible in the heat, like trying to see through a flame to the other side. We decided to walk down Main this time, banking on the store awnings to provide a little extra shade before being thrust back into the brutal openness of

Independence, which had fewer and fewer trees lining the street the further away from the river you got. It was a slow day downtown, fewer people wondering through the storefronts than usual. We drank our cokes down to the last dregs, sucking air through the straws, as we observed the others with a discerning eye.

Everything seemed faded in the sun. The bars were sad and pathetic during the day, the lights drooping with the force of the sun, and the few people drinking inside were either leaning in close to the bartender to share a joke or with their drink to share their cheek as they slowly slid into the bar. The display items in the many antique stores were covered with cheese clothes to keep the colors from fading more than they already were. We reached the old town clock, centered in the middle of a four way stop, the buildings clear all the way to the floodgate on our left and up the sloping lawn of City Hall on our right, where kids sometimes went sledding in the winter. We walked on separate sides of the clock, saying “bread and butter,” and it wasn’t until after we had made it past the next few storefronts, a few women laughing loudly with wine glasses in their hands at Cup ‘N Cork, and Mrs. Nicholson sitting square in the middle of her storefront, Somewhere in Time Antiques, as if afraid the high school burglars might strike at any moment, that we realized Mr. L’s Video Store, the one that had been on the corner of Main and Themis for as long as I could remember, was empty.

“Wait.” I stopped and turned around slowly to confirm. The windows were empty, absent of all store decals. I walked back to the storefront quickly and stood in front of one of the large glass windows. Save for a few bookshelves, half of them knocked over into each other, the store was empty. Where were the rows and rows of VHS tapes? Where were the movie posters tacked to the walls, most of them for old

Disney movies, faded from the sun? Where was Mr. Lewis, the kind old man that owned and single-handedly operated the storefront, always situated behind his desk with a smile on his face? He had given Atlas and me free Disney movie rentals every other week when we were kids, always winking and telling us to enjoy. We later understood the action to be charity, but at the time, we had decided he was our favorite person in the town. Not the world, though. Our favorite person in the world was Princess Diana, until she died, and then the position was left open until we both decided we really liked Nelson Mandela.

These were a few things Atlas and I shared that I didn't really speak of to Emily. Not that I hid them from her—I just didn't mention them unless she asked a specific question about us. Atlas and I had bonded long ago, marking our place in the world against the other.

“What is it?” Emily asked, appearing at my side.

“Mr. Lewis's video store. It's gone.” I was surprised at how sad my voice sounded.

“So?” Emily asked. She saw the empty space as an opportunity, not a gap.

“Wonder what will go here next.”

“No, it's just—I wonder what happened to it.” I turned away from the storefront, not wanting to look through the empty windows any longer. “Atlas and I used to come here a lot, is all.”

“I'm sure there's an explanation.”

“Sure is!” Mrs. Nicholson called from the doorway of her store. She was plump, with curly hair piled on top of her head, her lips pursed in a permanently begrudged state.

Which, honestly, made her look like a fish. She was squished into an old office chair, the wheels looking like they might give out an any minute, and was holding a rolling pin in her hand. “He died.”

She presented the information cavalierly, because to her, it was probably just like any other death of someone 70 years or older. “Oh, poor thing, I guess his time did come, know he sure is happy up there with the Lord, bless his gone spirit, he was a nice old man, even if his dentures did clatter when he talked.” The information hit me much harder. I felt as if she had thrown the rolling pin right at my chest, leaving a deep dent that would take years to reshape. I nodded my head, slowly, taking in the information. I wasn’t a crier, never had been. I had understood from an early age that crying only brought unwarranted attention and I wasn’t keen on that. But if anything made me want to cry, it was this. He was the first person I had known in person to die, and I wasn’t sure how I should respond.

“Oh,” I said, after what felt like a million years. “I didn’t realize he was—”

“Oh, honey, nobody did.” Mrs. Nicholson finished my sentence even though my thought was fully formed. “Sure, he was gettin’ on up there, but his heart was healthy. The rest of him, too.”

“Oh. Okay.” I shook my head in response, not really knowing what else to say. “Do you—uh—know what will happen to the store?”

“Lord knows. People will start biddin’ on it soon, though. Waterfront property like this, sure will be scooped up fast.”

“It’s not waterfront,” Emily said flatly.

Mrs. Nicholson's gaze went quickly from sympathetic back to begrudged, one of her eyebrows popping up on her forehead like an angry caterpillar. Emily usually didn't say much when it came to elders that she didn't know that well but, when she did, it was usually something inappropriate or snarky.

"Well, it's close enough," Mrs. Nicholson said, her lips thin.

Emily nodded her chin toward the rolling pin. "What's that for?"

She tightened her grasp on the kitchen utensil. A small price tag sticker was visible on one of the ends. "For keeping kids like you outta my store."

Emily rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on. You know we're not those girls."

Mrs. Nicholson acknowledged this with a tight-lipped grimace. "I know that. But all the same." She settled back into her chair. She showed a brief smile to me. "Nice to see you girls, as always."

"*As always,*" Emily mimicked as we walked away, shaking the ice in her empty cup. We passed a trash can and ditched our cups. I wasn't paying much attention as we traversed the walk home, knowing it by heart at this point. I wiped the sweat off my forehead every few minutes. It wasn't until we turned on Independence that Emily nudged me and said, "Hey. You haven't been listening, are you paying attention?" She crossed her arms across her chest. The sun was directly in front of us now, and I winced behind my sunglasses.

"Yeah, it's just—Atlas and I really liked him, you know? I hadn't even heard he had died."

"Well, it's not like your parents would know."

“No—maybe—sometimes Dad keeps up with the local businesses.” I shook my head quickly. “But that’s not the point, I just wasn’t prepared for this.”

Later, when I told Atlas about the death, he held my hand and said, in his ever-surprising wisdom, that when are any of us ready for death? But eventually it comes, and we have to take it in stride when it does. At the moment, Emily took my hand, swinging it as she held it, and said, “Maybe someone else just as kind will take the storefront.” She was so focused on the future she couldn’t comprehend the devastation of the present.

When I got home, I closed my door and held a pillow over my head, tightly. Maybe this would finally succeed in shutting out the rest of the world. Maybe I could finally just be alone.

*

Emily and Mark continued to have sex even after school started, all three of us now walking the same hallways. It wasn’t until I noticed she left the clipboard behind at the waterpark on one of the last days of summer that I said anything to my dad.

I knew he had a policy about lifeguard relationships, not wanting to bring any unneeded drama into the waterpark. He must have known that they were all sleeping with each other anyway, but was too nice to say anything. But Emily was different. He cared about Emily; he checked in on her health and well-being and actually cared about the answer. He sent snacks and sodas home with her from time to time and told her to call us if her mother ever left her at the house all night by herself. He would be upset to know that she had taken up with one of the lifeguards, especially one that he was doing a favor for. After I told him, he shook his head slowly, digesting the information. He said “thank

you, darling,” kissed me on the forehead, and that was the end of the discussion. But the next year, Mark was no longer a lifeguard at the waterpark.

CHAPTER 7

3:15. The Wexler representative was late. I felt lightness in my chest. Maybe they'd realized the fruitlessness of their endeavors and given up. Maybe they'd just forgotten. I considered calling them, but decided to extend the same courtesy they extended me and put down the phone.

Charlie was fussing with something by the flume slide, newly painted in blue and red stripes. Without hesitating, I changed my shoes and made my way outside. The weather was a bit warmer, but the skies were still gray, the threat of rain lingering in the sky. He was wearing his fisher's hat again, the string tight around his neck. The park was nearly spotless, yet he was fussing with something at the pool's ladder. The leaf catcher was on the ground beside him.

"Charlie, what are you doing?"

He glanced over his shoulder. "What's it look like I'm doing, I'm maintaining the park." He pushed his foot against the ladder a few more times until a pine cone rolled out. He let out a satisfactory noise and leaned down to pick it up.

"The park looks fine, really. You can just—you know, rest for a few days."

He looked at me in amusement. "Oh, sure, let me just go ahead and rest. I worked nearly every day all my life, but now you, young child, comin' along telling me to rest."

"I wasn't trying to insult, I just thought you could... use a break." My words drifted off in the end. I watched a car advance from Lexington; a BMW, much nicer than most of us in the town drove. As it neared the waterpark, it turned on its blinker. "Dammit!"

"Your language, you gotta work on that."

“They’re trying to *buy the waterpark*, Charlie,” I snapped. “The Wexlers, those fucking bastards.”

Charlie shrugged his shoulders. “That ain’t no surprise. They tried to buy it from your father nearly every year for the past ten years.”

I looked at him. I couldn’t hide the shock at his words, completely unaware that this had been an ongoing problem. “Why didn’t he say anything?”

“You know your dad, he wasn’t going to budge.” Charlie picked up his leaf cleaner and rested both of his hands on it. “Plus, they probably just think they’ll get you to break.”

I gritted my teeth. “I am not going to break.” The car had disappeared behind the office building. I heard the engine go off. Then a few moments of silence, followed by heels clicking on the pavement. A woman. Maybe Mrs. Wexler’s daughter? Anna perhaps? It was a family business after all.

The heels rounded the office building and I froze.

“Helen!” Emily said, her voice high and excited. Emily, my best friend for so many years. Emily, six years older than when I last saw her and wearing high heels. In fact, everything she wore screamed Mrs. Wexler: the crisp black pants, the chiffon blouse tucked in. A patterned scarf that seemed to serve no purpose other than decorative. No rain gear; just a large purse swung over her shoulder and hair poofed high, as if she had stuck wadded paper into the roots to keep it looking that way.

I wanted to move; to flee, to run away. To run through town as fast as possible until I had reached the river’s edge, and then I’d figure out some way to cross the river on foot to keep going. All the anger I had harbored toward her for leaving, and now I wanted

to repay the favor by leaving myself. Maybe if I ran, this wouldn't exist anymore: I could run into another time dimension, where Emily stayed far away, forever, because it made things easier that way.

“Well don't just stand there, give me a hug!” She clacked toward me and wrapped her arms around me. I let her hold me for a few seconds before I pushed them off and stepped away.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

Emily's expression faltered, as if she had never heard a curse word before.

“Excuse me?”

“You're back in town? Why are you back in town?”

“John got a job, so we moved back.” Emily looked shocked. “Don't be silly, now, it's me!”

“I know it's you,” I spat out. “I just can't believe you're back here, of all places. What happened to getting out of town? What happened to leaving and never coming back?”

“Well—”

“What happened to the traveling plans? What happened to the maps, huh? What about the maps?” I felt the words pouring out of my mouth lightning fast but I couldn't stop them. I didn't want her to think she could just walk back in here and everything would be okay between us.

She pursed her lips at the mention of the maps. She looked away momentarily before focusing her gaze on me again. I had seen the other Wexlers do this before; it was

their strange way of dealing with uncomfortable topics, or “no-nos” as they liked to call them, as if we were a whole society of toddlers.

“John got a job at a law firm—”

“You mean his parents got him a job at a law firm.”

“And now I’m—” Emily paused. For a second, I caught a glimmer of hesitation in her eyes. It disappeared quickly. “Well, I was a stay at home mom. We have a four-year-old son. Brian.” She paused to see how the information would hit me, and I had a hard time hiding it. I felt as if I had just gotten punched in the gut, and our plans to be aunts for each other’s kids, to babysit while the other had dates, flashed through my mind. The best friend part of me wanted to tell her congratulations, to give her a hug. But I have to be wary of every ploy, and so I don’t budge. She waited a few seconds before continuing to speak. “Now I’m working for my family.”

“Your family! Oh great, your family.” I realized I was talking abnormally loud, as if I was speaking for someone to tape record us. Charlie was propped against his leaf catcher, half listening. “I just don’t—I can’t.” I stopped and tried a different approach. “Why are you here, Emily?”

Emily smiled nervously. She glanced around the park, surveying the property. And then she started in on the pitch. “Well, as you know, the Wexler Brothers have plans to turn this area into a lovely shopping center. We have space for three or four consignment shops, and a small café, at least.” Emily dug through her bag. “Here, take a look at this!”

She shoved a glossy brochure in my hand. It read “The Shops at Wild Rivers,” and featured mock photos of boutiques, fake people sitting on a patio drinking coffee. An expansive parking lot.

“Why are you calling it ‘The Shops at Wild Rivers’ if you’re trying to get rid of the park?”

“Ah, yes.” Emily’s eyes lit up, as if excited I asked one of the questions she had no doubt prepared for. I looked at those familiar blue eyes. They were the same color, the same shape, but something was different about them: more animalistic, more alive, in a sinister way. “It’s homage to your park, you see? For letting us so graciously have the space.”

I laughed. I shook my head a few times before crumbling the brochure and throwing it on the ground. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“No, it’s quite the thing these days.”

“Oh, excuse me. I didn’t realize this was ‘the thing.’ I didn’t realize the thing was convincing your ex-best friend to hand over her father’s business so you could destroy it was *the thing* these days. Pave down paradise to put up a parking lot, huh?”

Emily tilted her head to the side. She looked offended. “That’s not what I meant, Helen. Don’t be so dramatic.”

“Oh my god!” I felt my blood boil. I wanted to grab her and shake her until her new clothes fell off and her hair knocked down and the Emily I knew emerged. “What have they done to you? Are you even in there anymore? Is Emily still in there?” I leaned forward and knocked on Emily’s forehead a couple times. She jerked back as soon as she could, nearly tripping over herself.

“Helen, please!”

I stared at her for a few seconds, wondering if maybe she’d start laughing and say “just kidding!” and we’d hug and talk all about how the Wexlers tried to brainwash her and made her into someone else. But then I realized that even if that was the case, I didn’t want her back. I didn’t want to be second rate in someone’s life, even as best friend. I wanted first priority, and she had removed that possibility for us, forever. I shook my head, smiling like a lunatic. “What are you doing here, Emily?”

“Mrs. Wexle—the Wexler Brothers sent me. They thought I’d get across to you better.”

“You can just say the Demon woman sent you, it’s okay.”

“Helen!” Emily snapped. For a moment, I felt a glimmer of hope, her voice ringing empty, as if she didn’t back her own attitude toward me. But it passed, quickly. “Please be reasonable.”

A few raindrops started to fall. I started toward the office. When I reached the door, I turned around. She had followed me, wincing in the rain, as if it was a personal attack. “Listen, I’m not going to sell. Tell Mrs. Wexler I appreciate her good effort. But also tell her to get over herself and wake up. You can’t just buy whatever you want; the world doesn’t work that way. I *know* you agree with me on that, Emily.” I felt a lump in my throat and I choked it down, embarrassed at myself.

Emily stared at me for a few moments; I could tell her mind was calculating the best response. I held my breath, still hopeful. “We already have interested shop owners, and a café designer—”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” I opened the office door and pulled it shut after me, tightly. The rain had picked up even more, yet Emily still stood on the other side, holding her purse over her head, serving as a pathetic umbrella. “You’re brainwashed!”

“This isn’t just going to end!” Emily yelled, her voice muffled through the door. “They’re not going to just give up. You better be ready.” We stared at each other for a few more moments before she turned and walked away, the rain swallowing her whole.