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A Place, near water

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A PLACE, NEAR WATER

by

Kaitlin McClanahan

Bachelor of Arts
Gonzaga University
2005

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts

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Kaitlin McClanahan

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Examination Committee Chair

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ABSTRACT

A Place, Near Water

by

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My thesis represents the crux of my goal in coming to UNLV: to begin and successfully complete the first half of a novel that I have spent years developing. I attribute much of my success to the dedication I have learned in pushing through the MFA program with the help of my advisors, and will leave the program with enough vision to complete the novel I have begun.

My novel tells the story of a fictional Pacific Northwest town circa WWII. The novel begins with the discovery of a body. It then goes back in time and follows the lives of Millie Mulch and Gael Young up to the murder, which intrinsically links their futures.

I believe my participation in the MFA program has greatly enhanced the shaping of my work and will effectively contribute to UNLV's burgeoning MFA program in a beneficial way.

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for Mama

BOOK ONE: THE BODY

Chapter 1

Lawrence Shalley's body bobbing face down in the shallow waves below Adam's Logging Mill did not stay under water as intended. Weighed down with heavy rocks, there are holes in his pockets and sleeves where they wormed through; shell-speckled mud spilling from his distorted mouth and broken nose. The sun, just beginning to surface over the tree-lined horizon, shines weakly through gray-blue clouds, illuminating the world enough for Gael Young to see the slick hair, the translucent hands and neck surrounded by dark clothing, caught between two log rafts fifty feet from the loading dock where Gael stands. It is the honking cries of sea otters that pull his attention to the body – sea otters with round black eyes, silken gray coats that flash like light as they weave up and around the intricate piling of timber to stare and bark at their uninvited guest.

Odanodan, Washington, in Skookum County at the base of the Puget Sound is a town of fifteen thousand people, an hour drive south of Bigmount, a rainy, mossy place spattered between rivers and inlets, slippery hills and trees taller and more plentiful than buildings. At high tide, there appears to be no shore, simply land ending without sloping downward, trees growing crooked toward the water then bending up to the sky like a stretching animal. When the tide is low, the pebbly and shell-littered shores reveal

themselves, gray and white below the green and brown of the trees. At extremely low tides, below the shore lies another shore, this one dark, muddy and smooth, where the seagulls like to sink their claws and let the waves lap at their twig-like legs. The loading dock Gael is standing on juts out past the shore, always several feet of water beneath it no matter the tide. This morning, 6:45 A.M., the thin veil of fog hovering above the water is cold and damp and feels like a sopping wet coat clinging to bare skin.

Gael, a man of forty, stands with his fists shoved deeply in his pockets on the worn edge of the dock, peering intently through the haze, but sure, yes positive that his eyes are not deceiving him.

Not a bag of something, perhaps.

Not a coyote or wild dog, though possible.

A brown fishing boat with the faded white letters IVANOVICH painted on the side passes, bound for farther up the Sound, and there is a salty, wooden-tasting wind from the sawdust pile down shore and the metal tubes dripping with rust and billowing steam from the sawmill, also owned by Adam's Logging, across the inlet. Gael's eyes dart back and forth between the body and the boat, the mill, looking for signs of life, practicing what he will tell the police once they arrive. How he'd come down to the shore to watch the water because he couldn't sleep, he hadn't anything to do with the body. He looked up the tides in his almanac when he lay in bed, but sleep wouldn't come. And if it was low tide, as it was supposed to be, March 9, 1946, he walked the few blocks from his apartment to the pier, following it down to where the steep stairs dropped him off on the rocky sand and he would walk to the mill, sometimes past it, looking for good fishing spots, and trace his way back as the dawn approached and the fishing boats began

trickling out into the bay on their way to deeper waters. Harmless enough. And now this morning, this horrible thing. This floater, soft flesh pulling away from the bone, knocking back and forth, back and forth, between two cedar trunks wrapped in rusty chain, dotted with barnacles like a rash climbing the metal links, the otters slapping the wet bark with their floppy paws, barking for the body to move.

As soon as he understands what he sees, the fat fingers so white they look blue, hair fanning from the skull - delicately curling like lace - as soon as he recognizes the awkward curvature of the spine, the way the legs lay crooked from the knee, his chest tightens, lungs deflating. He looks around for something to throw at the otters, but finds nothing. Instead he jumps up and down, waving his arms. "Leave it! Shoo, shoo," he shouts, as if they were obedient dogs. "Goddamned water *rats!*"

Thank God it's not a woman, he's thinking. Thank God it's not *her*. Her hair much longer, darker, her body surely unable to swell so big no matter how logged with water. It's no one he knows, he's positive, having only lived in Odanodan for less than six months, all the people he knows scattered about the East Coast and Midwest, thousands of miles from this rainy, little town.

At the back of the sawmill, in a small, dust-caked room, Terry Wilson calls the police to report the body. His voice is low and scratchy, as though he'd recently lost it and was just now getting it back. He speaks matter-of-factly, the only way he knows how to speak, but trails off at the end of his sentence as if unsure of what he says: "Yes, hello. There's a body in the bay below Adam's Logging Mill. Please send someone quick." He hangs up before the female voice on the other end can ask any questions. By 7:00A.M.,

the screaming noise of the bandsaw usually drowns out human speech, but this morning the mill is unusually quiet, most of the workers having abandoned their posts to clamber out onto the dock, their cork boots clinking on the wood boards as they shift their weight from one foot to the other to stand and stare out into the water at the unmoved body. The white mill workers smoke cigarettes and scratch the sawdust out of their hair. The Indian workers stand together in the back of the crowd, hands still snugly stuffed into their thick leather gloves that will be filled with holes by the end of the week. Gael feels compelled to answer questions shouted out from the crowd but ignores them, fearing his calm voice, his lack of panic, will make him seem suspicious. Then one question seems to quiet the low murmurs of the crowd, “Is it an Indian?” Gael stiffens before turning around to see all eyes on him. They can see just as well as him the pale flesh, wondering if skin kept its color after being in the water for so long or if it, too, washed away like paint. Of course, the body’s hair is a tawny brown even when wet, perhaps closer to blond when dry. Gael, feeling responsible for the answer to this question, shakes his head gently no. The low humming of the crowd slowly intensifies.

Gael has not seen a dead body in months. The last one he saw wasn’t even a body at all, just a booted foot sticking out from a pile of rubble that used to be a wall. He wasn’t even sure if the exposed ankle – a purple-blue color he almost mistook for a sock – was attached to a shin or calf. The boot, he noted from his seat on the bed of a truck, was fairly new. The soles were not yet worn thin, the toe a shiny black like glass at night. Sometimes men’s bodies would float in the trenches after the rain. The water would only be a few feet deep, a muddy, opaque brown with bits of blown up trees and grass collecting in the crook of a neck or clinging to exposed arms. Dirt collected around the

nostrils, in the folds of ears and the corners of the mouth, as if their organs had turned to mud and they were leaking it slowly from every opening. The memory of these bodies puts the taste of dirt in his mouth. He can feel the smooth metal of his gun, warmed in his sweaty hand. This body, this floater in the bay, with all its parts, is different. It is clean. There are no visible wounds, no bullet or shrapnel holes oozing blood in the stagnant water, turning it a pink color that screams out against so much brown and gray.

He studies the wood of the dock beneath his feet and listens to the mill workers behind him speak. They are whispering about him, their gruff voices carrying the word 'doctor' to his ear, lifting at the end of it in question. *What is he doing here?* He wishes he had a good answer, a noble one – stitching somebody up or setting a broken bone. *Is he the guy who sewed up Harry Michaelson's thumb?* Gael keeps mostly to himself. He doesn't quite know how to start a conversation, never has, but finds it more difficult since returning from the war. He can't start a sentence without saying, *In North Africa*, or, *In Italy*. It surprises him how other men cringe when he brings up war, as though their planes landing on U.S. soil made it disappear from their minds, stripped their memories like years of salt water licking paint off the underside of a boat.

At 7:20A.M. gray clouds huddle over the dock, painting the waves the color of concrete and dulling the sheen of the log rafts. The dock is now full of mill workers and fishermen who have docked to watch the police poke at the body with the end of a pike pole, watch the tip sink into the soft flesh. A few officers on the log rafts slip and fall as they make their way to the body. A crane used for hauling logs onto the conveyor belt is swung out over them, a long chain dangling from its great height down into the water.

An officer takes the looped end of the chain intended to rope the thick trunks of trees and carefully slips it over the legs of the body and pulls until it is wrapped tightly just under the arms. When the crane is lifted, the body drags slowly out of the water until just the feet are still submerged. The crowd of men stare silently, unable to look away despite the gruesomeness of the sight. In the water, there are two policemen in a canoe, bobbing up and down with the waves caused by the lifting of the body.

“Pull ‘er up!” one of the policemen shouts to the mill worker operating the crane.

There are cars parking in the muddy lot alongside the mill and a small crowd gathering, forming a thin line of dark coats at the shoreline. Some of them women, a few with children. A few Indians have walked up shore from the Res to stand at a distance and watch, not attempting to come any closer. A van pulls down onto the concrete boat ramp beside the dock, the words SKOOKUM COUNTY CORONER painted in thin, black letters on the side.

“Is that a *person*?”

“My God.”

There are noises shouted, most of them words, all of them in reference to the peculiarly shaped object protruding from the body’s abdomen.

“What in the hell - ”

“What is *that*?”

The body is swung across, feet dragging in the waves, giving the horrible illusion that it is a puppet being made to walk on water. Lawrence Shallew was a small man, limbs thin and short, and his face in the decay of death is frowning, melted-looking, like hot wax that is quickly cooled. He looks as though he, too, is disgusted with the sight of

him, filmy eyes open wide with horror, gazing downward at the murder weapon, plunged deeply into his belly.

He is lowered onto the shore. Uniformed men surround it quickly, kneel beside and hover over, to block it from view.

“What was that?”

“A branch?”

“Looked like...”

“An antler?”

“Looked like.”

Then a police officer, older, gray hair peeking out from his dark blue cap, approaches the dock from the shore. He looks up at the men, silent now in his presence, a hand above his eyes to block out sunlight that is not there.

“Looks like a ten point,” he announces. “It’s in there so deep, we can’t get it out.”

“Jesus Christ – who *is* it?”

Two sawmill workers, both thin and young, are talking with police. They lean over the corpse, now on a gurney and covered with a brown tarp, the center propped up like a tent over the antler. The shorter one hunches down, hands on knees, his own face inches from the body’s, and begins nodding. A name. Lawrence Shallow. There is no mother, no siblings to come for the body. Three police officers comb the crowd, asking what people know. A man in a black coat slides the gurney into the van and the men on the dock watch as it drives away. The answers the police gather are inconclusive. The

millworkers are unsure if the information they have is of Lawrence or someone else. Lawrence living in Odanodan for both a couple of weeks and over a year. A guy who kept to himself and also boisterous, cocky, frequenting bars. He grew up in Arizona, Maine, somewhere down south. Lived alone, with his sister, with three other guys in a cabin out on Steamboat Island Road.

“We got nothing,” a police officer says to another.

It begins to rain, but the men do not move from the dock. They smoke cigarettes and discuss the body, as if talking of something else would demand they return to work. For it is slowly dawning on them, that, yes, they will have to return to work. The Saturday morning shift. 5:00A.M. to 1:00P.M. As usual.

Five hours to go.

Seated on the bumper of his patrol car is Detective Steve Hagram, flanked by deputies Archer and McCowan. Some mill workers walk over, the officers uneasy despite knowing the men, for they have no answers for them. Though it is not questions they have, preferring to stand quietly listening to the officers speak.

“From the looks of him, probably been in the water a couple of months,” Hagram guesses.

“That long?” Archer replies.

“Skin flaking off like soap. You guys know anything about this kid?” Hagram asks the mill workers. *Kid* because of the hair, maybe, a little grown out and no gray. The men shake their heads, save one, a man of thirty with coarse skin and quick eyes that dart around the floor without settling on anything in particular.

“Heard he was a queer,” the man says.

Hagram clears his throat, pretends to have a small coughing fit, so he does not have to respond.

“Think it was a lover’s quarrel, huh?” Archer asks the man, who nods once, then walks away with shoulders lifted as if to protect his ears from hearing any more. The man disappears into a sea of flannel shirts. When Steve Hagram stands up to leave, he sees the face of a woman, so pale, so small, he’d have to be blind not to notice it amongst the rough shoulders of so many men.

It’s the Mulch girl from Kimilchi Road. Hagram is almost positive, but she looks different somehow. She’s roughly twenty, maybe older, but looks sixteen, with skin so pale he can see individual blue veins under her eyes, which are dark and shiny, like something burnt then left out in the rain. Hagram knows her name is Millie, but is unsure if she still goes by that. Her real name something ethnic sounding, with a harsh, Slavic ending. He decides she is beautiful, something exotic about the purplish-red skin of her lips, the brows like black paint on white paper, for her skin could not be described as anything other than the color white, like scar tissue long healed. Hagram walks to her, puts a hand on her upper arm.

“You alright, hon?” Hagram is not a tall man, but must stoop his head to hear her speak, so faint and choppy, only two or three intelligible words making their way to his ear.

A halo of downy hair has escaped her ponytail and dances in the wind. She looks around, making sure no one is trying to listen. A few of the men, the younger men, spilling out into the dirt parking lot of the mill, steal glances at her then turn around and

resume their conversations. You cannot tell much of her figure through her clothes, a thick green jacket too big for her narrow shoulders buttoned up to the neck and dangling past her knees. Hagram is distracted by shouting and pushing – a pair of sawmill workers still drunk from the night before. The squabble is broken up before Hagram can excuse himself from the girl's presence, but he stands alert, his hand resting on his hip beside his holster.

“I might know, I think I know... my brother, he knew, or at least I think he knew...”

“What are you saying, Millie?”

She looks up at him for the first time, face softened, he hopes, by the recognition of her name. Lonely people never think anyone knows who they are.

The crowd can see Detective Hagram talking beside his squad car with a girl who is wearing a coat and boots so big for her they appear to belong to a man, and a tall one at that. Her nose is pink with cold, her hands awkwardly hanging at her sides. She is speaking carefully, brows furrowed in thought as she pauses – him nearing closer and closer with each fit of speech. His hands are on his hips, giving him the appearance from behind of exercising his authority, but when viewed from the front, his face is gentle and still, bowed at the neck so he is nearer to the girl's lips, it is obvious he is simply concentrating on her every word. Hagram nods as she speaks, telling him that her brother, Tony, knows the victim. He will be home all day helping their father with the cows. She tells Hagram the address. Just as he thought, Kimilchi Road.

“I didn’t know him,” she clarifies. “Not sure how well my brother does, either. Just know he knows the name, heard him say it once or twice.”

“And what name is that, dear?” Hagram is testing her, not because he thinks she’s lying, but to make sure she isn’t mistaken.

“Mr. Shallew. Lawrence, I think. They just call him Shallew, though, like boys do.” Her voice is clear but distant, as if she is thinking of something else entirely. “I never met him, just heard he liked to drink well past closing time at the bar.” She stops speaking, letting her gaze fall on Hagram’s shoes.

“Know when the last time anybody saw him was?”

She shakes her head.

“Maybe don’t tell my brother it was me who said something,” she says, lifting her head, lines creasing her forehead.

“Yeah, okay.” Hagram remembers Tony from before he moved up north to work in the shipping yards. A small man, pale like Millie, with a puffy chest that he stuck out even farther when he entered a room.

“Your dad home today?” Hagram asks.

Millie nods. She has begun backing away, fumbling with a button of her coat that has come undone.

“I’ll stop by this afternoon,” he says.

She is walking now, long black ponytail untucked from her collar and swinging back and forth between her shoulder blades. It isn’t until she has made her way to her father’s truck parked alongside the mill road that she looks back and gives a weak wave in Hagram’s direction. He cannot tell if she is smiling, as he is, but he does notice the

enormity of her coat draping over her small frame. Probably her father's as well, grabbed in a rush out the door once the news of the body came knocking on her front door. He watches her turn sideways, noting the swell of her stomach, but only for a brief moment, as she climbs into the driver's seat. He chalks it up to an ill-fitting coat, the wind catching it from underneath and blowing it up like a balloon. She is too young still, he thinks, for such things, watching her dark head through the window as she drives away.

Chapter 2

"Find it. Can you find it?"

Millie Mulch, a seven-year-old girl on the floor of the tiny one bedroom house on the Reservation, is petting the deer hide as if it were a living, breathing thing. She is searching for the bullet hole that killed it, Solie watching from the edge of the bed, where she is knitting a hat for Millie's father. Her long, black hair is draped across her shoulders and down her arms, emitting the sweet, powdery smell of rose water. They are clean. Fresh out of the bathtub, scrubbed pink by a starchy washcloth after feeding the bunnies next door, getting rained on, slipping in mud, searching for the stray dog Solie has been feeding who wandered out into the forest behind her house early that morning. They never find the dog. Solie is sure it will show up. Millie's hair is wet on her back through the white T-shirt Solie has given her to wear until her clothes dry.

"I can't find it," Millie says. She lets her hands fall to her sides and looks up at Solie, at her round face, dark eyelashes that leave shadows on her cheeks. Millie thinks, *You look like my mother*, but does not say it. Her father told her never to say that again, not to Solie. Even though Solie and Millie's mother have the same translucently dark

skin, the same dry hands, constantly occupied by laundry, plants, dishes, food. Solie could be her mother's sister. An aunt. Just like Solie asks to be called. Of course, Solie cannot be mentioned to her mother. This has never been said, but Millie knows, can feel it like dread sinking in her stomach.

“You have such teeny-weeny hands, I thought for sure you'd be able to find it, my little Militsa.”

Only Solie calls her that, her real name, so Croatian, so *ethnic*. All the other girls at school have names like Jane, Anne, Elizabeth, Betty, Alice. She wishes her name were Madeline. Such a pretty name, no harsh-sounding letters, no country to attach it to. But it is Solie's voice that makes her name seem like one Millie could like one day. The way her cheeks lift in the middle of saying it, her steady, airy voice making the 'ts' not sound so severe. Millie wants to hug and kiss Solie, wants to tell her that she'd love to come live here with her instead of having to share a house with three smelly brothers who tease and pinch her or a mother who scolds her for the littlest things like leaving the milk out of the ice box or not picking up her clothes from the bathroom floor. Solie never scolds Millie, never even tells her what to do. It is always what Millie wants to do, what she wants to eat, where she wants to go in the hours between her father dropping her off and picking her up. That last hour before 1 o'clock goes by so fast. Millie never wants to leave, but always has to no matter what new excuse she has come up with now.

It is 12:58P.M. Her father will come for her soon. He will tell her to wait in the truck and she will obey, the cab already warm from her father's drive from the mill. A few minutes later her father's lanky frame will come liling out of the front door of the tiny yellow house with an expression on his face as if he were happy to see his daughter.

Millie never sees them kiss, never hears them say *I love you* to one another, but she can feel it in the room, feel it in the way her father's face grows stern and cold as they drive down the highway toward home.

Where were we again, hon? Her father would ask as they idled on the gravel driveway, his freckled face split open in a toothy smile.

The mill. You let me color in the observation deck.

Well, then where are the pictures?

Millie would think for a moment, not looking at her father but at her hands, so small and pale against her dark pants.

I gave them to your boss, Mr. Adams.

Her father would smile even broader, pat her on the knee with a callused, dirt-encrusted hand that never looked completely clean no matter how much soaking or scrubbing, as if his hand grew dirt in the creases around hard skin.

That's my girl, he would say.

The word 'mistress' is unknown to seven-year-old Millie. She only knows that this is another life in Solie's house, like make-believe you have someone to share with. You don't recount your make-believe stories to your mother, can hardly remember what it was you were doing for so long in your room with the door closed, your dolls lined up like an audience on your toy chest while you talk to yourself in the mirror. *What were you doing in there?* your mother asks, but you honestly can't remember. Bits and pieces of pretending to be Olive Oil, feeding Popeye spinach so he can save you, but from what you are not sure. *Nothing,* you say. And you're not even lying, really. Lying makes you feel heavy and panicked with guilt, but this secret, Solie, is you being a good girl. Why

else would your father smile so big when you said the *right* answer? Why else would he call you *hon*, put his arm around you as you walk up the porch steps together?

“Dad will be here any minute,” Solie announces. Her hands move quickly, knitting needles making a faint clicking noise in the otherwise quiet room. As if Solie willed it to be, there is a faint rapping on the door window, the squeak of the hinges as her father opens the door just wide enough for him to slip through the crack. Millie looks over at Solie, thinking, *you jinxed it*.

“Daddy, Aunt Solie and me can’t find the hole,” she says, standing perfectly still outside the bedroom door despite desperately wanting to run and hug her father. If she is sweet, maybe he will let her stay. Though, Millie knows that if she did run to him, try to hug him, he would put his extended arms between them, blaming the thin veil of sawdust, the salty sweat from hauling logs, as the reason why they cannot touch. Millie’s mother would fuss over her dirty clothes, make that hushing noise through her teeth, as if she were whispering ‘shoe’ under her breath as she scrubbed them.

“Can’t find the what?” Her father is tired looking, wrinkles beginning to sprout from the corner of his eyes like fledgling roots. His eyes widen as Solie walks up to greet him hello. It is a kiss on the cheek. Her father leans into Solie’s face, bowing his head like he’s falling asleep standing up.

“The bullet hole,” Millie yells. She wants their attention, doesn’t want them drifting into their secret language of nods and smiles. “Where you shot it, Dad!” Her voice is strong for a child’s. The drawn out ‘Dad’ makes her father’s head snap sideways and give her that look, the one that lets her know she’s used up her last outburst for the

day. He does not need to say, *that's enough*. That look makes Millie feel prickly in her stomach. She is a good girl. She will not test her father, not even at Solie's house.

"I had her look for the hole in the hide you gave me," Solie explains.

"That hide over there," her father points through Millie to the deerskin rug on the floor.

Millie nods.

"There's not a hole in that hide," Emmitt announces. Millie turns around to look at the hide, buckled in the middle like an inchworm.

"What do you mean?" Solie asks. Her voice is quiet like adults do when unsure if they are being fooled.

"I shot that buck in the neck. The hole is mounted to our living room wall."

Millie pictures the deer head above their wood stove with its dusty glass eyes and thin black lips. Sometimes, when she is tired, Millie swears she sees it move. She walks around the back of the wall the head protrudes from, making sure there is not a body to meet the thick neck attached to a piece of polished wood on the other side.

Millie is upset. She wanted to find the hole, if only to please Solie. She imagined some prize for finding it and now there is nothing but her father's words flitting about the room like fruit flies. She wants to wave her hands around, make them scatter and flutter away. Millie walks out the door to the truck without saying goodbye. She feels Solie and her father staring at her back as she closes the door behind her, can feel them talking about her in the house as she climbs into the passenger seat of the truck. She normally smiles and waves at Solie, who puts a hand on her shoulder or pats her on the head, saying, *See you next Saturday*. She will be in trouble, she is sure, and can feel warmth

draining from her body as she sits waiting for her father to come out. She keeps her eyes down, does not turn her head as her father climbs into the driver's seat and throws Millie's neatly folded clothes into her lap.

"You do that again, we're not coming back here." Her father's voice is low, barely above a whisper.

Millie is silent.

"You hear me. You say thank you and goodbye to her when we leave her home. Ungrateful little girl."

Millie whimpers, her eyes well with tears. Her shoulders are shaking and her nose turns hot and tingly.

"I'm sorry," she is finally able to mutter between sobs.

Her father steals glances at her as he drives down the road, eventually putting his large, callused hand on her bony shoulder, saying, "I know you are, hon. I know you are."

Spring, 1933. Millie's grandmother hasn't passed away yet. She won't until well into the summer on the bed set up in the living room so she can look out the window and see when people go up and down the stairs. She is Millie's mother's mother. No taller than little Millie, always with a scarf tied around her gray head, the flower pattern long faded into pale patches of blue and green. A wide housedress hangs from her fleshy chest, which she rests against the kitchen table when she drinks coffee. Millie's brothers are silent when their Baba is present. They do not speak Croatian and Baba does not speak English, although she understands what people say, but only when she wants to.

Her skin is thick, smooth, and hangs from her cheeks, always powdered much lighter than she is, lips always coated in dark red lipstick though she rarely leaves the house. She kisses Millie, leaving oily lip prints on her forehead – her father smearing it with his scratchy sleeve saying, “Clean that off with soap. Go on now.”

This spring, Millie’s parents often argue about money behind their closed bedroom door. Since Baba has come to live with them, her father’s Saturday shifts do not make up for the mortgage of their two-year-old house built from a kit purchased from Sears and assembled by her father and some of his mill worker friends. It does not help that Millie’s brothers eat three times as much as everyone else and that Baba has a long list of medicines that need to be picked up every week from the pharmacist. They have had to go without sugar for months, *Like most of the country, I suppose*, Millie’s mother says. Baba likes sugar with her coffee, which she makes dark and thick and sucks through her front teeth, but does not complain about its absence if there is whiskey available. *Thank God for timber*, her father mumbles under his breath as he reads the newspaper every morning. *We’re building San Francisco, for Christ’s sake*. Baba calls Millie’s father “Zet,” announcing it every once in a while for apparently no reason. It is a harmless word, her mother explains, meaning nothing more than “son-in-law.” But it is the way Baba says it, teeth clenched like she wants to keep it in and can’t stop it from escaping between the same spaces in her teeth the coffee seeps through. Baba never calls Millie’s father Emmitt, even though that is his name, and Millie’s father does not respond to “Zet.” They speak very little and only through Millie’s mother when necessary.

Her father is hopeful despite the current state of the country, as if they were somehow protected in their tucked away corner of the map. He slaps the paper, shakes

his head, then says, *They say there'll be even more work once we get that railroad up to the Hama Hama.* They used to live up in the Hama Hama when Millie was younger. Her father felled logs while her brothers and her played in the woods. They lived in a cabin among many cabins at the end of a long logging road winding up into the hills. Her parents didn't argue about money back then and Baba still lived with her brother in Bigmount. *Unless, that is, they give all the jobs to the Indians. They'll work for cheaper, of course.*

Every time her father mentions Indians, she wants to ask if he means Solie, too. She knows she has to save it until she gets to Solie's, where it's okay to ask questions about Indians, even though sometimes Solie's face scrunches up in a pained expression and her voice gets a little shaky.

The adults in Odanodan are talking about the widow from Douglas Road. Her husband has been dead for nearly three years, her twin boys now five years old, when she moves in with her boyfriend, Thomas Scheer, an Indian. She sells the house in town, packs up her children, and moves in with Thomas on the Reservation. It takes one week before police come knocking on their door, asking for the twins, who are court-ordered to be taken from the widow's custody and move in with a family 'yet to be chosen' by the state.

Where will they go? Millie asked both of her parents. Her father shrugged, eventually responding with, *They'll find some place.*

Her mother brought it up the previous Sunday, when Aunt Laura was passing through town on her way to Grays Harbor. Aunt Laura is Millie's aunt, her mother's older sister, fairer than Millie's mother, hair almost red, with pale brown eyes, as if they

had been bleached by the sun. *The Reservation? Not even U.S. territory, technically.* *What kind of mother would do that?*, Aunt Laura said, brushing curls off her broad forehead. Her mother shook her head hesitantly, lips pressed together, like Baba does, when she wants to say something but can't. The house, Millie wanted to tell them, where the widow and Thomas live, is only four doors down from Solie's house. She played with the twins once, helped feed their bunnies Thomas bought them as a welcoming present, prodding bits of carrot leaf and celery through the square holes of their cages, chasing after their white tails in the sopping grass. Millie does not mention this to her mother and Aunt Laura, who sip coffee in the living room beside Baba, who is napping in her bed. She does not say a word, even though she thinks her mother might understand... if it weren't for Solie.

Millie's mother is shuffling between the kitchen and the table with a plate of meat and potatoes. Her father is talking to her brother, Johnny, the oldest. Her father's voice is low and quiet, Johnny leaning in his direction to listen. Yushie and Tony are staring at their empty plates, too hungry to talk. Baba is slouching in her seat, two fleshy arms around her plate and a foot tapping the floor underneath the table in impatience. Baba wears black house slippers with holes cut in the sides for her bunions to poke through, the dark fabric frayed along the edges. "Bolan," Millie knows, means "painful" or something like it in Croatian. Baba whispers it under her breath before she goes to bed, red feet resting on a pillow, Millie's mother rubbing the knobby joints of her toes until Baba sighs heavily and pulls her stubby legs under the freshly parted sheets.

“Just because the company is doing fine compared to others doesn’t mean it’s going to start making hand outs,” Millie’s father’s voice grows louder.

Johnny’s brow furrows in concentration.

“But I thought the mill paid Indians the same as whites,” Johnny’s voice lifts at the end, like a question.

“They do,” his father answers, “but that doesn’t mean they *won’t* hire more of them in the future and pay them less to save a couple bucks.” Her father’s cheeks are flushed as he scoops slabs of beef and plops them onto his plate. Millie and her brothers wait patiently. Yushie, the second oldest, claps his hands to his belly in excitement.

“They’re going to fire people?” Johnny asks. He is so absorbed by the conversation, he does not notice it is his turn to dish up. Millie’s mother dishes up for him, then does the same for the rest of the table.

“Not fire people, but hire more people, not necessarily white,” her father says, big hunks of meat piled into his cheek, making it shiny and hard under the stubble.

Millie stabs her potatoes with a fork, blows on them repeatedly with loud gusts of breath so she will not burn herself. Baba is beside her, pretending not to listen to what her father is saying.

“They’ll need more workers up in the Hama Hama hills with the new railroad coming in. To save money, there’s talk of hiring more guys off the Res, kids even, ‘cause they drop out from school so damn early, just so they can pay them less.”

“Oh,” Johnny says. His voice is just beginning to change, and it comes out high-pitched, like a dog whistle compared to the voice he was just using. “Oh,” he says, lower. “So no one is gonna lose their job.”

Millie's father sighs softly, narrows his eyes like he does when he's thinking, careful with what he is about to say. "No, but that's not the point."

"What's the point?" Johnny asks, his voice soft and child-like. He is sincere in his question, a perplexed expression spilling across his face like it tipped out of a glass on top of his head.

"The company shouldn't hire people just because it's cheaper. It's not fair to the men who really do need jobs."

"Don't Indians need jobs?" Johnny asks.

Millie sees her father's tense gaze fall on his plate, can feel him tighten in his seat across the table. Johnny is staring at their father, unaware he is frustrated by so many questions.

"People say that all the time," Johnny says.

"What?" Millie asks. Her potatoes are still too hot to eat and all the breath released to cool them has made her slightly lightheaded.

"That Indians should get jobs," Johnny announces. "Don't they? Say they're lazy and live off the government, drink all day and don't work."

The table falls quiet. Millie, too, wonders why the Indians can't have the new jobs in the Hama Hama hills, has heard her father say men are moving down from Bigmount for those jobs, which he explains in a grumbly voice, so why *can't* the Indians have those jobs. At least they know the Indians.

"It's not important," Millie's father says, although his heart isn't in it. His voice falls flat, his face never relaxing, eyes still narrowed in thought. "It's all just *talk*, anyway." He attempts a weak smile at Millie's mother's, who doesn't like talking about

such things at the dinner table. She reminds her husband of this by growing quiet, invisible, until he sees her with her face scrunched up like a dried apple.

Millie tests her potatoes with the pad of her index finger. Her mother sees this and reaches across the table. Her hand touches Millie's, the child lifting her gaze to find her mother shaking her dark head, hair so black and shiny over her scalp, the reflection from the light glides around her head in circles.

"That's the thing, though," Millie's father mumbles, using his fork to tap the air in front of him, as if touching the point he had been forming in his mind. Millie hears the intensity in his voice, the conviction that, yes, he does get to say this one thing, and, yes, is *not* wrong about it.

"They do get money from the government. Housing, land, food. If I lose my job, I don't get that kind of stuff for free. I still have a mortgage. Taxes, for Christ's sake. They don't got to pay those at all. And now they get jobs, when other people need them more than they do?"

"Who?" Millie asks. She is confused and cannot remember if 'they' is Indians, or if 'other people' is Indians.

"Just regular guys. Like me. Out of a job." His voice is calm. His face, too, is relaxed as he leans back in his chair. If he gets too wound up, Millie's mother will clear her throat loudly, interrupting the conversation, or Baba will mumble something in Croatian and leave the table. Then Millie's mother will tilt her head and give her father that look, the one that means, 'this is your fault', without ever saying a word.

'Regular'. Millie is still confused.

“They hate us, too, you know,” her father says, more to Johnny than the table. “Blame us for everything. Wanna make it seem like they had some sort of paradise here before we came.”

Millie doesn't understand who 'we' is. She wants to ask if he means their family coming to Odanodan from the Hama Hama hills. She looks at her mother who is not looking back at her, but at her father, her head beginning to lean to one side.

“Truth is, they killed each other before we even got here. Would've killed each other off anyway. Tribes fighting all the time. Some of them head hunters! But they don't tell you that.” Her father's face is flushed as he leans over his plate and forks potatoes into his mouth.

“And if they do hire Indians up at the Hama Hama, there'll be a strike or something. They can't afford to lose all the men they have. They just *can't*.” His face is shiny with a thin layer of perspiration, lips closed tightly around a full mouth.

“Won't they just hire more Indians?” Johnny asks.

“No. I don't think so. No one would buy the wood. Then they'd really be in trouble.”

Millie thinks 'they' has changed to Adam's Logging. She wants to ask her mother, but her mother is still not looking at her.

“But I thought you said a lot of the buyers were from overseas. Japan, was it? Wanting to buy whole logs?” Millie's mother asks. She is annoyed, Millie can tell, her head now completely cocked to one side and staring at her father. “Surely they don't care about the difference between a white crew and an Indian crew felling logs up in those hills.”

Millie's father drops his fork on his plate, takes the napkin from his shirt collar and lays it on the table. He chews and breathes loudly for a moment. After swallowing hard, the lump in his throat bobbing up and down like a buoy, he says, "Doesn't matter." He means it this time, his voice quick and strong. "All hypothetical, anyway. Hasn't happened yet. Just mill talk, that's all."

Millie stops staring at her mother and turns her gaze to Baba, who is eating in tiny bites and stealing glances in her father's direction.

"Zet," she says, loud enough for Millie to hear, but not anyone else. Baba shakes her head slightly. She lays her fork down and pushes her chair out from the table. When she stands, she must brace one thigh with a bony hand, the other clutching the edge of the table for balance. Millie watches her shuffle from the kitchen to the living room, notices the long hem of her skirt ending just above her ankles, from which lifeless socks dangle like seaweed. Millie has seen women on the Reservation wear the same clothes, especially the older women, some even with scarves around their heads like Baba, long gray braids dangling from beneath.

Once the idea enters her mind, Millie can't believe she hasn't thought of it before. It all makes so much sense, really. The skin, the hair and clothing – the mumbling of odd words Millie doesn't understand from both Baba's lips and Solie's, when there are other Indians present.

"Are Indians from Croatia?" Millie asks. The silence of the table tells Millie that she will not be getting an answer to this question. She sees her father roll his eyes and shake his head, her mother stares at the table like she has just been slapped, and from the living room, Baba emits a single, harsh cackle, "Ha!" Millie wishes this was not the one

thing Baba understands in English today. She wishes she had waited to ask Solie her question. She imagines Solie smiling, at her – she’s such a *silly* girl – instead of solemn stares from her parents. She can feel them looking at her as she shovels forkfuls of potatoes into her mouth, still so hot in the center they burn her tongue and make her eyes water as though she were about to cry.

When everyone is asleep, the house so quiet Millie can hear Baba snoring downstairs, she creeps down the steps to stand in the darkness beneath the deer head mounted to the living room wall. The porch light through the window illuminates Baba’s small frame in the bed in the center of the living room where a table used to be. She is nothing more than a bump under the covers. Baba’s snoring, barely audible through Millie’s open bedroom door upstairs, is much more grating close up, the constant inhale and exhale like the scraping of sandpaper on rough wood. Standing in her thin nightgown, Millie shivers, hugs herself around her bony ribs. She stares up at the deer head, at its glass eyes shining in the dark, its pointy antlers like petrified roots growing toward the ceiling.

The stove is cold beneath her bare feet. The wall close enough to use for balance as she stands on her tippy-toes, thin arm reaching toward the furry neck. She can reach it, just barely. Glides her fingertips across the slick fur, pats the hard base of the throat. She cannot help but wonder what is inside it now. The animal’s organs, as her brothers say. It makes a faint, hollow noise when she prods it with her finger. Then she feels it, almost by mistake, her hand wandering to an untouched place, when the fur opens suddenly, revealing the smooth, artificial surface under the buck’s skin. There it is, a few inches up

from the base, almost directly in the center of its throat, a small, circular hole where the bullet punctured fur and skin, slid past flesh until it hit bone, *killing it instantly*, her father promises. Telling her when he comes home covered in dried blood and salty sweat, *it did not suffer*. She stands there for a moment, her fingertip resting in the shallow hole, feeling its trembling power pulse into her tiny hand.

Chapter 3

Saturday afternoon, a day in August, 1936, on the verge of stiflingly hot, and here's Millie, driving Solie's truck, practicing alone, although she is only twelve, with all the windows rolled up, her bangs a wet mess on her forehead, slick and warm as the underside of a tongue. She is not shy yet, still childish in the way she speaks to adults, interrupting, asking questions, telling jokes even when they are visibly disinterested. She is weaving in and out of Reservation roads, nearly driving into ditches then veering sharply in the other direction. The gear sticks when she shifts from second to third, a lanky leg pressing delicately on the clutch. The window latches are broken so she is driving with the door open so she can get a little breeze going, but the door has slammed shut from when she took a hard left onto the main road. Millie is giddy with driving, imagines it is what carnival rides feel like although she has never been on one. The air in the cab of the truck is too hot to think about where she is going.

Before she knows it, Millie turns the truck onto the two-lane highway leading to the mill. If there had been a rearview mirror, which there is not, Millie would see Solie walking down the road in a blue flannel shirt and men's jeans ripped at the knees, calling

after Millie, yelling and laughing, half-scared, half-knowing she would be back soon, unscathed and buzzing with excitement.

The highway to the mill is winding and filled with narrow bridges that hang over muddy shores. The lanes widen just before the turn off, the mill emerging from between the trees like an enormous metal monument. There are four buildings total, two on each side of the inlet. Millie's father works in Building #1, the largest, responsible for the highest quality wood that they load onto train wagons, 18-wheelers, and boats that sit waiting outside tied to the dock. Millie jerks and rattles the truck into a shaded area under a weeping willow tree on the far end of the dirt parking lot alongside the building. She feels old fiddling with the keys to the truck, jangling them from an index finger. She has driven before, but always with Solie or a brother, and never to anywhere, just around where they already were. It is this moving from one place to an entirely different place, where people can see her arrival, that makes her feel like a grown up. There are two young boys, no more than sixteen, loading boxes onto a flatbed outside the office door. One stands still as Millie approaches them, looks her up and down trying to decide if she is pretty. The other whistles low and quiet, that piercing noise Millie has heard in the streets – men in cars chasing after women, yelling “Hey, good-lookin’. How’s about a ride?” Millie’s cheeks blush. She is already as tall as she will ever be, with small, hard breasts. Her face is delicate, a slight bump on her nose giving her the appearance of being older than she is.

“Hello, honey. What can I do you for?” It surprises Millie that the boy who says this is not the one who whistled, but the quiet one who stares.

“Know where I could find my father?” She says ‘father’ after a slight pause, thinking quickly in her head that ‘dad’ sounded so childish, despite the fact that it is what she normally calls him.

“Lots of fathers here, kiddo.” They have resumed stacking boxes in an automatic way, all the while keeping their eyes on her. Her voice, she thinks, is what gave her young age away. So squeaky sounding, like a baby bird.

“Emmitt Mulch?” she asks, swinging the keys over her hand by their metal ring.

“Should be on lunch,” the whistler says, eyeing the keys with a furrowed brow. He is older, Millie decides. Something about his jaw jutting out from the side of his head like a chunk of metal. He puts a box on top of another and looks over to the side of the mill, gaping open in the middle where the enormous doors part. Extending a gloved finger, he points to the far side of the building where two men are standing outside talking, their backs to the wall.

Her father is smoking a cigarette. The summer light catches the smoke and makes it glow an opaque white. He does not see her yet, distracted by an animated conversation with an Indian in a grey shirt and cork boots. Millie recognizes the Indian but does not remember his name. The side of the building they are leaning on is pulsing, the collars of their shirts shaking at the tips. The Indian snubs out his cigarette and begins playing with a strand of hair that has come loose from his braid, dangling like rope over his shoulder.

They are laughing when she walks up to them, something so funny her father has to bend over and hold his stomach. He is a tall, lanky man, who stoops to make up for the intimidation he fears his height suggests. It is not enough that his hair is red, every inch of his pale skin covered in freckles, but he has a large gap between his front teeth,

making him appear cartoonish. When he stands straight, he is so tall that even men much heavier and more serious-faced stand back in awe as he enters the room. When he stoops, he looks like a teenager not yet comfortable in his newly grown body. His chin thrust forward and his teeth white as milk, he is often mistaken for his son, Johnny, who looks so much like him. Millie feels safe in her father's presence. Something about him hovering over her like a sturdy tree she can swing from. Still finds it hilarious when he asks her how the weather is *down there*. *I'm five-foot-three*, she whines.

Millie joins in on the laughter, although she has no idea what they are talking about. She pulls her father's sleeve to get his attention, but it takes him a moment to realize who it is he is staring down on.

"Millie?" he says. "Well... what are you doing here?" His eyes are the color of wet grass, his lips draping open.

"Just wanted to come pay a visit." She presses the keys to her cheek, as if she's forgotten they are in her hand. "I drove," she adds.

"You know you're not supposed to do that," her father sighs. The Indian man beside him smiles like he's trying not to, a deep dimple on either side of his mouth.

"How you supposed to get back home?" Her father's face sinks as he takes a long pull from his cigarette.

"Suppose she'll get there the same way she got here," the Indian says. "How long you been driving?" He leans down close to talk to her, his voice smooth over the metallic noises coming from the mill.

"Almost a month, now," she announces proudly.

The Indian's hair is in his eyes. He has to tuck it behind his ears to clear his vision. Millie helps him, his face so near hers, sure he will not flinch away. He lets her finger his hair, brush it from his forehead. She stares at him until he smiles.

"Can I braid your hair?" she asks. As she's putting the keys in her pant's pocket to free her hands, she feels her father's heavy palm on her shoulder. When she looks up at him, he is shaking his head.

"Scout braids his own hair, hon," her father says.

"No, it's fine," he says. "I understand you only have brothers at home."

"Yeah. They have short hair. My mom cuts it in the kitchen once a month. She never lets me play with her hair."

"Well, then," Scout says. He turns around and sits at Millie's feet, eyes squinting against the sun directly above them. Millie looks up at her father for approval. He hesitates then shrugs his shoulders. He lights another cigarette with the cherry from his last one, crosses his arms, and watches as Millie unties the leather string at the end of Scout's braid and slowly separates the three sections of hair. The sun beats down on Millie's dark head, sweat surfacing on her upper lip. Scout's hair is thick and heavy in her hands. It smells of sawdust and salty sweat. She pulls it roughly from the scalp, gripping the pieces as tightly as she can.

"Am I hurting you?" she asks. She knows from braiding Solie's hair that she pulls too hard. Solie winces and squirms until she can't take it anymore and crawls away, the braid unraveling down her back.

"My mother pulls harder," Scout answers. Her father laughs, tongue poking through the hole in his teeth like a cherry tomato.

“Looks good,” her father says as Millie ties the string tight around the bottom of the braid, which is so taut it feels like it could burst at any moment. A thin film of sweat covers her face and the top of her dark head is almost too hot to touch.

Scout runs his fingers over the top of it approvingly. He stands and faces Millie’s father, a slight smile spreading across his lips. Scout blinks and rubs his face, the skin stretched tight over his skull from the braid pulling at it from all directions.

“You look Chinese,” Millie’s father smiles, a stifled laugh escaping from his throat. Millie laughs, too, although she is not sure why.

Millie and her father follow the calls piercing the air, so full of clanking and buzzing and pounding, Millie can hardly breathe. The enormity of the building makes Millie feel small, like she could fit in her father’s back pocket.

“Mill-wright!” someone calls.

“Mill-wright!” The word bounces from one man to another until it finally reaches Millie’s father. She is behind him, clinging to the tail of his shirt, hanging loose in the back to let a little air in. Her teeth rattle from the conveyor belt vibrations. A horrible grinding noise that turns to a screeching buzz as the bandsaws bury themselves into the wood. The clap of wood piling onto more wood. Metal engine parts jangling like keys.

“Mill-wright!” The word louder now, more urgent.

Millie’s nose tickles from the haze of wood dust suspended in the air. It coats tongues and eyes, tiny splinters turning sensitive skin red and raw. There is a man bleeding next to a machine much taller than him. A ripped glove lies limply on the ground. Millie knows that the men at the mill have to buy gloves weekly – by Friday, the

leather is worn too thin to protect anymore, scraped and pinched by handling board after board.

“Mill-wright!”

The wood moves jerkily along the conveyor belts, so fast it makes the men appear in a hurry. Some men are yelling at another man for not paying attention, messing up the line. Millie and her father pass another man bleeding, much more profusely than the last. Red liquid squirts out of his forearm with every heartbeat. He is swaying a little where he stands, staring at the puddle he has created in the sawdust under his feet. He is pale, his eyes glassy, the sweet smell of whiskey wafting from his sweaty skin. Millie wants to stop and make sure the man is all right, but her father keeps walking and Millie is too scared to let go of his shirt. They stop at a conveyor belt that is not moving, three men hovering around an engine that will not turn. Her father disappears behind them before she can tighten her grip on his shirt. She turns around, half-expecting Scout to be behind them, following them clear across the mill. There is nothing but empty space behind her, filled intermittently with the breeze of a man quickly passing by. Millie stands perfectly still as her father is making clanking noises on the machine. She stares up at the bright lights, big and round as suns hanging from the rafters of the ceiling. The men look small, dwarfed by the height of the building and the enormity of the machines, as they swarm around like ants. She looks up at the observation deck, several men in suits standing behind the dirty glass window separating them from the mill. They are pointing and nodding. Millie recognizes one of them as Mr. Peckner, the owner. He has gray hair and black eyebrows like a stray cat.

The clanking noise coming from her father suddenly turns into a whirring noise of the engine, which quickly putters and coughs. Her father resumes clanking. Millie is tired of waiting, even though it's only been a few minutes. She sees a man walk out a door not far from where she is standing. The light leaks in, in a steady beam that ends at Millie's feet. Her father is so preoccupied he does not hear her say goodbye, despite her screaming over the roar of the mill. Once outside, the sunshine warms her quickly, thoroughly, even though she hadn't noticed she'd grown cold. Millie walks around the back of the mill. She pauses to watch the waves lap at the shore, sucking back as many shells as it deposits. The tide is low, a sea otter sunbathing on its back in a shallow bend in the water, its clam-filled belly popping out of the water like stone. As Millie rounds the corner of the mill, she slows when she see the suited men filtering out of the office door and spill out onto the dirt parking lot. The office door slams after the last man, Mr. Peckner, who is buttoning his jacket with one hand and smoothing his silvery hair with the other. The men form a circle of black blazers and speak too quietly for Millie to hear what they are saying. They are sweaty-faced men with hair than shines in the sunlight. As Millie passes them, the office door opens one last time, a young boy in slacks and shirt so white it is almost blinding. It is Henry Peckner, Mr. Peckner's son. He is lanky, bony wrists jutting out from his sleeves, looking as old as his older brother, Riley, who is Millie's age and whom she is beginning to despise. Henry was always so quiet, unlike his brother, who even breathes loud, writes loud, and turns pages loudly from his seat behind her in school. She had grown up with the Peckner boys up in the Hama Hama hills, but the memory seems so distant now. Henry is a stranger to her. The thought of

speaking to him makes her feel panicked, but she can hear her mother's prodding voice in the back of her mind, *You didn't say hello?*

Not only is Mr. Peckner her father's boss, Mrs. Peckner, Kathryn as she urges Millie to call her, is her mother's boss, although no one uses the word 'boss' to describe their relationship. Millie's mother washes the Peckner laundry for extra money. Millie sometimes delivers the clean laundry and picks up the dirty, but she only ever sees Kathryn, always perfectly made up, curled blond hair, black lashes, red lips, pearls around her skinny neck. Henry is never in the foyer of their house, never answers the door when she rings the bell. Sometimes, when she is by herself in her room, Millie remembers the Hama Hama hills. How her cabin was right next door to the Peckner's. How they were two of five families, the rest single men, that lived in the logging community built just above an old logging camp that had fallen and rotted under the cold and damp of several winters. The cluster of cabins sat beside a creek that the children simply referred to as "the creek," although its real name was Perry Creek. They had a small, two-bedroom cabin behind the Peckner's home, which was referred to as "the big house," even though it was only slightly larger than any of the other cabins. Millie and her brothers used to take a half hour bus ride to school every morning down a winding gravel road to town just as the Peckner boys did. Then came the day Mr. Peckner bought half of Adam's Lumber Mill from Rich Adams, forcing all employees to move in closer to town where Rich was building the mill, which he could finally finish with the money from Mr. Peckner. It confused Millie when they first moved into their new house why she couldn't go play at the Peckner's anymore, why Johnny and Yushie didn't want to

play with Riley anymore, go hunting for rabbits like they used to. *Things are just different now*, her mother would say. Soon, Millie got used to not having them around.

This boy standing next to his father outside the mill is surely not the same Henry that used to follow Millie through the woods, tripping over tree roots trying to keep up. Just as she is passing the men, so close to the weeping willow tree where she parked Solie's truck she can feel the coolness of its shade, Henry looks up and sees her. His bottle blue eyes latch onto her and don't let go. Millie waves in the men's direction, Mr. Peckner nodding his shiny face in reply. Henry is still watching her as she crawls inside the cab and starts the engine. Millie is suddenly nervous of stalling as she drives away, afraid the group of men and Henry will laugh at her as her brothers do when one of them stalls their father's truck. She drives shakily up to the road and does not stop to see if cars are coming. She turns onto the road, grateful that there are no other cars. She glances out her window, tries to crane her neck to see if the men are still standing there, but she is too afraid to look for very long and only sees the blur of the mill as she snaps her head back to the road. If there were a rearview mirror, Millie would see Henry squinting into the sun, watching her drive away.

Solie's face is beaming like a porch light from the front steps when Millie pulls onto the side of the road outside her house. There is a thin, leafless branch stuck under the windshield wiper, but other than that, the truck is in the same condition as before Millie drove it. Millie feels like she is about to burst as she climbs out of the cab of the truck and runs to Solie's embrace. Solie's arms are warm around Millie's ribs, her lips pursed hard as she presses them to Millie's hot head.

Chapter 4

In late September, 1939, Johnny has already started his senior year at Odanodan High School. He is restless lately, going out at night and coming home drunk. Sometimes Yushie and Tony go with him. They have had to hitch rides to town or walk the three miles since their father's truck was stolen one evening two weeks ago when Tony drove it to get something he forgot at the brewery. Johnny, Yushie, and Tony are not yet home for dinner. They are still at the brewery where they work. It is Saturday, the day all three of them work the day shift and come home smelling like hops. As soon as her father gets home, dropped off by Harry Michaelson, her father's best friend, Millie is shuffled off to her room by her mother so her parents can resume an argument they started earlier that morning in heavy whispers over breakfast. She has stopped going to Solie's every Saturday, instead staying home most weekends to help her mother around the farm.

Millie is alone in her room staring at herself in the mirror. Her face looks gawky recently. Every time she catches her reflection in a window she does not recognize herself. She has grown quiet, sullen, until something slowly builds in her chest and she has to snap at her mother or Solie for touching her – how *dare* they touch her when she so clearly does not want to be touched. But how *dare* they ignore her when she is angry, when she is so clearly in need of attention. Millie no longer understands herself and is frustrated that she has to think about understanding herself, when she is positive she used to not have to think about it, she used to just live. She no longer likes herself and is angry that she has started thinking about herself as somebody to like. There is so much time for thinking, especially when she finishes her homework so early and has already milked the

cows at night, her new daily chore. Her hands are sore from pulling the tough udders, squeezing the milk out in little spurts until the pail is filled up to the line her mother has scratched into the side. The milk must settle in the icebox overnight. In the morning her mother scrapes the cream off the top.

Millie can hear the faint muffle of her parents talking in their bedroom. She creeps down the stairs, careful to avoid the creaky spots, and sits at the landing beside their bedroom door. Their voices are forceful. Her mother's voice is high-pitched, which means she's angry. Her father's voice is low and booming, which means he's angry, too. She hears Tony's name over and over again, but has to press her ear to the cool surface of the door to understand every word.

"He lied, he lied, he *lied*... dammit, Sima... we can't bail him out this time, too. Hand me that shirt, would you?"

"He's fifteen... he's allowed to make mistakes. This one?"

"That's what you've been saying for years... oh, he's four, he doesn't know he's hitting so hard... he's six... ten... twelve... doesn't understand his own strength. No, the blue one."

"...always have to bring that up. Here. I don't think this is like the time..."

"Yes, *it is* like the time..."

"It was an accident. Tony didn't mean to..."

"He pushed his own brother..."

"It was a wobbly ladder..."

“You’re always making excuses for him...pushed poor Yushie fifteen feet to the concrete floor, and you’re telling me...”

“... not how it happened. You buttoned it all wrong.”

“... broke his arm ... doesn’t matter if he meant to, he shoulda been punished more harshly...”

“We weren’t there, we don’t know what...”

“Just leave it, I’ll fix it. Johnny and Yushie had matching stories, and you-know-who had a different...”

“... means well, I think...”

“Means harm is what he means.... always been like that... told you we have to be careful with him... *stern* for Christ’s sake...”

“... you gave him a whoopin’ if I remember correctly, so don’t tell me...”

“... not talking about beating him with a goddamn belt...”

“... want to send him away... we’d be better off without him, is that it?”

“... always take what I say to mean something I don’t...”

“... let them lock him up.... rot away in a jail cell.... that what you want?”

“Yes... let the law take care of it for once... never got in trouble for breaking into...”

“... was years ago, he gave everything back he stole... fixed the window he broke...”

“*We* fixed the window he broke... I paid for it, not Tony.”

“But this is *jail*, Emmitt... our own son in jail... the whole town will know...”

“Oh, like they didn’t know about the break-in to the hardware store... sure as hell know about this... twelve Indians detained for two weeks for something he did... all over the paper... quoting him saying that Indian kid did it.”

“... not that big of a deal...”

“... don’t know how you can say that... police knocking on doors and feeding Indians in the jail, men looking for the truck only to have it pulled out of the bay two weeks later right where *he* drove it into the water...”

“So, he’ll pay for it.”

“How?”

“Shifts at the brewery... make him hand over his paychecks...”

“... that’ll take years... have to buy a truck... pay a lawyer if the police want to...”

“... not gonna be a big deal...”

“... can say that as much as you want, but...”

“... can take up more shifts... work nights as long as his schoolwork doesn’t suffer....”

“... can’t get anything above a C even if he tries... not like he does...”

“... he passes all his...”

“... you’ll go easy on him after a week of working...”

“Well, school is important...”

“Not gonna let you do that... not this time... he works ‘til he pays off the truck and that’s final... work and school... that’s his life... don’t want you sneaking things

behind my back... no presents 'cause you feel guilty... no days home *sick* from school or work...promise me.”

“... promise you, I won't...”

“Where's my wallet? Have you seen...”

“... right here... to the left, on the nightstand...”

“What's for dinner?”

“Stew... haven't started yet...”

“... don't got enough time for...”

“... do if the boys are walking home from the brewery... take an extra hour...”

“...oh, right.”

Millie is helping set the table with the thin glass plates her mother ordered through a catalog. They came in a soapbox wrapped individually in newspaper, Millie marveling at how light they were, tracing the tiny bubbles in the glass with her finger. She always grabs an extra plate out of habit, Baba's chair still sitting there, empty, unless one of her brother's brings a friend home for dinner. Millie is quiet, nervous thinking about Monday even though it is a whole day away. She is scared that Riley Peckner will say something to make her woozy again, just as he did Friday after school, putting an arm around her like they were boyfriend and girlfriend, talking so close she could see the sleep in the corner of his eyes. She has grown accustomed to him sitting behind her in school, “Mulch” coming immediately before “Peckner” in the inevitable alphabetical seating that plagues her first day of school every year, but she hates him so much it makes her shake in her seat. All summer she wished and hoped that maybe the teacher

would place them by height or first name or birthday or the previous year's grades, but the lifting of her heart vanished quickly when the teacher started roll with Margaret Albert and pointed to the far right corner of the room, where Margaret was already sitting half asleep, swinging her feet beneath her desk. And so it continues, year after year, Millie Mulch and Riley Peckner. Not even the direction of the alphabet from room to room changed. Never a snake curving from Albert to Yesterly, always columns from front to back. There was never even a year when she ended a row and he began one. Always him breathing behind her. Always him erasing until he tore a hole in the paper and rustled in his pack for another sheet, always him tapping her shoulder for an answer or a pencil. She never has found out if it is his tiny sinuses that whistle when he concentrates or if it is his front teeth, which he is forced to breathe through for sufficient air. Just once, Millie wants to sit in front of someone else in class.

Friday after school, Millie was walking to the bus idling alongside the school building. She saw her friend Jojo waiting outside for her. They sat together on the bus until Millie got off, Jojo riding the rest of the way to the Reservation. She was walking quickly, afraid the bus would close its door and leave without them, when Riley Peckner came up behind her. Her grabbed her by the shoulders, stopping her, then slid his hands down her sides and finally rested them on her hips. He nuzzled his nose into her hair so his mouth was next to her ear and told her she was *filling in nicely*. He ran off so quickly, she didn't have a chance to punch him in his thin nose or crooked mouth. She felt so lightheaded and sick to her stomach that she couldn't move until Jojo came running up to her, leading her by the elbow to a seat up front on the bus. *He's so... disgusting!* Jojo said. *My mom says he's cultus, that the whole family is.* Millie didn't know exactly what

cultus meant, but knew it was Chinook Jargon for something bad. Solie used it whenever she spoke of her *deadbeat* cousin. *Not the whole family*, Millie said to Jojo, thinking of Henry. The memory of an afternoon up in the Hama Hama hills surfaced in her mind like a buoy emerging from choppy waves.

Millie and Henry had fallen behind Riley and her brothers, so far ahead of them in the woods above the old logging camp that they looked like tiny flecks of red and blue against the tree trunks. They were traipsing along an opening in the trees overgrown with blackberry bushes and fallen branches covered in green moss. Millie couldn't have been older than six, little Henry not yet four. They stopped and held their noses before realizing that it was a dead doe rotting not far from where they stood that caused the insufferable smell. Henry tried to pull on Millie's pant leg to keep her from getting a closer look, but she broke free from his grip and kneeled beside the corpse. What remained of the doe's eyes were bits of cloudy white jelly, gaping holes checkered her side and stomach. One particular hole on her belly near the hind legs was swarming thick with flies. They crawled on top of and pushed between each other to get to the food. Millie shooed them with her hand. As the flies fled only to land on another raw feeding place, they exposed what they had been fighting over – a tiny ankle and hoof protruding from the doe's belly. The dry hoof clung to the meatless anklebone, shiny in the dull light of the woods. She would have kept staring had it not been for Henry, who, sickened with what she was examining, pulled her away with repeated tugs of her arm. Millie could say nothing as they kept walking for fear of getting sick all over herself. It was Henry who took her hand in his, rubbed the back of it with a tiny thumb. She

remembered it comforted her, the sick feeling nearly gone by the time they reached Riley and Yushie whittling spears from peeled branches.

Surely Henry and Riley are not so much alike, Millie thinks as she sets six plates on the freshly ironed tablecloth. From behind at recess, she cannot tell them apart even though they are almost three years apart. They are the same height. They have the same lanky frames and wavy brown hair that falls across their foreheads just above their bottle blue eyes. Henry has just gotten glasses, which he slides up his nose when he runs. The seventh-graders don't normally talk to the fifth-graders, but Millie tries to be polite and wave or smile at Henry when she sees him, perhaps only out of guilt for hating his brother so much and his mom being so nice to her. Sometimes his cheeks redden or he looks like he is trying to stifle a smile. He waves back usually, always stopping to stare at her for a minute longer than she'd like, eyes blue as water eating her up.

Johnny, Yushie, and Tony are already sitting at the table. They are sweaty and breathing heavily, the scent of hops slowly filling the air like steam. Johnny is balancing his head in his hand, propped up by an elbow on the tabletop. His eyes are closed, his freckled mouth twitching like he is dreaming. Yushie is cutting bread, placing a thick slice on each plate. Tony has already begun eating his piece, noshing the fluffy white center between his teeth. His eyes are rimmed in dark purple skin, giving him the appearance of someone who is exhausted, his *Croatian eyes*, their mother calls them. His eyes make him appear exhausted or sick, and evoke a feeling like pity in other people despite Tony's cocky demeanor or downright rude behavior. He is dark-haired like Millie, head and eyelashes black as ink. His skin, like their father and Johnny, is pale and freckly. When Millie's mother and father come sit down at the table, everyone remains

quiet in anticipation, expecting their father to start yelling at Tony at any moment. But he does not yell. He does not say a word. Not even when Tony begins telling a story from work, having to stop in the middle of telling it he is laughing so hard about what comes next – some idiot kid at the brewery supposed to roll the empty barrels into the water, trips and falls in himself. No one laughs with him, but Yushie smiles. Millie can't tell if it is to be nice to Tony or because he, too, is remembering the funny story.

Millie is in the bathtub in the upstairs bathroom. She could think of nothing to do after Johnny, Yushie, and she were shoed upstairs where they are to remain until their parents are done 'speaking with Tony'. She decided to take her bath early, perhaps to please her mother, she couldn't decide. Millie is lathering her hair into a point on top of her head when there is knocking on the door.

"I'm in the tub," she yells. Her brothers have known for a while that it is not funny to steal her towel anymore as she walks to her bedroom from the bathroom. They also know to use the bathroom downstairs or hold it until she is finished or their mother will talk sternly to them, threaten to have their father come up there if they don't recognize their sister is no longer a 'little girl'.

"Let me in, I gotta go pee." It's Johnny. He is jiggling the handle, but the door is locked.

"I'm naked."

"Oh, who cares? You got 45othing' to see. It'll take two seconds." There are footsteps fading down the hall then growing louder. A hand is on doorknob.

“Don’t you dare. I’m *naked!*” she says, thinking, *of course I have something to see*. She looks down at her small breasts, at the hair beginning to grow between her legs. There is a rattling of the handle followed by a distinct metal click. The door slowly swings open, revealing Johnny with one hand covering his eyes, the other holding a screwdriver.

“Take cover, I’m coming in!”

Millie frantically pulls at the heavy shower curtain shoved between the tub and the wall, yanking it so hard it leaps from her grip. She reaches for the edge and wraps it around her shoulders, the bottom part submerged in the bathwater around her knees. Only her shoulder and head are visible, her soapy black hair popping out of the white curtain like a wet crow. Shampoo suds are slowly sliding down the sides of her face.

Johnny turns his back to her and unzips his pants. He throws a glance over his shoulder before saying, “Cover your eyes, you little pervert.”

“You’re the pervert. Trying to sneak a peak at me, you... you... you...” She cannot think of the right name to call him.

Johnny is laughing, his shoulders shaking as he begins to pee loudly into the toilet. Millie hides her eyes behind the curtain, shivers against the draft pouring in from the open door. She does not want to see Johnny’s *thing*, as Jojo and her call it. Sometimes, when Jojo comes over to spend the night, Johnny and Tony show off for her, talk loudly from their room about things they’ve done with their *things*, and the girls who have touched it. Jojo looks older, like the girls in Yushie’s class, with soft breasts that shake under her shirt when she walks around with no bra on before bed. Her eyes are wide-set, white teeth flashing in smile, a womanly arch to her brows. Her hair hangs

loose over her shoulders, almost red at the tips. She rarely braids it, cuts it so it never grows past her armpits. *I don't want to look like every other Indian at school*, she explains.

“Two seconds, huh? More like ten minutes. You *stink!*” Millie says, but it is muffled from behind the curtain. Johnny is still peeing, a dark, acidic smell wafting into the air mixing with the hops radiating from his skin.

“Hold your horses,” he says. She wonders why any girl would want to touch any *thing*, let alone her brother's. Girls at school have crushes on him. She has to be careful who she invites home. Jojo has a boyfriend, Louis, from the Res. He is older than Johnny. Millie is sworn to secrecy to never to tell anyone about him.

“*You're* the one who couldn't hold *your* horses. I was almost done.”

“You take forever in here. Talking to yourself in the mirror.” Johnny stops peeing and zips his pants up.

“I do not,” Millie says, but she is lying. Of course she does, but she is horrified at the thought of Johnny knowing she does this. “You're so... so... *cultus*,” she says as he's walking out of the bathroom. “Close the door!” she screams after him, but he is already gone. Millie sits in the empty bathroom for several moments until, finally, the door swings shut with a loud slam. She unravels the shower curtain from her body and leans her head back into the water, which is now tepid and makes her skin pull tight against her bony body.

Chapter 5

The pale pink clouds over Baltimore, Maryland at dusk crack open like an Easter egg revealing the slick yolk of the sun. Gael Young stares at the white snow turned gray in shadow blanketing the sidewalk below his apartment. There is a young child in a red coat leaving tiny footprints along his mother's and church bells ringing in the air from the five o'clock mass beginning a block away. He is still hung over from celebrating the eve of 1942 down at Patsy's and trying to pack, a headache pulling at the backs of his eyes. He wishes he had someone to help him. A wife, not a maid. One who would hide notes in his shirt pockets to find later when he is gone and alone. Someone to have kissed at midnight the night before, a girl that didn't smell like sweat and cheap lipstick.

Enlisting? his mother had said over the phone the week before. *You're too old. Let the kiddies fight this one.* She had just gotten up, her voice raspy and slow. He thought he could hear her pouring herself a drink. *If you were married with a kid or two, you wouldn't be doing this.*

You're right, he thought. But only said, *Of course I would.*

She hung up without saying goodbye or asking when it was he would be leaving. She had no way of knowing it was so soon. He ships out tomorrow. He can only picture the train ride, not anything else. There will be a plane, he is sure, although he can't imagine it or who it is filled with. Most likely scared boys who will look at his prematurely graying hair and think he is an old man. Thirty-four-years old and an old man. He is an only child. Whenever he asked why he didn't have any brothers or sisters his mother would always reply with, *We hoped and prayed for you, Gaely. We got what we wanted.* It took years for him to figure out that it was hard to make children when the

mom was always drunk and the dad was never home. His mother so bored he could see it through her drunken eyes. His father 'important' and 'busy', which meant 'absent' most of the time and 'quiet' on the rare occasion he was home. His father, the scientist. Gael the doctor. His father disappointed he had not followed in his footsteps.

Medicine? he had sneered, running his hands over the medical school applications strewn across the dining room table. *People already living too long. It's invention, Gaely, invention. The future of this country depends on it.* He was always doing that, Gael thought. Not saying anything and then saying something so grandiose Gael couldn't help but bite his lips not to laugh. His father agreed to pay for school anyway at the urge of his mother. *It's so close, John Hopkins, right?* His mother waved her glass in the air for emphasis, ice clinking loudly. *Would you rather he go all the way to Vanderbilt? My baby, a doctor! And so close. What is it, dear, a two hour drive?* His father had grunted, wrote Gael a check, and dropped it in the air above the table, the tiny piece of paper floating back and forth like a feather.

Sometimes Gael wished he could remember things differently. Or not at all.

Gael is smoking a cigarette and walking against the cold wind past the thrift store on 30th Street, a young woman in a tight skirt turning the sign to CLOSED in the window. Her yellow hair is pulled back into a tight bun. Gael wonders if it is long or short when unpinned and shaken loose. He has had plenty of girlfriends, but always by accident. A girl in a bar who he wakes up to the next morning, a panicked sensation clawing at his back. Sometimes it goes away, if he goes through the routine of getting drunk and sleeping over enough times, until the morning he wakes up and stays for breakfast or

makes plans for lunch. He tries different girls, thinking when he's with a blonde, *if I just had a redhead*. Then with a redhead, *if I just had a brunette*. Divorcees of forty-five, girls out for drinks after their typing class lets out early. They always get bored of him. Start nagging that they never do anything but *drink* together and they feel like they hardly *know* him at all.

When he enters Patsy's, he sees the same girl from last night, the one with the cheap lipstick caked onto her thin lips. She is smoking a cigarette in a booth next to the sweaty window bordered in the blurry reflection of white lights strung along the sill. He can't remember her name, just that she kissed so hard it made his lips hurt against his teeth. Dark circles encase her eyes as they scan the menu slowly. When he sits down across from her, she smiles, exposing a crooked tooth, the tip smudged red with lipstick. She tells him her name as they order. He doesn't catch it, lets it spill from his mind like water. She chews heartily on a Reuben sandwich while he smokes a cigarette and gulps beer quickly, at first to take the edge off his headache, then to feed the numb sensation expanding inside him until it fills him, brimming at his skin.

He can't feel his cheeks. Claps on his back in farewell from the bartender. *It's your last night?* the girl gasps. Free drinks from the wrinkled man with the swollen, red nose across the room. The girl is sitting beside him, now. The room is crowded. Tired faces buried in glasses. The girl's thin hand on his thigh under the table. He can't find his cigarettes. There is music playing so loud Gael can't tell if it's live or the jukebox. The pop from somebody uncorking left over champagne. He is smoking a cigar. The girl's hand on his crotch, now. Her face close to his. If he turned just slightly, their lips would touch. Her hand is rubbing. Gently. Just enough to make the blood rush. Just

enough to spark that itch. Like a mosquito bite, he will want to scratch it, has to scratch it, one last time before he leaves for God knows how long. The ring of the bells as the door closes behind them. Night air cold against his face. They are walking for hours, it seems. Stumble up the stairs. Her bed so narrow. Her breasts so small they disappear underneath his hands. The picture of the girl and a boy in uniform framed on her nightstand the only thing he sees as he scratches away at her.

“You scared?”

Gael pauses for a moment, wonders what good it would do to say no.

Gael can't remember how he got from his apartment on St. Paul Street to the train station. In fact, he can't remember how he got to his apartment the night before, or was it this morning? The train ride south from Baltimore comes to him in bits and pieces, like flipping through a magazine too quickly to see all the pages. He has to fill in the holes: stashing his duffel bag above his seat, taking off his snow-speckled coat, handing the conductor his ticket, buying a drink – just to take the edge off – in the service cart, sipping it slowly, a swallow still left at the bottom of the paper cup when the train rolls to a slow, screeching stop. He remembers the trees bleeding together outside his window like the ink letters of an envelope in the rain. The smudges the small child in the seat in front of him leaves on the glass with his tongue when his mother is distracted. The way the woman next to him crosses and uncrosses her legs – him half-expecting her bony ankles to make a clicking noise when they touch. Instead, they rustle like sheets.

Now standing outside the plane, its engines roaring louder and louder, the wind blowing cold air that slaps him on his cheeks, he is facing the sergeant he is to salute,

although he does not know properly how, before climbing the metal stairs to join trembling boys clutching guns. Now this question. Is he scared? A question he has not thought of before, let alone formed an answer to. The sergeant asks it with a straight face, seems to stop mid-thought, his pink lips still open when the words end suddenly. Gael must look terrified, he thinks. Or haggard. He paws at the two-day's worth of beard on his face, whiskers prickly under his sensitive fingertips. His hands should be gloved, should be holding a scalpel this morning, cutting open a man to take out a large tumor, most likely cancerous, in the operating room at John Hopkins. Instead, Gael's hands are shaking slightly on his face. A face he will not recognize soon enough, scarred and bony in the dirty mirror above his bunk in North Africa, although he will not remember ever hearing the word 'Egypt' until soon before landing just outside Cairo. That is not until later, years later, when his fifty tours have turned into one hundred fifty tours. When he is lost in paperwork and secretly hopes he can stay lost, not able to imagine going home – the thought making his skin pucker like a cold shower every time it enters his mind.

Right now, all he knows is that there will be fighting. Medics are never ordered to fight, but carry guns. *Just in case*, the sergeant says, handing him the heavy metal object. He has never handled a gun before. Doesn't know what to do with it. He wonders if he will be trained once they get over *there*, still unsure of where they are landing exactly. Eight weeks somewhere in Texas? *Everybody has to learn how to march and salute*. After that, another plane landing somewhere else. Italy? Then by train to where, France? He hears something about India, but can't think clearly enough to form the question, Where? Gael puts the gun in his waistband like he's seen men do

in movies and covers it with his jacket. Yes, he is scared. He nods to the young sergeant, cheeks newly shaven and shiny in the sunlight.

“Sure,” he replies. “Isn’t everyone? Most of the time, I mean.”

The sergeant looks Gael up and down, like he’s looking for something but can’t find it. He straightens into a salute and holds it until Gael moves to mimic his stance. Gael feels weak, limbs flopping around his waist, not knowing what to do with his shaking hands. His head is throbbing behind his eyes and his stomach is rolling like boiling water. He is sure he will be sick, hoping for vomit instead of soiling himself. As he climbs the metal stairs into the plane, new boots falling heavy and loud on each step with a horrible *thump*, he feels a pang in his chest like lightening. He did not say goodbye to his mother or father. It seemed unnecessary at the time, driving to their house in Arlington, County, just to kiss his mother one more time. She would not remember anyway, he told himself. Probably too drunk to answer the door. She would have feigned excitement to see him, used the opportunity as an excuse for a few more cocktails. His father always *out*, although he was never sure where. It had not occurred to Gael that the kiss was not for his mother. He doesn’t realize until now, the kiss was for him.

Unload, set up, operate, tear down, load, move, and unload. Never in an open place if they can avoid it. Never more than two days in one place. Always in a civilian building whenever possible. A church. What used to be a library. Factory. The steady background noise of moans in the blacked-out nights. Sounds like mooing and growling, that should come from frightened animals, never human mouths. Morphine. The sweet

syrup they call for. Their yellowish-green faces begging for it when he is injecting penicillin. Is it so wrong for him to lie. Tell them it's in their plasma bag. That he just gave them some. For a moment they calm down, imagine feeling it running through their veins. His hands shake unless he is holding a scalpel. He often thinks of saving some morphine for himself, but never does.

The smell of sulfa powder reminds him of concrete after rain. A dark smell. He asks the other medics, surgeons, comrades, if they smell it too. They shake their heads no. Give him sideways glances when they think he's not looking. When he sprinkles it on wounds, he can see himself walking down the street from his apartment. Can see himself opening the door to grocery store on the corner, shaking the rain from his sleeves before walking inside, brushing against a pretty girl in the narrow aisle. He wishes there were a woman back home, a complete woman instead of just fragments. He wants to miss somebody so he has something to talk about with other men, when they are unloading and setting up, when he helps them bury all the empty glass bottles or any *other shiny containers* before moving on. Light, Gael learns, is a tricky thing. He has stopped wearing his reading glasses unless he is in surgery, so afraid of light reflecting off the lenses, exposing where he is at all times. He reads with his eyes squinted into narrow slits, glasses tucked away in his pillow. He has stopped smoking. He misses it most at night, when there is nothing to look at, the world so dark it makes no difference if he keeps his eyes open or closes them tight. He writes his mother constantly, more comfort in the word 'Mother' at the top of the page than in the actual thought of her. He pretends she is someone else, that she is a real mother, like his friends' mothers growing up who woke up early and got dressed before making breakfast. Or that she is beautiful,

face thin and young instead of swollen and wrinkled. That she is thoughtful and understanding instead of self-absorbed and irrational. He pretends she writes him back, answering questions she never asked in his own letters, knowing she'll never open them because they're *too depressing* for her to read. He should not mail them, but does. Should not wait for a reply, yet feels a twinge of hope every time the mail comes. There is never anything for him.

Chapter 6

Millie is sixteen and wants to ask Solie about a change she has noticed lately, but she has not seen Solie in over a year. She doesn't know her phone number, cannot remember if Solie even has a phone, and cannot bring herself to ask her father. The last time she saw her she was with her father. They stopped by to deliver newly bloomed wild flowers they had picked alongside the road after the rain stopped. Millie bundled the flowers in a piece of twine and clutched them between her feet. She reveled in the wet summer wind blowing through the open window, the flower petals brushing her bare legs. Solie took the flowers from Millie and hugged her so hard she squeezed the air out of Millie's lungs. They sat in Solie's living room and drank coffee. Millie slurped hers through a sugar cube and watched Solie and her father sit in silence. She noted Solie's eyes, the brown irises shiny as glass peeking out from the puffy skin surrounding them. Solie gave Millie a bracelet she made from different colors of string, forming a striped pattern of blue and green that suddenly twisted in the middle and reversed. It is still too big for Millie's tiny wrist. She ties it around her ankle and hides it under a sock. Her mother has only noticed once, Millie lying, saying Jojo made it for her.

It is winter, the rain pouring down onto the roof of the house in sheets. She is in Yushie's room lying on his made bed, trying to read *Huckleberry Finn* for school. Johnny has moved up to Tokam to work in the shipyards. Yushie is working at the brewery, Tony packing up his belongings into cardboard boxes in preparation for his move to Tokam. He has been expelled from Odanodan High School for flunking too many classes and getting in too many fights and has decided not to enroll in another school to finish his junior year. He will move into Johnny's apartment and start work in the shipyards with him right after Christmas, which is only a few weeks away.

Millie's mind wanders as she reads, the words blurring on the page. Not even the thought of a staged murder interests her, pig's blood smeared across cabin walls seems boring to her. She is thinking of Jojo's boyfriend, Louis, who accompanied Jojo and her to the movies the night before at the 5th Avenue Theatre. He is on leave from the Navy, having come back from some place in Japan called Guadalcanal. He came back with hair shorn close to his skull and a tattoo on his wrist of an anchor. Jojo seemed bored with him the evening before, nagging him to not be *so serious*, refusing to kiss him in public. Millie saw him feign smiles in Jojo's direction as they waited in line to buy tickets for *The Boogie Man Will Get You*. He tickled Jojo and attempted a laugh to prove he was still fun, but it came out hollow sounding. In the middle of the movie, sitting in the darkened theatre, Jojo got up to go to the bathroom during a part when Peter Lorre was not on camera. Millie looked across the empty seat at Louis, his face aglow in the gray light emanating from the screen. He looked older to her, older than Johnny even. His eyelids seemed heavy, his eyes distant, like his mind was somewhere else. She noticed a cut on his exposed forearm, the skin around it smooth over the long muscles striating

from elbow to wrist. She felt the overwhelming urge to reach out and touch her hand to his, gripping the edge of his armrest so tightly. When she went back to watching the movie, the mad scientist trying to revive a body on a table in the basement, she felt Louis stand and looked over to find him moving to Jojo's seat directly beside her. She was too scared to look at him. Could feel warmth radiating from his arm, almost touching hers. Then his face slowly leaned into her neck, smelling of aftershave. His cheek brushing her hair. No boy as close to her as this...except Riley, but different. So entirely different. She held her breath, not wanting to move and ruin it somehow. Closed her eyes as his lips met the patch of skin behind her ear and lingered there for a moment, sending a pang of heat between her legs and up her stomach. She could feel her heart rattle like a tightly wound clock finally able to release its alarm. He pulled away slowly, putting his hand on hers, his palm hot as fire against her knuckles.

What are you two whispering about? Jojo whispered loudly, sitting down next to Louis. She had a bag of popcorn in her hand and was munching a large mouthful.

She got scared. I told her a joke, it didn't work, Louis whispered back, leaning in Jojo's direction. A draft now between them, cold air blew away the warmth from where his hand had been resting on Millie's.

Millie smiled bleakly and fixed her eyes on the screen.

It's supposed to be funny, Mil. You're not really scared, are you? Jojo asked, offering Louis popcorn and sliding a hand onto his lean thigh. Someone behind them hissing, *Sssh!* Millie was quiet on the ride home. They dropped her off first. She watched the silhouettes of their faces through the back window touch in the darkness before driving away.

Now in Yushie's bedroom, she can feel the spot on her neck where Louis pressed his lips to her skin. The memory makes her close her eyes, makes her feel pulsing at the place where her thighs meet. Her mind is revisiting things her brothers have said, the words taking on new meaning. She used to want to kiss boys just to say she kissed a boy, to talk about it with Jojo. There was something exciting about being that close, pressing their faces together, imagining what they looked like while doing it. It had not occurred to Millie before last night what kissing feels like, that the nerves in her face and neck are connected to other areas of her body now suddenly working in ways she did not know they could. She remembers Johnny discussing *tits* with Tony loud enough for her and Jojo to hear from her bed. He described sucking on them, gently biting the nipples between his teeth. *How horrible*, Millie had thought. Tony, to Millie's horror, then changed the topic to *pussy*, telling Johnny how he had slid his hand under a girl's skirt and pulled her underwear to the side. How she had liked it, head tilting back in pleasure. *Fingers up there! That can't feel good*, she laughed to Jojo, who confessed she let a boy do that to her before. How it felt like someone sticking their fingers in your mouth – not good, not bad, just *there*.

Once when Millie was younger, she had a nightmare, and awoke scared without remembering why. She was still half-asleep as she snuck downstairs and walked through her parents' bedroom door, ajar enough for Millie to slide through the crack without making the hinges creak. She did not notice her parents' heavy breathing or the movement of the comforter on the bed. As she shuffled her tired feet in their direction, her mother let out a sound like she was startled by something, or maybe scared. *Oh God*, she heard her mother whisper. *Mama?* she said, her voice piercing the air like a dish

shattering on the floor. *Oh shit*, she heard her mother say, one of the only times she has ever heard her curse. Her parents began rustling around in the sheets so furiously it panicked Millie and she ran out of the room and back up the stairs to her bed, pulling the covers up over her eyes. The noises they made, she remembers, sounded like the anxious screams of the actors in the horror film from last night, but different.

Millie can think of no one to talk to about this feeling she has when she thinks of Louis. She certainly can't talk to Jojo about it. Her mother would get flustered and rub the scar beneath her lower lip until it turned pink, just like she did the morning after Millie's nightmare. *What were you and Dad doing last night?* she had asked. *You know*, her mother paused. *You should really knock before coming into our bedroom*, was all she said. Her brothers would never talk to her about it, probably change the subject before she could get a word in edge wise. Her father would cringe or blush and have to leave the room. The only person who can help her is Solie. Millie is flustered. She can't sit still and can't think about anything else. She wants to figure out a way to get rid of this feeling, to put it away for a moment, just so she can *think*, so she can breathe without this tingling sensation running up and down her stomach.

Millie tries to read, begins reading out loud so she can't ignore the words. She grows tired without realizing it. Her eyelids struggle to stay open and she finally falls asleep, her face pressed against the open book. She awakens to Yushie shaking her leg, her cheek sore where the flesh molded to the crease between the pages.

"Hey, Mil," he whispers. "Get under the covers."

When she wakes in the morning, she is fully clothed in Yushie's bed. She staggers into her room to find Yushie sleeping on top of the quilt Baba made her when she was a little girl.

"Yush," she says loudly. "Wake up. Time to go to school."

At school, Millie and Jojo eat lunch together under the gym awning. Rain is pouring off the edge and splattering onto the ground into a deep puddle by their feet. Millie's buttocks and thighs are cold against the concrete floor. They are watching two junior girls, Amy Roder and Sarah Stepp, flirt with Yushie and his friend, Taylor, in the gym foyer through the open doors. Taylor comes over for dinner sometimes after he gets off work at the mill. He has broad shoulders that bump Millie's at the table and blond hair that grows in circles from his scalp. He compliments her mother until she blushes, waving her hand in the air for him to stop. He and Yushie are seniors, Millie a lowly sophomore. She watches the way Sarah puts her hand on Yushie's chest when she laughs at something he says. The way Amy twirls her loose hair in her fingers and smiles as Taylor tells a story. Millie's hair is always pulled back from her face. She forgets to smile when she talks to people.

"Can you believe Sarah Stepp?" Jojo asks. "Beth Anne from Math says she overheard Sarah say she wants to sleep with your brother so he'll marry her." Jojo nods wildly, stopping only to take a sip of milk from its tiny carton.

"He won't do it with *her*," Millie says. "Everyone knows he likes Isabelle Jenkins."

"You mean Fiona," Jojo shakes her head.

“No. Isabelle.”

“From *our* class?” Jojo has a look of disgust on her face.

“Yup.” Millie takes a bite of her sandwich and chews bitterly – Sarah is now pulling on Yushie’s hand. Yushie shakes his head no but cannot keep from smiling.

“What are you gonna do over break?” Jojo asks. She puts her empty milk carton in her brown paper bag, which she crumples into a ball with both hands.

“Nothing, I guess. What about you?”

Jojo does not answer. When Millie looks at her, she is staring at her legs jutting out in front of her on the ground. She is rubbing the toe of one boot with the sole of the other, smudging mud around until it forms a brown circle.

“I was gonna tell you earlier,” Jojo begins. Her voice is low. Millie has to lean in to hear it. “It’s just that... I don’t know...” Jojo pauses, bites her lower lip.

“Jo, you’re *scaring* me. What is it?” Millie’s mind is racing.

“I have to move,” Jojo finally says. Her whole face frowns and her eyes fill with tears.

“Move where?” Millie asks. Her heart is beating so fast she feels dizzy. She puts a hand on Jojo’s shoulder.

“My mom wants us to move back to Spokane to be closer to my dad.”

Millie has wrapped an arm around Jojo’s shoulder. Jojo is wiping tears from her cheeks. “When are you leaving?” Millie asks.

“Next week.”

“But your mom hates your dad, I thought.”

“Not anymore. They’re gonna try and get back together or something.”

“What about Louis?” Millie asks. She is careful to make her voice sound concerned, but it comes out flat, like she is pretending to care.

“He ships out in a couple days. He said he’ll write. Will you write me?” Jojo looks at Millie, her callused hand squeezing Jojo’s shoulder.

“Of course,” she says. “You can come visit in the summer and it’ll be just like it is now.” Millie feels like a child, knowing deep down that any time you say ‘it’ll be just like before’, you already know that things can never be the same.

Chapter 7

It is the day after Christmas, 1943, and Gael is calling home, where it is still Christmas. Late evening, according to his calculations. He hasn’t spent more than an hour or two with his parents since the day he graduated from medical school eleven years earlier. His mother, foggy eyed, his father, yawning in the audience as he walked across stage. He was still in his twenties, left for Argentina as soon they handed him his diploma. He called once from a hotel overlooking Mendoza Street in Rosario, holding the receiver to his ear and watching flowers spill from tin buckets on a cart, a cluster of boys wearing sailor outfits chase after a mangy dog. His father had been out, always *out*, no further explanation. His mother was drunk, words bleeding into mumbles and fits of coughing. He remembers thinking, *I do not know this person*, the same moment of pause when you’re positive you’ve dialed the wrong number. Then the familiar sounds trickled into his ear. The click of her teeth against her cigarette holder and the ice clinking in her glass as she held it to her lips over the phone, despite the fuzzy connection. They siphoned money into his bank accounts, *they* because he never knew if it was his mother

or his father. They never asked what he used the money for. He has never forgotten to call on Christmas, not even last year when he was in northern Egypt watching *Sergeant York* in a tent and drinking warm whiskey straight from the bottle.

He is in Brindisi waiting to be shipped off, but does not know where. Sicily perhaps, half remembering someone saying it. To his surprise, his father answers the phone. His voice is gruff, like he is sick or has just woken up, although it is almost ten o'clock in Virginia.

“Italy?” his father asks. Although it comes out as two syllables, ‘It’ly’.

Gael is watching gulls run along the shore. He traces his finger along the sooty glass of the window he leans against. The phone feels heavy in his hand. The gulls peck their beaks into the wet sand and ruffle their feathers for warmth.

“I take it you’re not coming home any time soon,” his father says. There is a faint click click click on the line. Gael thinks for a moment that maybe it is simply the sound of bullets that he always hears. Then it comes again. Click click click. “You still there, son?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“Got some bad news,” his father clears his throat, the noise so loud Gael has to hold the phone away from his ear. For a moment, he hears silence. Then the sound of gunfire resumes faintly. He puts a finger in his ear and pops it out. Still there. “You there?” his father asks.

“Is it Mom?” Gael asks. His voice quivers as if he is going to cry, but he feels nothing. He has imagined his mother drowned in the bathroom his whole life. Or in a car accident – trembling hands at the wheel, eyes as hazy as breath-fogged glass. Her

swollen stomach and bony shoulders slumped over on the couch, hands clenched in seizure.

“She said she didn’t feel safe in the house with me being gone all the time. I bought her a gun. Pearl handled pistol. She got drunk and ate it. Thought you should know.”

When, Gael wants to ask, but it is an afterthought, a line from movies, not something he genuinely wants to know. *Why weren’t you home*, he thinks, not only for his mother, but ever. His father the scientist at the university, hired for important government work.

“You there?”

“Yeah. Still here.”

“Sorry.”

“Sorry. Yeah, sorry, Dad.”

“We’ll visit the grave when you get home,” his father says. The word ‘home’ sounds strange, almost muffled, like his father can’t think of the right word for the place they used to live together. She is undoubtedly buried in the same cemetery Gael used to visit with his mother. One of Gael’s first memories is them putting flowers on her father’s grave. *Samuel G. Daringer*. He died before Gael was born, before his mother had even met his father. She told him once the G. stood for Gael, so, in a way, he was named after her father. *Dear father. Wouldn’t hurt a fly*. Her slanting silhouette under the morning sun swayed on the freshly cut grass, her heel conveniently getting stuck in it when she stumbled on the way to the car. When he was still a boy, round-faced and toothless, he read the name aloud, if only to prove to his mother that he could read, just as

his report cards suggested. *Samuel Gael Daringer*. He rocked back on forth on his heels, trying not to smile too big and appear proud of himself, even though he was. *Gael?* His mother's face was puffy and wrinkled like a fingertip left in the bath water too long. *His middle name was Garrett, not Gael*. She laughed and tapped him on the crown of his head with the back of her hand. The gesture was so rude and startling, Gael will remember it all his life. *Gael means 'stranger' or 'talented' or something*, his mother hiccupped. *I don't know. Your father picked it out.*

The woman Gael is walking with along the boardwalk has hair the color of molasses pouring down her back. He cannot see it now in the darkness, but remembers how it grazed her waist as she nestled up to him under the streetlight. They wove through the streets and piles of rubble towards the sound of waves. She is leading him. He imagines the tips of her hair lapping at the small of her back with each step. The boardwalk is hole-filled and rattles in the wind. Seagulls watch Gael and the woman pass from their perch on the railing. They are as still and gray as church gargoyles in the dark. A fire on the beach blazes wildly, men drunk and stumbling around it. Laughing is coming from a weakly lit room where the pier abruptly ends and shore takes over. It is a bar with a slanting roof, all the windows upstairs cloaked in shadow. Gael cannot speak Italian, and the woman only knows the word 'come' in English, her hand waving him toward her as she walks. The night's darkness is interrupted by intermittent bombs that light up the sky along the horizon. Many are faint, too far away to feel. Others are grating to the ear, rattling Gael's teeth in his skull.

They pass through the threshold and the woman turns around. She is nothing but a pair of red lips in front of him, breath sweet with drink. Eyes wilted in the corners, a crease slanted diagonally across her brown forehead. He sits and drinks wine with her until his vision blurs. He allows her perfumed hand to slide up and down his neck, grab his arm and lead him up the crooked steps, wood worn pale and frayed where so many boots have trodden. The rooms along the narrow hallway have no doors. He sees skinny legs and buttocks thrusting, dirty hands almost black against pale breasts. There are no empty rooms. The woman pushes Gael against the wall and presses her mouth to his, separating his lips with her tongue. Her kisses taste like ash, although he cannot remember her smoking. He has not kissed anyone since the girl from Patsy's. All the women he's been with since undoing his pants, thrusting his hand inside their shirt after he pays, but never kissing, not like this.

Another woman and soldier ascend the stairs and stand next to them. When Gael's girl sees the soldier and woman are not kissing, she withdraws her face and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand like a child after a goodnight peck.

"Hey, doc," the soldier nods in Gael's direction. It is Jeremy Harris. A boy of nineteen with a bullet lodged in his left hand.

"Harris," Gael nods. He turns to his woman, who is wide-eyed, her lips pressed together so tightly the skin around them has turned white.

A soldier buckling his belt walks out of a corner room followed by a barefoot woman in a flowing skirt and unbuttoned blouse, parted over heavy breasts that shake as she walks. Gael's woman marches into the room and sits down on the bed, the flimsy metal frame creaking under her weight. When she turns on the dim light next to the bed,

she lifts her skirt up over her breasts, exposing a swollen belly Gael had not noticed under her loose dress.

“How much?” she asks in a thick accent.

“I don’t understand,” he shakes his head.

“How much?”

Gael kneels before her, presses his hands against her belly, which is hard under his fingers and tight as a drum. She is at least six months pregnant, he thinks. Maybe seven. He feels the baby kick through the skin under his palm.

“You have me,” she says, “and you no pay. How much?”

“Oh, no. I can’t.”

“Man say doctor,” she points toward the hall.

“Yes.”

“You doctor?”

“Yes.”

“How much aborto?”

Gael shakes his head. He pulls her skirt down over her belly. “I can’t. You’re too big,” he motions with his hands, forming a circle of air around his stomach. “Too far along.”

He has done it before, several times. A brothel in Cairo, in some tent in Egypt. Made the girls, never more than a month or two along, breathe ether. He scraped and scraped until he hit matter, until they bled it all out.

“You do it, yes?” she nods her head, eyebrows raised to meet the crease in her forehead.

“No. Too big. Too late.”

Her face contorts into a scowl. “You *no* doctor!” she yells. He stands up to leave and she is pounding her fists on his back. “You no doctor!” When he turns around to hold her arms still, she presses her wet face into his, kissing him, biting him. She puts his hands on her breasts and thrusts her hand down his pants, but pulls away when she feels he is limp and lifeless.

“You no doctor,” she says.

Gael holds onto the peeling walls on his way down the stairs and sits at a table made from a door and a stack of crates. He sits by himself, drinking until he can no longer keep his eyes open. He does not see the explosions of the nearing bombs illuminate the room or feel the room rattle around him. He can only hear the sound of bullets slicing the air, even though they are not there.

Chapter 8

Late May. But rainy. Ground wet like a soaking sheet your hand gets lost in when it dives in to unplug the drain. Stiff and pale as bone, Millie lies in her bed sighing heavily, hoping each exhalation will invite sleep to jump on her suddenly. She concentrates on the pitter patter of rain falling on the ceiling, but each moment that passes she is more and more awake. It is midnight already. Millie should be asleep, dreaming of something besides cow udders and milk. Or, more recently, black soil crawling with worms and baby weeds she must pluck out by the roots. *Or else they'll just grow back. You must always pull from the root.* Hands chapped and scabbed over from the biting pricks of tiny thorns.

The wind coming through her cracked window smells like wet dirt and sounds like someone hushing loudly. She looks out the window as she closes it, swears she sees a light out in the field, but then it is gone, dims slowly behind the ridge in the field. It takes her a moment to realize that it was not one light but two – headlights – joining in the newly warm night air to form a single beam through the rain. Millie knows the car is parked and the driver is sitting there, waiting for what she can only imagine. She has heard of other farms, the Armstrong's next door in particular, being used for parking by high school couples. It starts up in the spring, when the nights don't have that bitter chill every time the wind blows, not stopping until summer ends and school starts. It is the end of May. School will be out soon. Millie is twenty, has not been in school for two years, but she knows school is almost out. Can feel it in her stomach, that flutter of summer, like she is a girl half her age.

She pauses, only for a moment as she tiptoes downstairs, to think of what her mother would do if she woke up. Millie in a nightgown and rubber boots, her father's coat slung over her shoulders like a cape, to what? Go outside and catch those *teenagers*, something Millie can no longer call herself, in the act. The one that Millie always thinks about but has never done. Not so much as kissed a boy, unless you count the time senior year when James Sable, her prom date, crashed his head into hers as he was dropping her off on her front porch. His lips hard on the side of her mouth. Both of them readjusting, trying again, only to knock chins. Too embarrassing to say anything to each other ever again.

One boot is her mother's, the other her own. She closes the door behind her so gently even she cannot detect a noise except the slight click of the latch. The soggy grass

pulls at her feet, but she is walking, no stomping, her way to the ridge in the field. Night so black she can hardly see where she is going. Knows her way by memory alone. She wraps her father's coat tightly around her ribs, but the hood is blown down and she is dripping wet by the time she reaches the car. A Cadillac. She can tell by the hood ornament. The little light the night affords making a line of white along the seam of the door, the metal handle glinting. She opens the back door without knocking, anticipating heavy breathing, the sucking noises of kissing she hears behind her at the movies. There is nothing but silence. The backseat is empty, which she checks with a damp hand against the leather seat.

Millie is seized with a sudden panic. She slams the door and backs away from the car. When the driver's door cracks open, she is ready to run, knees bent and hands clutching her father's coat tight at the sleeves. She wipes the rain from her eyes, smooths her sopping hair across her forehead. The door swings open, a lanky frame emerging from behind it.

"Millie," the muffled voice shouts through the wind. She is partially relieved. The voice knows her, calls her by name. "Get in," it says, followed by a motion she imagines to be a hand beckoning. The back door is being held open. She can feel the warmth from the car and crawls in. When the door slams behind her, she is sitting next to someone. It is a man, she thinks. Too tall to be a girl. A pair of glasses flash in the dark.

"Henry?" She has not seen him in years. Not since the last day of high school when he walked up to her in the hall and asked her to sign his yearbook. He was a sophomore. Big lips parted in smile. He didn't look so much like Riley anymore. He was so much taller. Something grown up about his neck and shoulders. His hair

brushing against the frame of his glasses in thick, blond waves. She had written something stupid, something she hadn't given a second thought until now. Oh, what had she said? She hadn't drawn a smiley face, had she?

"You're soaked," Henry says. He is helping her out of her father's coat, toweling off her hair with his sweater. Without the rain and wind, her eyes adjust and she can see his long, lean torso bent toward her. He smells like laundry soap, the kind her mother uses.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he says. He has draped her father's coat over the back of the driver's seat and strewn his now wet sweater across the passenger's side. Millie is sitting there, shivering. Henry must hear her teeth chattering. He pulls a coat from underneath him and drapes it over both their laps.

"I couldn't sleep," he announces.

Millie is nodding for a moment before she realizes he may not be able to see her. "Me either," she says. There is a pause. They are both looking down. Millie raises her wet head. Realizing she is older, that he is on her family's property, she gets a rush of superiority and says, "What are you doing out here, anyway?"

Henry shrugs his shoulders. She can feel it in the way the seat shakes.

"Do you come out here a lot?" It is possible she has not seen him, normally fast asleep by ten o'clock.

"I don't know," he says. "I guess so."

They are sitting so close, Millie can feel the warmth of his body pressed up against her own. It is almost too much to take, like thinly clothed skin on the throbbing surface of the wood stove.

Chapter 9

The war has ended and Gael is in London. He borrows a map of the United States from a closed bookstore, letting himself in through the already smashed-out front door window. The map unfolds into a giant sheet he spreads out onto the hood of a car. He puts one finger on Arlington County, Virginia and lets his other hand wander as far westward as it can go before hitting the Pacific Ocean. California. Gael hates the idea of sun and sand after the tortuous months in Egypt. His hand drifts north until it lands closer to Canada on a town near the ocean, a small dot surrounded by forested peninsula, mountains, bay and river. Odanodan. He doesn't know how to pronounce it. He knows no one there. It is perfect.

BOOK TWO: THE PEOPLE

Chapter 10

One Saturday in August, 1945, there is a stranger in Odanodan. He is still there the following Sunday, and the next day – his presence like a prickly cold the town prepares for before venturing outside. They look for him, crane their heads closer to other people’s conversations and repeat what they hear without being asked. *Heard he’s from back east? He’s a doctor! Not bad looking. Dresses so fancy in those suits. Say he’s never been married? Not as old as he looks. You know how war ages people. Anything else? No other news? Nothing at all?*

On the sidewalks of 4th Avenue, on Main, on State... in the hardware store where men normally chatter but are now standing silently, waiting... in Sylvester Park on Legion Way in front of the courthouse where women walk their children and scoot their babies in strollers, now lingering a little longer underneath the pine trees, watching other people closely as they pass... in the Dinner Bee Diner, in Bartel’s clothing store, in Ralph’s Grocery, in the Bread Peddler Bakery, in Julianne’s Beauty Parlor where female voices normally spill out into the streets in loud bursts of laughter, there is a quiet, a stopping of time. Even the tellers at Odanodan Savings and Loan listen closely as fisherman carry in the stench of salty fish with them as they cash their checks. The post office employees pretend to stock envelopes and wipe down tables even though their shift

is over. There is no news. Not even a snippet to build a rumor on. Only a name: Gael Young. You wouldn't think anyone outside of Odanodan would care there was anyone new in town, yet when reports leak out that there is a doctor living above the Spar Bar on 4th Avenue, people as far as Chentum (twenty-three miles away) and Paylor (thirty-seven miles away) come to town asking about Gael.

Him in the suit? The drunk in the bar?

Then one day there is a line out the Spar Bar door. A child bleeding from the top of his head, a coughing baby, a fisherman with a cut down his leg, an old woman – eyes dark with cataracts. It all started with Harry Michaelson, a mill worker who always smelled like Christmas because he was in charge of the Grade A Douglas Fir. He cut his hand on the bandsaw when he reached in to shift a board. It sliced him between his thumb and index finger cutting the muscle and ligament, his thumb dangling from his wrist like a soggy piece of rope. Harry went to the Spar Bar to get a drink before going to the hospital, such injuries no longer jarring him as they did in his youth – saw blade cut on his thigh, his hip, a board swung across his face, breaking his nose. His hand was wrapped in a white towel, blood soaking through and dripping onto the knee of his pants. As the story goes, Gael stitched him up quickly, numbing his hand with something from a vile he had in a black bag in his room. They drank together, Harry waving his hand, crisscrossed with black stitches, as men he knew stumbled in from the mill. The hospital down on Lilly Road cost more money than most people were willing to spend, even with steady work, even with insurance. But this doctor, this *good doctor*, doesn't charge a penny. Just have to contribute to his bar tab. He doesn't say much, but each new patient thinks maybe, just maybe, he could be the one to get him talking, she could get him

spilling all the details of his past, which had to be sordid. After all, no one keeps a boring life secret. What would be the point?

Gael hasn't been able to remember where he is most mornings since the beginning of the war and this early September morning is no different. The light leaking in through the spaces in the blinds of his narrow window illuminates his small room – no bigger than a storage closet. Enough room for a bed so tiny it could be for a child, a dresser that doubles as a nightstand, an armoire filled with suits he has no use for, and a rug that is a little too long and buckles against the outside wall. His eyes try to make patterns of the dust swirling in the air like smoke, but his mind wanders to other places without his consent. The oily pillow of the motel just outside Andrew's Field, planes lining up in the night sky like some new constellation. The last time he heard his mother's voice. Over the phone, of course. About to play bridge with her *gals*, teeth clicking on the ebony cigarette holder his father brought her back from a trip to France, before the war, before Gael was even born. Bombs landing nearer and nearer. Finally, men exploding – their belts of ammunition going off like firecrackers in the night.

Even though it is still technically summer, even though the days are still sometimes sunny and humid, Gael falls asleep to the sound of the ever more present rain dripping from the awning outside his window, from the trees across the street, from the fenders of cars parked outside, raindrops lapping, licking, like a dog with cut on their tail. In the evening, like wind at the ocean whipping water through the air, the rain starts, and continues, intensifying with each passing hour. The sound of it sometimes even replaces the noise of gunfire, a sound he can't seem to shake, a sound he has no medical

explanation for. But he hears it all the time. It grows especially loud in the bar, as if trying to compete with so many drunken voices. Or seeing a patient – stitching up a girl’s collarbone where a branch fell and struck her, the girl no more than thirteen saying something, heart beating fast under his touch, talking fast and loud, but Gael couldn’t hear her, had to ask her to repeat everything she said. The girl looked at him with distaste, as if he were crazy and not worth talking to. He couldn’t tell her it was the gunfire, the sound as loud as someone screaming in his ear, couldn’t explain that he was trying to listen, but couldn’t understand her words, muffled under the duhdaduhdaduhdaduh in his head.

Pat and Otis Bents, the Spar Bar owners who rent him his room and live in a modest, one-bedroom apartment across the hall, knock on his door and say good night, but he does not hear them until one night when it is raining and the gunfire has quieted to a low buzzing noise as he watches rain trickle down his window, fast then slow, drawing S’s on the window. There was a light rapping on the door and Gael jumped out of bed and turned the knob just in time to see Pat shuffling down the hall in a tattered nightgown.

“Oh,” she said when Gael called after her. “I always assume you’re already asleep.”

Gael stood in the doorway, looking at Pat more closely, slightly scared he was imagining her there, that he was dreaming.

“You normally don’t say anything when we knock.”

“You knock every night, then?” Gael asked, to which Pat nodded her white head slowly, her wrinkly eyes heavy with sleep.

Gael's first night in Odanodan, nearly a month ago, he was dressed in a suit, shoes shined in the airport just so he didn't have to sit and do nothing, waiting for his plane. "Aren't you a little overdressed?" Otis asked, even before saying hello as Gael strolled into the Spar Bar and ordered a beer. He remembered thinking the town had been a mistake. It was so much smaller than he had envisioned. The people were... he couldn't quite find the right expression. *Country bumpkins*, he thought once, then shook his head. It wasn't that. There was a town, bars, stores. It wasn't as isolated as he had imagined, bigger towns a short train-ride away. Theaters, political conversations, people who had traveled to other places. It was just *smaller*. As if the forests, the water, the mountains, had swallowed up the people's lives, dwarfed them with their abundance and stature. Fish and trees. Trees and fish. Without them there were no jobs. Nothing to be good at. Nothing to think about.

He sat on a stool, barely saying a word, as Otis and Pat Bents talked on top of each other to an otherwise empty bar. Unlike the aggressive banter of Baltimore bartenders who spoke in rapid bursts, their words bled into each other, their voices swelling like light as it draws closer in the dark.

"Stayed open durin' the war," Otis explained. Both he and his wife were white haired people with shiny faces. At first, Gael had thought of them as brother and sister because they looked so much alike. It took seeing them kissing each other on the lips when they thought no one was watching to convince Gael that they were indeed a married couple. This was solidified when they spoke of their daughter, Mary, a second grade teacher at Odanodan Elementary.

"Every night the women came up from the cannery and drank," Pat continued.

“Smellin’ like gunpowder, ‘cause they converted the cannery to a grenade factory, you know?” Gael nodded his head, pretending he knew. “Least it wasn’t the women from the cranberry mill. Turned that one into a rubber factory. That smell’ll give you a headache for days,” Otis smiled a lipless smile. Gael noticed Otis’ shirt strained at the buttons around his swollen belly, clothed in a clean, white undershirt. He was short and round, like his wife. Both had large mouths that gaped wide in conversation or thought.

“With the hops shortage,” Pat continued, “sometimes the brewery would run out of beer for weeks at a time. With the way those women could drink, we near ran out a few times.” Pat’s teeth were too big for her face. Her mouth could hardly close around them. But the most distracting thing about her appearance was the absence of a neck, which gave the impression she was always leaning back to get a good look at you. Like Otis, she appeared to be a series of knobs glued together: head, chest, stomach, knees, ankles, although Pat’s ankles were wide and a purplish-blue color, veins climbing the skin like ivy.

“In thirty years, we never ran outta nothin’. Nothin’! Come the first year of the war, we ran outta more’n one thing at a time.” Otis shook his head, wiping the bar in front of Gael with a damp rag. Gael traced a finger through the wet streak, thinking, *They have nothing else to talk about. Trees and fish. Fish and trees.*

“Sometimes, it was lack of rations, but more often than not, it was our Class A pass,” Pat added. She had begun stacking glasses on the shelf.

“Three or four gallons a gas a week!” Otis exclaimed. “The makers of these laws have never been west of the Mississippi. Three gallons’ll get me to the place I’m goin’ around here, but what about the way back?”

Gael nodded to show he was listening, despite the fact he was staring at his nearly empty glass of beer. Within moments, a full glass slid across the bar. He looked up to find Pat wiping her hands on a towel. She winked. *They see me*, Gael thought. *I can't get lost here.*

“When the supplier didn't show up, which he *often* didn't,” Otis continued, “we were helpless to find what we needed. Nearest towns are smaller'n Oadanodan.”

“Bigmount's a good sixty miles north and our truck gets fifteen miles per gallon,” Pat finished.

“You do the math,” Otis sighed.

“Not enough,” Gael said quietly. Pat and Otis looked surprised, turning to him as if he would say more. He could only repeat, “Not enough,” and shake his head. Pat and Otis exchanged glances before resuming wiping counters and stacking glasses.

Gael gets dressed quickly, without looking at himself in the mirror. He has stopped wearing suits – long grown tired of the stares – unless it is Friday or Saturday night, when most men shower and change before coming to the bar, some even in a freshly ironed dress shirt and slacks, black shoes shined to a mirror-like sheen. Gael cannot bring himself to wear thick jeans or canvas pants, work boots, and flannel shirts. Instead, he wears khakis, white tee shirts under a button down, and loafers scuffed at the toes from all his walking. His jacket is new, recommended to him by a fisherman patient with a bait hook lodged in his forearm. It is dark blue with a hood, the fabric an oily canvas lined in sheepskin. He buttons it as he creeps down the stairs on his tiptoes, careful not to wake Pat and Otis, snoring loudly from behind their door. It is dark out despite the sun having risen nearly an hour ago, at least according to Gael's almanac. It

is as if there is a hand cupping the town, faint sunlight barely visible through breaks in the thick clouds. The sky is gray and low, pressing Gael to the ground with such force his tired knees shake beneath him. *This town is a mistake.*

Every morning, he walks. Lately the walks have started earlier and earlier, until he is laying in bed after the bar has closed, giving up on sleep, and heading out into the night, walking until he can walk no longer and it is all he can do to climb the stairs to collapse on his bed, Pat and Otis staring at him strangely as he passes. He is never sure what he is looking for as he wanders the town, although he has a suspicion, one he won't let form into an actual thought in his head. There is the girl, after all. A girl, indeed. She lives on the farm just off Kimilchi Road, which he is always sure to pass on his way back to the Spar Bar. A big, gray house, blue shutters and so many windows it looks ablaze all lit up at night. It is surrounded by green fields, green trees, speckled cows and muddy patches along the fence where the cows stomp and rub their backs on the posts. He walks along the narrow, gravel road slowly, hopeful a cow will have broken through the fence and wandered onto the Armstrong's neighboring farm. The girl would soon follow, running through the field, her pale skin made even paler by the blackness of her hair. He is an old man next to her, he knows, but he can't help but stare when the girl comes to the bar on Saturday evenings. She doesn't see him, he is sure. It is always so crowded, and she is tucked away in a booth surrounded by her brothers. The only one Gael knows is Johnny. He is loud and talks incessantly, patting people on the shoulders and winking at women. He sneaks glasses of whiskey when he goes to fill up the beer pitcher for his brothers and sister. Eyes hazy with drink, he talks to anyone within earshot. On one occasion, it was Gael closest to him. Gael was too drunk to hide his contempt for talking,

for answering questions. Johnny was too drunk to notice and wouldn't shut up. Johnny spoke of the war freely, a clear sign he never saw any combat.

Six months in the tarpaper barracks in Bigmount, down by the water. His red face shiny like the inside of a tomato. Class X gas passes. Could leave every night. Played football, mostly, during the day. His toothy grin, like a kid's, unable to hide his self-satisfaction. Went out with girls for dinner and dancing. This one blond. Gold heels, bright beneath her long legs. What was her name, again?

Gael's mind wandered, the noise of bullets piercing his skull. He could taste the dirt in his teeth. Feel the scream he had to bury in his throat. Severed arm. Missing leg. Intestines held in hand. Exposed brain. Cauterizing the artery. Applying pressure to the wound. Trying so hard to listen.

Three teams for football. Championship game day after D-Day. Everyone forgot who won. We got so drunk.

Green field he ran through, littered with bodies. A green field perfect for a game of football. The last thing on his mind. The taste of blood. Green infection. Purple bruise. Thoughts of leaving, somehow. Of eating his gun like his mother. At least there is always that way out.

He wanted to excuse himself. Sit on the floor of his room until his mind calmed. But that was when the girl drew nearer, handed Johnny a dollar bill and some coins, smiled at him in a bleary way without ever looking at Gael. He wanted to ask Johnny about his sister, but didn't, afraid it would intensify the stuttering of his heart. He couldn't help but stare at her white neck, her round hips as she walked away, all the while somewhere in his head a voice saying *yes, yes, yes*. He found himself nodding at the

thought of her, even after Johnny started talking about working in the brewery in high school, *yes, yes*. The thoughts of men's exposed insides dissipated into the dark corners of his mind where he could no longer see them, no longer feel them in his hands. The gunfire quieted to a dull pitter-patter noise in his ear, like rain. *This town was a mistake.*

He is too old for her. After all, he is nearly forty, he thinks, climbing the muddy hill out of town, stopping to catch his breath where the wide road narrows into a gravelly path barely broad enough for two cars. He shouldn't be thinking of her at all, half his age and never living outside of this small, rainy town. But something about her pale skin makes her glow in the darkness of his mind's eye. He felt foolish asking Johnny her name, especially when it was the first time they had spoken. His embarrassment dissolved quickly when he realized how drunk Johnny was, still rattling on about the brewery, the smell of hops and rolling barrels down the switchbacks and onto the boats. He had to ask twice before Johnny tilted his head back like he had to think about it for a second, before saying her name was Mildred.

Mil-dred. Gael is positive that is not what she is called. Not what he has heard yelled from the house as she runs out to the barn. He would remember the word 'dread' in her name. Yet he repeats it over and over again under his breath, as if he is willing her to materialize right in front of him as he stands alongside Kimilchi Road in the rain. Dripping. Rain sliding down the side of his hood, pooling at his feet in a shallow pothole. He is hoping the door will open, that her small figure will run outside. But the house is dark inside, only a kitchen light left on, it seems by accident, from the night before. So he stands. Waiting, until the overwhelming realization that he is visible, that

he can be seen standing there, alone, staring unabashedly at a house, begins pulling his legs toward town.

Chapter 11

Millie is sitting on the floor, legs bent underneath her like a child at reading time in school. She is hot and dizzy with nausea. Her blood feels thick, like it can't quite fit through her tiny veins. She is staring at the deer head above the fireplace, the buck's dusty glass eyes staring back at her with an empty, surrendered expression. She can't think of anything but her stomach pulling at the back of her throat. She closes her eyes tight and tries to remember the night before when she fell asleep with little effort, without tossing and turning in pain. Tries to imagine how the sheets felt against her skin, the wind blowing through her open window, warm as breath on her face. It was the first Friday night she did not go out to the field just after midnight to meet Henry in the back of his father's Cadillac. Surely he did not wait long, she assures herself. After half an hour or so, he must have figured she was not coming and drove down the road to his driveway, twisting and turning up the hill.

She pictures Henry's thick lips curled up in waiting, his hand on his lap in anticipation. She will explain later and he will understand, she thinks, that she was finally comfortable enough to sleep, something they have been sacrificing to be with each other. They do not call each other to cement plans or leave letters for each other in secret places, such gestures too dramatic for Millie, who has fooled herself into thinking she does not care for Henry despite the rapid pounding of her heart against her ribs, like a caged animal trying to escape, every time she thinks of him. They simply know that at

midnight every night Henry will drive to the edge of the southeast field on the Mulch farm and park just under the ridge of land that sticks up like the back of a sleeping animal against the sky and Millie will walk the long way through the woods and come out from between the trees to climb into the backseat of the car where Henry is already sitting, the windows fogged up from his warm waiting.

It is still morning. The rain has stopped, but the clouds hover low in the sky, making the day seem like it has never started. The deer head is mostly in shadow, but Millie can still make out its dusty eyes that look like two filthy puddles. Millie's father is upstairs making noises with his heavy boots like cow hooves stomping on concrete. Millie's brothers are on their way down from Tokam, where they all live and work together in the shipyards, the house now empty and quiet without their musty scent, their heavy breathing. Millie's mother is in town selling milk and cream at the market, as on most Saturdays, and most Saturdays, Millie plays with her brothers, if you can call racing each other milking, feeding, and cleaning to make the work go by faster 'play'. Without the competition, they are simply blistered and aching-backed workers fondling cow udders, getting drooled on, shoveling shit.

Millie hopes she can be normal for her brothers, if only for the day. She hates when they treat her like a child, whispering sweet things like, *Poor kid, feel better*, with no feeling behind it. Or worse, ignore her because they simply don't know what to say anymore. She has already thrown up once right after getting out of bed, but is hoping she can do it again before her brothers barge through the front door rattling the air with their loud voices. Millie's father pleads with her to go to the doctor. After all, there is a new doctor in town who fixed Harry Michaelson up good as new after he nearly cut his thumb

off on the bandsaw. She tells her father it is just hormones, lady troubles, the flu, a headache, and sometimes he acts like he believes her. Her mother says nothing, ignores her when Millie lies in the middle of the kitchen floor, her clammy cheek pressed against the hard, cool surface of the wood. It takes the edge off, something about pressing her body against the floor makes her feel like she's at a precipice and cannot go any further, so she has no choice but to lie there. Millie's mother steps over her daughter's limp legs to get to the sink, but never says anything, acting as though Millie were some piece of furniture. Her mother is worried. She knows by the way she traces the scar on her chin with an index finger until the white line turns pink.

There is something about the deer head above the living room stove that speeds the nausea along. Its slick black lips, the intimate curve of its antlers, dusty cobwebs dangling from its snout. It used to remind her of Solie, made her picture the hide on the foot of her bed. Of the story Solie told her about Indians a long time ago using the antlers of deer to dig holes, to unearth wapato roots from the soggy ground. Millie does not know how to ask her father about Solie, can't bring herself to utter her name in his presence. Although, she has thought very little of her since *falling ill*, as her mother refers to it. Ever since the first days of nausea, the deer head disgusts her for no reason, just as milk – something she has loved her whole life, was always punished for drinking the last of and not leaving any for her brothers – does for no apparent reason. *You know your grandpa couldn't drink milk*, her mother says every time Millie cringes at her father pouring himself a tall glass, or worse, drinks straight from the bottle. *Yeah, but that was because it curdled with all the whiskey in his stomach*, her father retorts. *Still*, her mother says, *some people can't*.

Dr. Jeffrey has been out of town for over a month. Her father keeps nagging her to go see the new doctor, *That Gael character*, he says. *Yeah, I know, I know, Harry Michaelson's thumb*, Millie says when her father opens his mouth to tell the story for the fiftieth time. Millie hates doctors. She has only ever been to the doctor for fainting spells when she was twelve. Dr. Jeffrey did a series of uncomfortable tests, which cost enough money to cause her mother to make that throat noise, the one that sounds like a leaky balloon. Millie fainted a total of nine times – her mother tallied them along with the date – after each one, she'd go to Dr. Jeffrey. At the end of every test, sometimes up to four at one time, he told her everything was normal. The fainting stopped after the sixth visit and her mother told her it was all in her head. Millie just needed to hear the doctor tell her she was okay over and over again until she truly believed it. Now, preparing herself for the fourth week of nausea, Millie still believes it is all in her head, that she will wake up one morning and it will all be gone.

Millie's legs are numb. She stretches them out in front of her and feels the flood of pin pricks wash up her feet and calves. The glossy glue around the base of the deer head's neck makes her face hot and her vision blur. Her mouth floods with saliva. She stumbles to the bathroom, using the wall for support, and vomits bile that stings like acid in her throat. She hovers over the toilet bowl, tears dripping from the tip of her nose into the rippling water. As she rinses her mouth out with cold water from the faucet, careful only to swallow a little bit, she cups the porcelain sink beneath her, hard as bone, like her mother's arthritic hands. *Monday*, she tells herself, *Monday I'll go to the doctor*.

Millie is sitting at the kitchen table flailing her arms at flies circling her head. She has yet to catch one, to squish it against the table or, if very lucky, between her two palms, killing the fly in one swift clap. Her brothers traipse into the house, door slamming like someone is mad, feet treading heavy and loud on the floor boards. They do not notice her, do not ask why there is a green pallor to her face. Yushie, so dark, so handsome, with oily black hair combed neatly, and Johnny, so red and freckly it's a wonder they are related, join Millie at the table. Tony is idling at the door, carrying something long and thin.

“What you got there?” her father hollers from the stairs. He has been puttering around upstairs – the rustle of sheets piling into the linen closet, the swish swish swish of the broom in the hallway followed by the slapping noise of rugs hitting the floor.

“Pike pole,” Johnny announces from his seat beside Millie. He is unfolding the thin newspaper, eyes scanning the pages quickly.

“Found it in the woods out behind the shipyard,” Tony ads. He is standing it upright, paying no attention to the fact that the sharp, curved end is stabbing the ceiling, leaving light gray scratches on the white paint.

“Jesus, Tony,” her father pulls the pike from his hands and sets it on the floor. “Careful, would you?”

Tony rolls his eyes and heads for the cookie jar, rolls his eyes again when he finds it is empty. Millie's father is examining the pike pole like he's never seen one before.

“That'll work, right?” Johnny asks, eyes never lifting from the thin newspaper pages strung between his hands. “Huh. They're finally paving 4th Avenue.” He slaps the front of the paper.

“Of course,” their father answers. “It’s just, I don’t use these much anymore.”

“Don’t you ever work in the hills anymore?” Tony asks. He is rummaging through the cupboard for something to eat.

Their father scratches his freckled arm until the milky white skin underneath turns pink. Millie opens her mouth to say something; her father’s awkward hesitations make her nervous. “Um,” she begins.

“—No, not anymore,” their father cuts Millie off. “Not for a couple years. Every once in a while I’ll go help out at the mill on Saturdays, but the guys know I don’t like to put on cork boots and walk around in the water.”

Johnny’s stiff jaw flexes under the red beard beginning to sprout on his face and throat. “They’ll have it paved by the end of October, it says here,” he says.

“Still afraid of chainsaws, Dad?” Tony asks, his mouth so full of crackers he can barely speak. The food visible through Tony’s lips makes Millie gag a little. She presses her tongue to the roof of her mouth, *closing the floodgate*, as she likes to think of it.

“Not afraid,” their father scoffs. “I just don’t like them. They ruin the wood. Can’t hear a damn thing up there with more than one goin’ at a time. I figured a long time ago I might as well work in the mill if I had to be surrounded by machines. At least it’s safer, no trees fallin’ on you ‘cause you never heard nobody yell *Timber!*”

“Says they’re doing State Street next. Sometime in the spring,” Johnny smiles. He folds the paper back up and swats at a fly on the table. He misses. Johnny has always been one to talk about one thing when everyone else is talking about another. Millie remembers her mother telling him to *focus* when he was little. She soon gave up,

explaining it was *just his way*. Their father disagreed, saying, *just his way? To act slow? To talk to himself like some idiot?*

Their father is looking at Johnny, his head shaking slightly. “Pretty excited about the street paving downtown. Aren’t you, son?”

Millie glances at Johnny, who is giving the front of the paper another once over. She pulls her knees up to her chest and hugs her legs, telling herself, *I will not get sick, I will not get sick.*

“Yeah,” Johnny answers. “I guess. Don’t have to worry about getting muddy when we go down to the bar.”

Their father is shaking his head more fervently, now. “Shouldn’t be going down there,” he says. “Bad things happen there. Fights, too much drinking. My daddy drank himself to death. You know that, don’t you?” he asks, looking at each of his children individually. “Runs in the family.” Millie has only ever seen her father drink on special occasions – Christmas Eve, Fourth of July, her cousin’s wedding last April. Even then, just a half a glass of wine, one beer, before exclaiming he feels *fuzzy in the head* and stops.

“We only ever have a beer or two. Promise,” Johnny says coolly. He winks at Millie with the eye farthest from their father.

They are silent for a moment. Millie reveling in the distraction of so many people in the kitchen. She barely has time to think about the saliva pooling in her mouth, the aching throb of her stomach. They are simply sensations she cannot examine, her head occupied with trying to appear normal. *Relax your face. Smile a little. Move a little instead of just sitting there!* Then she must think of the sensations, of not doing anything

to aggravate them. How to swallow her spit without gagging. How to put her feet on the ground and straighten up without appearing pained. She closes her eyes for a moment. The buzz of flies hitting the wall, the crunch of Tony chewing on crackers. Millie opens her eyes to find Tony with his elbows on the kitchen counter. He is staring at Millie, eyebrows raised like he knows something she doesn't.

"You expecting any visitor's today, Dad?" Tony asks, maintaining his gaze directly on his sister.

"No," their father answers. He is testing the sharpness of the pike with the pad of a thick-skinned finger.

"There's a car out on the field. Saw it when I turned into the driveway."

Millie's heartbeat quickens. Her cheeks redden with a sudden rush of heat.

"What kinda car?" their father asks.

"Oh, I don't know," Tony narrows his eyes at Millie, who is narrowing her eyes at Tony. He knows nothing, she is sure, but is used to him trying to cast suspicion on either Yushie or her, never Johnny, perhaps because he is the oldest – Tony respecting something about the hierarchy of siblinghood. Their father rarely falls into Tony's trap.

"Didn't get a good look. It was already seven-thirty and we didn't want to be too late."

Johnny is staring off into space over his crossed forearms on the kitchen table. Yushie is now skimming the paper intently, but has lifted his head to listen. Millie's eyes can't rest on one thing. She pictures making the Cadillac out in the dark of night, knowing full well that she will walk out into the field and stumble upon it in the daylight.

“You boys seen anything?” their father looks around at all of his children.

Despite using the word “boys,” he means all of them, including Millie.

Johnny and Yushie shake their heads. Millie tries to appear calm, although her face is flushed – she can feel the heat in her cheeks, the sweat beginning to moisten her upper lip.

“Probably nothing, I’m sure,” her father says.

Millie swallows hard, hoping to push down the feeling of vomit rising in her throat.

“Maybe I’m just seeing things,” Tony says, but it is half-heartedly. Millie rises from the table and walks to the cupboard for a glass.

“I can go take a look,” she offers.

“No,” her father replies, “You don’t gotta do that”

Millie holds her glass under the kitchen sink faucet until it brims and overflows. Her hand is noticeably shaking. She abandons the glass in the empty sink and wrings her hands, thinking it will somehow stop the trembling.

“Come on boys,” her father says, turning and walking to the front door. “We’ve got plenty of work to do. Millie?” he glances back at her, standing as still as she can beside the sink, “come out if you feel like it.”

Millie nods and watches her father, Johnny, and Yushie trail out the front door. Tony stands quietly with his back to the kitchen counter, never taking his eyes off Millie.

“What?” she shrugs her shoulders.

“Nothing,” Tony shakes his head and slowly makes his way to the front door.

“Where do you think you saw a car?” she asks. She hopes her attempt at pretending to not know the exact location of the car is somewhat believable. If she does not ask, if she simply walks out the door and heads straight for the car – surely he would watch her from the window – he would know, wouldn’t he?

“Just south of the ridge on the field,” Tony points out the front door at the expanse of green edged with a white fence, little more than a thin line in the distance. He stands in the doorframe with both hands in his pockets. “Might’ve been a truck,” he adds before she can turn around. She is sure he doesn’t know anything but she wants to slap him for making her think he does.

Millie watches Tony slink down the path to the barn and disappear into the shadow of the gaping open door from her stance behind the living room window. She stands staring until she is sure her father and brothers are busy at work inside the almost windowless barn. She walks to the front door and checks her reflection in the mirror above the bench in the entryway where she keeps her boots. Her face is ashen, dark circles encase her eyes. Her hair is parted crooked and matted in the back. She smooths her hair down with the palm of her hand and pats her face, trying to bring the blood to the surface. She wrestles her sweater from the hook beside the door and closes the door quietly behind her. For a moment, she has to resist the urge to slam it as hard as she can.

Millie runs through the field so fast she stumbles in a hole covered with wet leaves and overgrown grass. She has to stop and catch her breath. The toes of her shoes are wet from the muddy puddles where the cows have worn the grass away. She kneels over her feet and breathes in deeply. Even hunched down from across the field, she can

make out the black Cadillac's roof peeking up from the ridge. She walks slowly as she approaches the car, fighting the impulse to look behind her to catch her brothers gathered outside the barn, staring at her, thinking, *Look at what our little sister has been hiding*, despite the fact, they are inside the barn stacking hay bales, their sister the farthest thing from their minds.

There he is just as she suspected – Henry, asleep in the backseat. His socked feet are propped up on the windowsill. Socks, no doubt, her mother laundered, ironed even despite Millie's protests, *Who irons socks, Mother?* He is folded in half at the neck, his chin on his chest at an awkward angle, as if someone has sewn it to his collar. Drool leaking from the corner of his mouth has turned a spot of his shirt a darker shade of blue. He looks especially young while sleeping, Millie thinks. His lower lip sticks out like a child pouting over something he wants and can't have. His cheeks are flushed and his curly brown hair is standing up on end in the back. Millie taps on the window to wake him, but he does not stir. She taps again. Not so much as a facial twitch. Impatient, Millie begins knocking on the window with a tight fist. She goes to scream his name through the glass but decides against it, afraid the sound will carry across the field. Millie is knocking with both hands now, her knuckles stinging where they meet the hard glass.

Henry shakes his head in his sleep. His legs jerk, feet dropping from their perch and landing with a thud on the car floor. His eyes do not open. Millie is still knocking, pounding until she is out of breath. When she jangles the car door handle and finds it unlocked, she opens the door quickly, Henry's relaxed body slumping out the door like a

poorly stocked sack of feed. Millie catches him in her arms just as he is about to fall face first into the grass.

“What are you doing?” she whispers loudly. “Wake up.” Millie pushes him back into a seated position and stands over him patting his face, first gently, then harder, until she is almost slapping him. *Is he drunk?* She thinks, remembering times when she was younger trying to wake Johnny for chores on a Saturday morning. She sits next to him in the backseat, leans toward his body and examines his face. There is suddenly movement, a twitch followed by a still moment before Henry’s lashes begin quivering behind his glasses, eyelids slowly opening to the light. Millie leans back, watching him blink and sigh heavily. Henry closes his eyes and rubs them with the backs of his smooth hands.

“What time is it?” he asks. His voice is dry and thick with sleep.

“Just past seven-thirty.”

Henry yawns and continues blinking, moving his head from side to side as if he is looking for something. His brow furrows.

“Shit,” he says. “Shit.” It sounds strange in his mouth, like he has decided to use it for the first time. When Millie’s brothers say it, they say it with conviction, with ease. The word is overly annunciated in Henry’s mouth with too much emphasis on the final “t.” Saying it makes him appear even younger in Millie’s mind, like he’s a little kid screaming it down the road, his parents out of earshot. They sit in silence until Henry begins fidgeting in his seat, the leather squeaking beneath his legs.

“I’ve been here since midnight,” Henry says. “I can’t believe I slept here all night.”

“I’m sorry,” Millie apologizes, examining his face closely. Is he smiling? Laughing, perhaps, at how silly he must feel? Or is it one of those mocking smiles, the ones people do when they are too angry to make any other expression? “I should’ve come, I’m sorry.”

“I’m leaving town tomorrow, Millie,” Henry announces.

“Where you going?” she asks. A sharp, stabbing feeling darts through her chest suddenly, like a startled fish in shallow water.

“School.” Henry fiddles with his watch, re-checking the time, adjusting the band around his bony wrist.

“You finally decided where, then?” Millie asks.

“My mom’s upset.” Henry finally looks up at Millie, half attempting a smile that makes him look like he might be sick.

“East Coast?”

Henry nods, lowers his head. “She was crying all day. I won’t be back until Christmas.”

“Christmas?” Millie can feel her heart quicken. And there it is again – the sharp stab in her chest. For a moment she had thought he meant a hunting trip with his father when he mentioned leaving town. *How stupid of me*, she thinks. She stares at the muddy toes of her boots, unable to look at Henry – at least not while the hard lump in her throat convulses like it’s alive.

“I meant to tell you earlier,” Henry says.

“Hush,” she shakes her head. Such an odd expression, she thinks – *meant to*. The intention followed by forgetting. For he must have *forgotten* to tell her, the only other

option being *deciding* not to tell her. And how many nights did he forget? And if she had come last night, would he have remembered then, told her he was leaving? She can't ask – doesn't want to know the answer. They have come here, to this place, every night for weeks, months. Except Saturdays – her brothers' night in town when they don't get home from the bar until the early hours of the morning – and last night. Oh, why hadn't she come last night? She wasn't so sick, was she?

“Will you meet me tonight?” he asks. He takes her arm in his hand, his fingers cold and stiff against her skin. She thinks of his skin, so soft under her callused touch. On her arm, Millie can feel his hand shaking. She looks up to find his eyes squinted in pain. His thick lips hang gently from his mouth and she resists the urge to kiss him as hard as she can.

“I can't tonight. It's Saturday.”

“Not even just this once? Tell your brothers you don't feel well. They'll understand, won't they?” Henry pulls her arm until she is practically sitting in his lap. Millie doesn't know how to explain that she has worn out that excuse weeks ago. How carefully she has hidden her illness from him, cutting the nights short because she is *just so tired!* From working such long hours on the farm.

One day, you won't have to work so hard. I'll make the money and you can do whatever you want, he would say. *If you could do anything, be anything, what would you be?* Millie unable to think of anything. *How embarrassing,* she thought – *not wanting to be anything at all.* Trying to think back when she was a child, what did she say when a grown-up asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up? A nurse? A mother? No. She had said something impossible, something absurd. A captain on one of those big

ships that dock in Bigmount. The ones that are gone for months. Or just a sailor on that ship. So she could go far, far away and maybe not come back if she didn't want to. She wasn't even sure if she meant it, only getting as far as envisioning herself waving from the deck of the boat, champagne cracking at the hull.

Such a silly question, she had answered. Repeating his words in her mind like they were the chorus of her favorite song, *I'll make the money and you can do whatever you want*. She mustn't think of him that way! There was no future with Henry. She must repeat these words over and over again, aloud in the mirror so she believes it. *He doesn't love you. He will leave. Go far, far away and forget about you. You must distance yourself. Act distant. Trick your heart into growing cold*. Distant was difficult. Distant backfired. Rushing out of the car to be sick, pretending she was bored and couldn't wait to go to sleep, only made Henry paw at her to stay. His mouth near her ear, holding it there, not saying a word, just breathing and studying her closely, like she could disappear at any moment – it was, Millie thought, how a man looked at a woman when he loved her.

Henry is looking at her like that now. His arm is draped around her, holding her so tight, his face so close to hers she swears she can feel his unshaven cheek. *He is not so young*, she thinks. The thought of him shirtless, broad shoulders strong and slick as glass. His sturdy arms around her ribs when he holds her above him. Him kissing her, confidently, pulling her neck from side to side so he can touch his lips to every inch of her mouth, her jaw, her throat. *These are not the actions of a child*, she thinks. She feels guilty for thinking him so young and naïve, selling him short even though he doesn't deserve it. He is not a child. Almost a man, really.

“Come to the field. Late, later than usual. The earliest we get back is two,” Millie says.

Henry takes hold of the back of her head with both hands and kisses her gently on the mouth. She feels something release inside her as clearly as the click of a key turning in a lock.

“If I’m not here, it’s because I couldn’t get away,” Henry begins. “If I’m not here, come to the end of the driveway early tomorrow morning. I won’t be leaving until half past ten.”

Millie nods and opens the door, which has swung shut. She lifts her feet and puts them on the grass outside. She pauses for a moment, swallowing the question, *do you love me?*, before getting out of the car. When Henry stands up beside her, his lanky frame towers over her. He pulls Millie to his chest, her cheek resting on his breastbone. She swallows hard in hopes it will push the nausea she feels from her throat down to her stomach. She wraps her arms around him for a moment, then lets go and starts walking away without lifting her gaze from the grass beneath her feet. By the time she is halfway back to the house, she hears the Cadillac engine turn over and the thick blades of wild grass slap the underside of the car as it drives away. She stands, picturing herself with an orange X painted on her back like they do to the trunks of trees waiting to be felled.

“So this is how it ends,” she whispers.

When Millie’s father enters the kitchen, Millie is slapping flies from her cheeks and staring blankly at the table under her elbows. She knows she looks silly, lazy even,

but she doesn't care. The queasy feeling brewing in her stomach reaches up the back of her throat and pulls at her tongue.

"You okay? Look a little green," her father says.

Millie nods her head. "No more green than normal," she says.

"Find a car in the field?" Her father grabs a hat off the bench across the table from Millie.

"Nope. Think Tony was just trying to make waves."

"Nobody out there," he states. He puts the hat on his head and tugs at the brim until it is level over his eyes. "If there was anyone, probably just some kid out causing trouble, I suppose."

Millie nods gently, as if she doesn't understand what her father is saying.

"Some kid out in his daddy's car, trying to have some fun before summer's over."

Her father takes off a glove and slaps it over his thigh. A gauzy cloud of dirt springs from his leg and disappears into the weak sunlight filtering in from the kitchen window.

Daddy's car? Millie shifts in her seat. "What makes you say that?" she asks. It comes out more forceful than she would have liked. The corners of her mouth point downward in unease.

"I can keep a secret, Millie."

"Alright." Her voice is breathy and long. If she is playful, sarcastic, perhaps he will think there is nothing worth telling him.

"I can, Millie." He pauses for a moment to lick his chapped lips. "There's a lot you don't tell me that you could if you wanted."

"What makes you think there's something to tell?"

“Just a gut feeling,” he says after a hesitation. “And not want. Need to. That might be a better way of looking at it.”

Millie can't think of the last time she went to her father for help or advice, other than the kind he offers freely regardless of Millie's exclamations to stop. They have not been that close or that informed of the other's day since Millie was in middle school. All their conversations revolve around chores, the weather, and town chitchat.

“I don't mean to beat anything outta you. Just thought I'd offer to keep a secret if that's what you needed. I don't know what I'd do if no one knew about some of the things that I – ”

“I know,” Millie interrupts. She is not used to her father speaking so directly, especially to her. It makes her feel like she has just dropped something and is fumbling to catch it before it hits the floor.

“I can keep a secret.”

“I know you can,” she nods. “You already said that,” she continues, but it comes out as more of a mumble.

Millie slams her hand down on the table in hopes of smashing a fly that has been perching on the back of her hand. When she lifts her palm, she finds only a single wing plastered to the skin between two calluses.

“I mean, I know the importance of keeping a secret.”

“Okay.” She wipes her hand on the hip of her jeans.

“Lord knows,” her father continues, “Lord knows you've kept some of mine.” He nods quickly before leaving through the back door, a breeze rushing in from where he stood before swinging the door shut behind him.

Chapter 12

Sima likes being the first person at the market. She creeps out of the house when it is still dark and sets up her booth with the aid of a lantern. Sitting in the dark, waiting for dawn to come, she splits her gaze between the muted gray sky and the veiny tops of her feet, which sometimes pulse with every beat of her heart. It is silly, really, her coming so early, just so she can have a moment of quiet in the dark. There are plenty of quiet moments in her day, but none in the morning, none quite as private as her Saturday mornings at the market.

There is one vein in particular on her left foot running from ankle to big toe that pulses no matter if she is moving or still. In the summer, with flats on, it twitches and tickles her. In winter, after she pulls her boot and sock off, the vein is dented with the shoelace imprints and painfully pulses until she soaks her feet in the bathtub, *like an old woman*, she thinks.

Sima does not feel old, but the age of her children and her arthritis tell her otherwise. Her arthritis, which began as a slight pain in her hands in her thirties, is now changing the shape of her fingers – they are stiff and smooth from skin stretched tight by swelling. Her knees ache, as do her shoulders. Weight gained in the winter no longer melts away with the sweat of summer. A streak of gray runs through the front of her hair, which she covers up by parting her hair on the other side. This makes her feel vain, and if there is one thing Sima Mulch is not, it is vain. She is only forty-six and has recently gone through “the change.” Her older sister prepared her for it. Their mother, who had still wanted more children, went through it early, at the age of thirty-eight. Sima has

been waiting for it, and then, right before her forty-fifth birthday, she realized she had skipped two cycles. Thinking she was pregnant, she visited Dr. Jeffrey who assured her it was not fertility but sterility that made her monthly bill disappear. With four children in their twenties, she hardly wanted more children, but it was the way Dr. Jeffrey worded it that put her in a foul mood for weeks. *Sterility*. She was empty, closed, defective. She pictured all the blood in her belly fleeing to her chest and legs. Pregnancy had been painful for her all four times, but it was still something she could do and do well. All four children were healthy, fat babies. Labor had been quick, or so she was told, and relatively easy, or so she was told. Between five and seven hours for each birth. After that, they grew so fast it seemed she woke up one morning to find four teenagers at her kitchen table, eating their weight in oatmeal and sausage.

No one knows she takes naps in the barn in the early evening before Millie is done with her chores in the house or Emmitt comes home from the mill. They are short naps, never more than twenty minutes. She has done all the work alone for years, but found she misses the help of her sons. If she doesn't take naps, she snaps unnecessarily at her husband for asking simple questions or she ignores Millie, whose condition is beginning to worry her. Sima worries very little. Most things in her life prove to work themselves out. She married early, at eighteen, and had no trouble getting pregnant or being a mother. She was lucky, she knew. At seventeen, when Emmitt proposed, a moment of reluctance seized her by the throat. Confiding in her mother, Sima already knew what she would say. *This is just how things are done*. She said yes and they were married and pregnant within three months.

Sima has considered herself happy, busy and tired, but genuinely happy. This is much more than most women she knows can say. Elanore Czanki can't stand her husband, who sleeps with other women on a regular basis. They only have one child, who ran away at the age of sixteen, never to be seen again. Mary Jenkins drinks all day and comes knocking on Sima's door in the afternoon when she is good and liquored up. She drives up in the shiny Chevy sedan her husband bought her with all the extra hours he put in at the finance department for the brewery, wearing little more than pajamas and a coat. In the past, she'd come to discuss Yushie and her daughter, Isabelle. Sima reassured her that Yushie was a well-intentioned boy, to which Mary replied it was Isabelle's intentions, not Yushie's, she was worried about. Then there is Kathryn Peckner – pristinely dressed in clothes she drove all the way to Bigmount to purchase or ordered from catalogs. There is a vacancy in her eyes that only goes away when she speaks of something newly bought or how her boys are doing in school. If it wasn't for the laundry business, Sima wouldn't even talk with these women. But the laundry has to be picked up, cleaned, then returned, forcing her to interact with almost all the women of the town who can afford to have somebody else launder their clothes.

When the boys were no longer toddlers, they began eating up Emmitt's paycheck. To make it to the end of the month, Sima started doing people's laundry and Emmitt began taking hours at the mill on Saturdays. Millie was still a child then and accompanied her father to the mill while the boys did extra work at the neighbor's or picked up shifts at the brewery. It was during this time that Sima realized she was much better off than the Czanki's, the Jenkin's, and the Peckner's – the wives, at least. She cares very little for clothes and cars. She is a practical woman who does what is expected

of her. She wants for very little, which in and of itself makes her happy to be her and no one else. But something has changed recently. At first, she thought she was only worried about Millie's illness, but she knows deep down that whatever it is Millie suffers from, it will pass. Sima is privately an optimistic person. Every morning, she wakes up hopeful, thinking her arthritis really could be gone, that Millie won't be sick anymore, that she will finally have enough energy this afternoon to finish the day without a nap. The day ends just the same, with arthritis, illness, and a nap, but none of this truly bothers Sima. No, a new feeling is growing inside her, something entirely separate from her normal, daily life. It weighs upon her until she is heavy and panicked. It feels as if her heart is breaking, but she can't figure out why.

There are waves of anxiety that wash over her when she is doing the most ordinary things, like weeding the garden or sipping tea after lunch or trying to fall asleep. She wants to crawl out of her body until it is over, but she just has to sit there and hold on until it passes. Even then, the feeling never entirely goes away. Remnants of it cling to the inside of her skull and hang on for dear life. It is becoming too much for Sima. She feels she needs to tell someone, if only for the reason that verbalizing it might make it go away, like a bad dream, and then she would feel silly for ever thinking it was so serious, so debilitating.

The night before, Sima lay next to Emmitt, snoring into his pillow. The feeling that her heart was breaking suddenly engulfed her. She tried breathing slowly, deeply inhaling and exhaling until she felt light-headed. The breaking didn't lessen. She would have screamed but it felt too dangerous, not in waking the house, but in that screaming could somehow release some part of herself that felt normal. Turning to Emmitt, so deep

in sleep, she shook his shoulder gently. He stopped snoring for a moment, which Sima took as him being awake, if only slightly. *There is something terribly wrong with me*, she whispered in his ear, close enough to feel the warmth of his face on her nose. *Something terribly wrong*. His head turned away from his wife. Emmitt resumed snoring. She lay still and could not recall how long it took her to fall asleep.

The sun is just beginning to peek over the mountains' silhouette as a handful of farmers trickle into the market. She traces the half moon scar underneath her lips and watches as they wipe down their booths with damp rags and set chairs right side up. She thinks of the things she wants to buy, but can't think of anything – cucumbers, rhubarb, cauliflower, peas, beans, carrots, raspberries – that she doesn't already have in her own garden. Tomatoes, maybe. Emmitt insists on picking theirs when they are still green and letting them ripen in a crate on the windowsill in the kitchen. They lose their firmness before they turn red. She eats the mushy, tart slices in agitation. She tells him to leave them be on the vine until they are red enough to eat. He doesn't listen.

He is so hardheaded about things when she can't find something to be stubborn about if she tries. Sima puts up with it because she accepted a long time ago that was how all men behaved. She constantly reminds him to put his sawdust-caked socks in the hamper and he continues to ignore her and leave them on the foot of the bed. She yells at him when he doesn't feed the cows, and he pretends he can't hear her. Like children, she thinks, you make peace with the fact that husbands never listen. But it makes her nervous about what else he is not listening to. Does he hear her when she tries to explain her recent panic over seemingly nothing at all? Does he notice her subtle hints about him not having to work those one or two Saturdays a month at the mill since their paychecks are

lasting longer, or does he find it annoying, condescending she is telling him what to do? Then there are the minutes before falling asleep, when he kisses her so fully she feels all the air in the room leave through her lungs. Or when he hold her tightly from behind, as if trying to swallow her body with his. He pulls her hair away from her ear and whispers that he loves her with such certainty that she trusts he feels it to be true, and so she believes it to be true as well. They say “I love you” frequently throughout the day, stating it without emotion, as if it is a reminder, as though if they stop saying it, they’d stop believing it to be true. At night, in the freshly parted sheets that feel almost wet in the cold humidity, Emmitt say he loves her with such conviction, she feels she cannot say anything back to him and have it sound convincing. So she looks him square in the eyes, nothing more than two shiny dots in the dark, and presses her cheek to his. How silly she feels, cheek to cheek like some sappy slow dance. *This is just how things are done.*

Husbands and wives cannot possibly communicate everything they feel, especially such things as complicated as love. A gesture, some squeeze of the hand, a look in the middle of dinner is surely enough. Why else does he keep kissing her, holding her, and telling her he loves her if he is doubtful of their love? She picks his filthy socks off the bed, assures him he deserves better than to be working so many hours, makes the bed the way he likes it – bottom sheet left loose, although she prefers it tucked neatly at the foot – and what are these if not gestures of her love? However, she often finds herself undermining his suggestions out of spite, she realizes, for him not listening to anything she says. Yes, perhaps she is a little more stubborn than she would like to think. He tells her to go see the doctor for her hands. She explains they don’t hurt quite as bad as they look. There is relatively no pain and the stiffness goes away the more she

rests them before bed. But just as with the socks, maybe it is not about what she wants, or even needs, but what he wants her to do. Going to the doctor would prove she listened and therefore cares about his opinion. She could commend him for suggesting a visit to the new doctor, who, of course, would give her the perfect remedy and she would tell Emmitt she could not imagine why she has not gone sooner, when he first mentioned it. Yes, she will go to the doctor as soon as possible if it pleases him. Monday. She will tell Emmitt when she gets home. His head will nod in self-satisfaction.

His name, his name – she cannot remember the new doctor’s name. Sima heard he doesn’t charge anything, only that you make a donation to his bar tab. He lives comfortably off his G.I. Bill, she assumes. The only doctor for miles and miles, and he doesn’t charge. In her mind, this makes him a good person without having met him, but she is sure their Monday meeting will only reinforce her belief that he is kind and decent. What is he doing all day in the bar? Can he drink and see patients at the same time?

No, she thinks, reminiscing about the times she had had one too many drinks at Christmas parties or at night after a hard day’s labor, muscles aching and taut. She keeps a bottle of whiskey under the kitchen sink where Emmitt will never find it, seeing as there is nothing but bleach and soap under there and he has yet to clean the kitchen in the whole time they have been married. Emmitt frowns upon drinking and rarely drinks, especially in front of the children. He lectures the kids every chance he gets ever since Johnny was old enough to drive. Sima is not discreet about pouring a little in her tea at night every once in a while. He either pretends not to smell it or honestly doesn’t notice. She never has more than two fingers worth of whiskey anyway. She drinks until her belly is warm and the muscles in her back relax enough for her to fall asleep. She is not

drunk by any means, but she cannot imagine doing daily things in that frame of mind. So she assumes that people in general cannot function properly if they have been drinking. Emmitt tells stories of drunken men chopping their fingers off at the mills, liquor thin blood spurting from raw knuckles. She only half-heartedly believes him, interpreting “drunk” as “stupid” or “clumsy.” There is simply no way the new doctor drinks all day in the Bents’ pub. How can he stitch a wound or prescribe the correct medication if he has been drinking?

He is younger, at least that is what Elanore Czanki told her last week as she was buying a dozen eggs and a quart of milk from Sima. He looks to be in his thirties but could just be aged by the war, which so many young men are when they return home. Sima had immediately thought of Millie when Elanore mentioned the new doctor. All of Millie’s classmates are married already. Some are on their second child.

This just how things are done.

The sun shines weakly through the thick clouds like a light bulb fighting to shine through a sooty fixture. A cold chill blows through Sima’s sweater, reminding her that fall has arrived and will most likely settle in by the end of the week, if not sooner. She needs to clean the ash from the wood stove and build a fire in the next night or two. The windows need to be insulated with cloth and shut and locked. Wood needs to be moved from the shed and stacked into the back porch bin. She grows restless just thinking about all the preparation she needs to do by the end of tomorrow. Giving herself deadlines is something Sima has always done. If she doesn’t meet her deadline, which rarely occurs, she is mad at herself for days, giving herself more restricted deadlines in which she has to do more things in less time. Sima arrange the bottles of milk in straight lines in the hay-

lined crate she uses as a display and decides if she is not done stacking wood by five o'clock the following day, she has to get her bean canning done by Tuesday as well as the Peckner's next laundry load, which doesn't need to be done until Thursday. She will send Millie over to fetch it early tomorrow so she can have it in the house, ready to be washed.

People start slamming car doors on the side of the street. The noise signifies customers and pulls Sima out of her daydreaming. She watches as three women walk more or less together, making their way down the row of booths, leading them to the end where Sima's table is ready for viewing. One woman, Sima can't tell who it is, stops to buy something at Jay Rowen's vegetable stand. Another lingers at Regina Waloom's fruit stand to buy a jar of honey or jam, she can't tell from such a distance. As the women near her booth, she tries to look busy. Her rigid fingers twist the bottles of milk so the metal hinges of the rubber stoppers all face the same way. When she looks up, she finds Mary Jenkin's puffy face staring back at her.

"I'll take two dozen," she says, pointing to the eggs. Her words are slow and muffled, as if her tongue is swollen. "And three bottles of milk. How are you, Honey?"

"Doing good." Sima likes being called Honey, or Sweetie, or Baby by women. It makes her feel young. "Any cream?"

"Nope, still have some from last week. Where do I put these?" Mary holds empty bottles with the rubber stoppers hanging off the sides.

"Right here," Sima holds out the basket from underneath the table, an empty bottle already inside to serve as instruction.

“If it was a snake...” Mary begins. She sighs heavily while leaning over to put her bottles in the basket, blowing a breath laced with whiskey across Sima’s face.

“How’s the arm?” Sima asks. The week before, Mary related the story of a mishap with a car door and bad lighting. From what small bits of truth Mary provided, Sima could deduce that Mary was drunk and slammed her arm in the car door. Mary’s exposure of a long bruise from bicep to elbow was all the proof Sima needed.

“Oh, better. That doctor said nothing was broken. The bruise is smaller.”

“That’s good to hear. Two dozen and three bottles. That’ll be forty-two cents.”

“I was hoping for something stronger than aspirin. Haven’t been able to sleep at night. Here’s fifty.”

“And eight is your –“

“Keep it, Hon. Hear about the fight last night?”

Sima’s face crumples in puzzlement.

“The Peckner boy again.” Mary nods for emphasis.

“Riley back in town, is he? What’s he got to be so angry about?”

“Apparently some snide remark from a mill boy? Guess he had to go and prove that college didn’t make him soft. Stupid little shit.” Sima would have thought Mary almost sober if it hadn’t been for the slurring of “fisherman” and the long pause before calling Riley Peckner a “stupid little shit.” Sima cuts her smile short so as not to appear rude if anyone can overhear.

“Was anyone hurt?” She feels little pity for cuts and welts, so what she really should ask is if anyone is in the hospital or in need of surgery.

“Just Riley. Some Indian kid knocked him out. Riley provoked him, of course.”

“And the doctor? Was he there?”

“Put ice on Riley’s face and gave him a stitch on his forehead. Shoulda let him bleed if you ask me.” Mary is backing up slowly, signaling the end of their conversation.

“Take care,” Sima calls after her. She raises her hand to wave goodbye but ends up simply holding it motionless in the air and dropping it to her side.

“I’ll stop by soon,” Mary answers.

The mention of the doctor gives Sima much to think about as she rinses the bottles from the basket in a bucket of soapy water and tips them over to dry. More people come and buy milk and cream but Sima is distracted. She hopes every man who comes to her booth is the doctor, but she, unfortunately, recognizes them all. Mac Paulson from his fish booth, Roger Yesterly from his meat booth, but no doctor. She meant to ask Mary if he is as handsome as she heard, if he was kind to her when he took a look at her arm. There could, of course, be no harm in having Millie pay him a visit. Millie is indeed ill. Her daughter rarely gets out of the house and when she does, it is under the supervision of all three of her brothers. She normally takes trips to the library, to the store, to the mill by herself, but the chance of her ever meeting someone in those places is close to nonexistent. Now that she rarely leaves home at all, her chances grow slimmer still. Sima can’t picture Millie with any of the young men who work with her husband at the mill. Nor can she see Millie meeting any respectable man out and about during work hours of the day, which is when Millie prefers to run errands because there are fewer lines. But a doctor? What mother wouldn’t be thrilled with the idea of her daughter finding love with a doctor?

Millie can't live at home forever. No reason to postpone the inevitable, as far as Sima can tell. She will bring her daughter up during the Monday visit with the doctor. She is now positive it will be a successful encounter. He obviously isn't married. No one has seen him with a woman, although word around town is that Mary Bents has been coming to her parents' pub more frequently in the past couple of weeks. Millie is much prettier than Mary, she reassures herself. Mary had unfortunately inherited Pat's lack of a neck, which gave her a turtle-like quality – head thrusting directly from the shoulders.

She will simply mention Millie casually while the doctor examines her hands to see if he knows who her daughter is, then she will know what to do from there. Millie needs to accept her lot in life, every woman's lot in life: marriage, children, work. Her daughter is no exception. It won't be cruel to suggest the idea to Millie that maybe she should start looking since she never found anyone in high school. After all, that is just how things are done.

Chapter 13

Sima says Millie is just like her now, *now*. As though it were her personality and not some phase. Millie has never been like that before. Maybe sulking or sullen for weeks at a time in high school, but less and less as she has gotten older. Lately, ever since getting sick, she is mostly silence and closed doors. Like Sima, a little, he guesses. Quiet, guarded. She is keeping something that is not meant to be kept by one person. It will come out sooner or later, he knows, but Emmitt Mulch is an impatient man. Perhaps, he supposes, that is why he was so quick to believe Tony's suspicion, despite knowing better than to do so.

Emmitt stands still in the doorway. He plays with the latch to the screen door, kept shut all night so the cat won't slink out and get eaten by coyotes. Last summer, there was nothing left of Big Red but a tuft of orange fur beside the garden. Mrs. Beasley, who is much prettier and much smaller than Big Red, won't stand a chance against those howling beasts. She has been meowing beside the door, scratching at her neck, but abandons her plea to chase a fly into the kitchen. Emmitt glances at the fly-less, elaborate spider web spread from planter to planter on the porch. He thinks about moving the planters carefully into the kitchen. With the web intact, it could possibly rid the kitchen of its fly infestation, for Mrs. Beasley does little else besides play with the things, torturing them until they are wingless and spasming on the floor. He takes a long pull of his coffee and scratches his nails across the mesh window of the screen door. Mrs. Beasley's footsteps make small pitter-patters on the floor as she runs up behind him. She purrs at his heels and rubs her side on his shins. When he swings the door open, Mrs. Beasley bolts out into the driveway. Emmitt rubs his eyes and opens them to find that she is gone, off into the woods he supposes.

He stands in the threshold, glances at his wrist, wondering when the boys will be done with their lunch. He tends to eat quickly then take a coffee in the living room while his sons dawdle and keep eating. After yelling to the kitchen to ask if they are finished, chairs scrape across the wood floor and plates clank as they are piled in the sink. He shouts to Millie, also in the kitchen, asking her to make a fire. She has been of little use in the barn, constantly stopping to stare at the air in front of her. Best to keep her in the house, he thinks.

The cool air rushes in through the tiny holes in the mesh screen each time the wind blows. Each son appears and stands directly behind the other: Johnny first, then Yushie, and finally Tony who stands a little to the side so he can see his father when he speaks. But how often he does not speak when he is with his sons. In speaking's place, a nod, a hand pointing where, or he simply starts walking and all three sons follow behind him: Johnny, Yushie, Tony, in the order of their birth. They empty onto the porch. Johnny and Yushie pause to smoke a cigarette, all of them staring at the trail to the barn – grass worn down to mud in a thin line from porch steps to barn door.

Emmitt watches lines of smoke leave his sons' lips and thin into a foggy veil that hovers for a moment before a wind blows it out from under the porch awning. His mind wanders to Millie, who he watches through the open front door as she piles logs into the stove. She has a secret. He knows as he imagines only a father can. Perhaps he wants her to have one, if only to lessen the burden of the one she has kept for him for so long. Secret Solie. Emmitt thinks of Solie, as he so often does these days, much more than he has ever thought of her, unable to put his finger on exactly why that is.

When Sima started working the market on Saturdays and Emmitt picked up shifts at the mill – he had lied to the boys about working in the hills so they wouldn't think him such a sissy for hating chainsaws – he had it in his mind that he could simply take Millie with him to work while the boys picked up odd jobs at the brewery. There were too many distractions at the market, too many places for Millie to hide and too many places for her to run to, seeing as there was no actual enclosure to contain her curiosity. The mill was one building and a little girl leaving it would ring strange amongst a strictly male crowd. The first time he showed up to work with Millie in his truck, Rich Adams

came down from his office with his head shaking. It wasn't like the Hama Hama hills where kids played in the jitneys and looked on as their fathers climbed and sawed. The mill was loud and fast. *All it takes is one little accident, one fall from a ladder, one run-in with the conveyor belt or slip onto a saw blade*, Rich had explained, *I just can't have that on my conscience.*

Despite explaining that all of Sima and his family lived in Bigmount or Grays Harbor and there was no one to look after her, Rich suggested asking Solie if she could help. *The sandwich lady?* He had asked. Solie came to the mill just before lunch to sell sandwiches from the cab of her cousin's truck. Most of the men called her "sandwich lady," but Emmitt knew it was Solie because he worked with Two Hawks and Scout, who grew up with her on the shores of Killtrap Cove. They spoke Lushootseed with her when she came and Emmitt found himself curious of what they said. Unlike the familiar Chinook Jargon, which he knew fairly well, their language was full of pauses held in the throat and a stringing together of consonants. Emmitt couldn't understand any of it. Solie looked young but Emmitt knew she was his age because Two Hawks and Scout, who were a few years younger than him, spoke of her babysitting them as children and of her never marrying or having children despite numerous proposals over the years. *What's the matter with her?* He asked. *Nothing, I don't think*, Red Wolf answered. *Just picky, is all.*

When Solie came to the mill that Saturday, Emmitt grew nervous. If it hadn't been for Millie waking from her doze in the truck and hungrily rummaging for change in the seat cushions – asking her father for three more pennies so she could buy a sandwich from the *lady* – he would have never worked up the nerve to speak to Solie for the first

time. He asked for a ham sandwich, nodding at Millie to hand over her coins. Millie stared at Solie, told her, *you look like my mother*. Solie smiled, touched Millie's arm in kindness. Emmitt left Millie with Solie to walk back to the mill. The thought of speaking with Solie, let alone asking her for a favor, made Emmitt nervous, a condition he avoided as much as possible. At first Emmitt thought it was only because she did look like Sima, same dark hair and smooth, dark skin. They were both unafraid to hold someone's eyes with their own, regardless if it was a stranger or not. Emmitt had lost Sima, he knew, years ago. Perhaps he lost her even before they married. She couldn't tell him she loved him, the absence of the words painful as an open wound in her presence. He pictured his wife telling him he should simply *know* that she loved him. After all, she had to. She had been nothing but a good wife. Cleaning after him, carrying her weight on the farm, making extra money with laundry, cooking him food, giving him four children. When he saw Solie, he felt a warmth he hadn't ever felt before, not even as a boy with school crushes. She smiled more than he had seen anyone smile. He wanted her to smile at him.

Emmitt found Scout on the back of a partially loaded truck eating a sandwich and asked him to ask Solie about babysitting. He took his lunch, a homemade sandwich Sima had packed him that morning, in the corner of the mill. When he finally came out, he found Solie walking straight towards him. In the distance, Red Wolf sat on the truck bumper while Millie sat on the hood, playing with his hair. Emmitt remembered hearing his daughter's laughter from where he stood. Remembered Red Wolf's face writhing in pain as he kept perfectly still for Millie, her little fingers yanking at his long, black hair.

As Solie neared him, Emmitt noted how the light reflected off her shiny hair, creating a halo that disappeared as soon as she walked into the shadow of the mill and stood in front of him, eyes level with his chin. The skin on her nose crinkled when she asked him if he wanted her to stay at the mill with Millie or if they could go back to her home. She tilted her head to one side while the rest of her stood perfectly straight, giving her the appearance of the floor lamp with a crooked shade that Emmitt fixed every night, only to find it tilted again in the corner of the living room come morning.

He told her she didn't have to start until the following Saturday and that he would bring Millie to her house. She gave him directions quickly, trusting their simplicity would make them memorable: follow the old highway to Killtrap but turn right off the bridge to go to the Reservation. Hers was the second house on the first road to the right. He would recognize the truck parked outside. Solie explained that Millie could help her in the kitchen and tag along when she came to deliver lunch. When Emmitt told her he couldn't pay her much, Solie told him that he didn't have to pay her anything as long as she could get four pints of milk and two-dozen eggs for free each week. Emmitt offered to bring them with him when he came to her house on Saturday. Solie tilted her head to the other side, explaining that it would be a fun outing for Millie and her to go to the market and visit Sima. Emmitt protested, imagining Solie and his daughter, who was supposed to be with him, stumbling upon Sima's booth. He stated again that he would be more than happy to bring the milk and eggs and save her the trouble. He stared at his bootlaces and opened his mouth to explain, but Solie lifted a hand to her bent head and said, *I understand.*

Emmitt nodded then shook his head as if to erase the image he had of himself nodding over and over again like some hungry pigeon. As they walked back to the truck, Emmitt stuttered trying to make small talk, but Solie only smiled, revealing small teeth perfectly aligned at the bottom of shiny pink gums. Millie ran to him, hugging him tight around the hips. *You're gonna play with this nice lady next week.* Millie studying her father's face with eyes wide enough to see white all the way around the green iris. *You're gonna go to her house on the Reservation. Wanna see the Reservation, hon?* Millie nodding unsurely, eyes sightless as they drifted to the ground, her lips mouthing the word 'Reservation'. A word she had heard all her life but had no idea what it meant.

"About done, boys?" Emmitt asks. He does not wait for a response, walking down the stairs to the barn. He hears the whining barks of Painter and Sarah crawling out from under the porch steps, their tails thumping against the ground. They are panting as they run alongside Emmitt, breathing rotten fish breath into the air. The creek flooded the night before, Emmitt knew – water a thin brown color when he turned the faucet on in the kitchen this morning – but hadn't thought about it when he let the dogs out soon after. They, probably along with the Armstrong dog, went straight down to the creek, tearing into the fish that lay dead on the rock bed shores. When the small, bony fish, too meatless to eat, began rotting, they would go down to the creek again to roll in their scent. Sima would shoo them out of the house in her high-pitched squeal, tapping the backs of their legs with the side of her foot as she opened the door for them and said, *Get gone! Go on, go!* They would whimper outside the door at night, the noise audible from Emmitt's bedroom.

As Emmitt approaches the barn door, gaping open to a hay-littered concrete floor, cows fidgety in their dark stalls where they pound their hooves and breath as loud as steam engines, he turns around to find his sons still lingering on the porch. He stands and stares at them from the shadow of the barn.

“Come on, now!” he yells, watches his sons look around, trying to figure out where he is calling from. They see him, see his skinny legs and crossed arms peeking out from the black line where the shadow of the doorframe cuts him in half.

“Let’s go!” His sons take turns descending the porch steps. They fall into a line as they walk toward him. It is a steady pace, but too slow for Emmitt, who whistles at them. Only Yushie and the dogs pick up their pace, trotting up to the barn in long steps, the dogs nipping at each other’s heels in chase. Emmitt tells himself he is impatient to get the work done, that’s all. Knowing full well that the sooner they milk the last of the cows, scrape the remaining stalls, and strew the hay in their troughs, the sooner he can make some excuse for leaving. The sooner he can stand on Solie’s door, begging, maybe even crying, for her to let him in, just this once, just one more time. It’s been weeks.

“Millie, can you say hello?” Emmitt’s daughter is taking off her shoes, which are wet and grassy from the walk across Solie’s front yard. She brushes her bangs out of her puffy eyes and stares up at Solie who is wiping her hands dry on the front of her jeans. It is still dark out, the air stiff with broken sleep.

“She’s not quite awake just yet,” Emmitt smiles.

“She get breakfast?” Solie asks. She is eyeing Millie like she can’t figure out what she’s looking at. “She cold?” she asks Emmitt, then turns to Millie, saying, “You got goosebumps.”

Millie looks down at her legs, turns them sideways and feels them with her small hand. Solie walks out of the room and when she returns, she is carrying a little yellow blanket. It is hand knit and worn, with small bits of yarn tied together over a hole in the corner that Millie plucks at with her small fingers as soon as it is wrapped around her like a towel after a bath.

“Daddy?” Millie’s eyes are slits and she is yawning. “Wanna go *hoome*.”

“You’re gonna play with Solie, today. Remember?” Emmitt is fidgeting with his sleeves, rolling them up to his elbows because they strangle his thick wrists. “Gotta be nice, like we talked about on the way over.”

Millie nods obediently. She is staring at herself in the mirror beside the door, looking back over her shoulder as she walks away, the blanket wrapped around her dragging on the floor. Pretending to be a bride or a princess, Emmitt cannot decide. She steps on the blanket and falters, catching herself, standing still for a moment and blinking her dark eyes.

“You want something to eat?” Solie asks the room. She is walking to the kitchen, slamming cupboards. “Got oatmeal, a muffin... can make some frybread.”

Now Millie is in the kitchen, standing close to Solie, like she knows her.

“Frybread sound good, hon?” Emmitt thinks of the restaurant beside the quarry, just off the Reservation, where he stops with Millie sometimes. The cook, a Nisqually, always makes frybread, sets it on a plate in the center of the table. Millie gobbles it

greedily, like it's the last she'll ever taste, her lips and chin greasy from its touch. Standing in the center of the small kitchen, staring wide-eyed up at Solie, Millie is nodding so fervently she has to clench her teeth to keep them from rattling.

“Frybread it is.” Solie pours oil into a pan that is already on the stove. “You can eat as much as you want,” she tells Millie. They are smiling at each other, Millie laughing that machine gun laugh of hers that she only does when she is nervous. It is not her real laugh, just a noise to fill empty air. She is rocking back and forth on her feet, still clutching the little yellow blanket around her shoulders.

Emmit glances at his wrist. It is three minutes past five. He will be late to work. He is slowly backing up to the front door, rattles the doorknob before hollering, “Be back around one.”

“Leaving so soon?” Solie asks. Directly beside her, Millie has already scooted a chair over from the kitchen table and is climbing up on it, the uneven legs wobbling beneath her step. She is too preoccupied with the sack of flour and the bowl on the kitchen counter to notice her father leaving.

“Already late.” Emmitt waves, or so he intends – actually just lifting his limp hand, letting it hover in the air for a moment before turning around.

“Goodbye, Emmitt,” Solie says. His name comes out slow and sweet. It is almost too much for Emmitt to bear. He turns around, half scared to look at her. She is staring at him, eyes boring into him as if he were abandoning them, woman and child. He feels startled for a second, unable to move from his stance in the threshold of the open door. It has been so long since someone looked at him for longer than a few moments.

“Solie,” he nods.

As he walks through the wet grass to his truck, he can still feel her eyes on his skin.

When he comes back to Solie's house after dropping Millie off at home, Sima in the kitchen, the boys not yet home from the brewery, Solie is washing dishes, her hands sudsy and dripping when she answers the door. There was something between them, Emmitt was sure, when he came to pick Millie up. Little Millie sleeping on Solie's bed. The way Solie touched his elbow, leading him to where his child lay sweaty and red-cheeked under the covers. Solie felt it, too, he was sure. It was the way she softened like butter sitting in the sun, aided by the beers they drank waiting for Millie to wake up. She touched his leg when she laughed at something he said. He could be funny, sometimes, he guessed. The way she talked and talked, like they had been friends for years. She revealed very little about herself, despite Emmitt's questions. He was so curious about her. Felt a twinge of jealousy at the thought of his daughter talking to her all day, such safety in telling a small child all the stupid little things that come into your mind. He wanted to know what they had talked about, everything Millie did that made her laugh, made her open her lips and reveal those small teeth and pink gums. Solie felt something, he was sure. He had not imagined how suddenly she moved from her seat right beside him to the rocking chair across from him. How she laughed less, her face tensing up like a pulled muscle. How her brow furrowed in thought. She was thinking, *I can't do this*. Just as Emmitt was thinking, *Who would know? Please don't slip away*. What else could have shaken her besides the sudden realization this was not harmless flirting. There was something there, as palpable as Millie's snores coming from the open bedroom door.

Solie looks relieved, then embarrassed, wet hands dripping down her hairless forearms. She does not say, *Come in*. Does not have to, Emmitt already following her to the kitchen where she is retrieving a towel from the oven handle. She is staring at her hands, slapping them dry on the flour-spotted towel. Emmitt and Solie cannot look at each other, like the other's gaze would be like looking directly into the sun. They are smiling, laughing at the floor. Emmitt will not be able to remember what they talked about when one of them finally worked up the nerve to speak. Nor will he be able to recall which one of them it is who neared the other, who kissed who, only that it felt like that moment right before falling asleep where you can feel yourself surrendering to something bigger than you. The unconscious pulling at you and pulling at you until your skin prickles, like something so cold it feels like fire.

Never thinking she would stop wanting him. That he would plead and beg to let him kiss her. That she would slowly stop being home at the exact hours she was normally waiting for him. If she is home, some excuse – oh, she was just heading out the door this very minute. Heartache following him home, following him like a voice constantly whispering, *you are not wanted, you are not loved*.

Chapter 14

The Spar Bar windows hang open on rusty hinges. Chipped paint and black spots of mold decorate the corners of each glass pane. Millie and her brothers sit at the booth facing the street under the open windows. The boys have showered and changed into clean clothes. Their combed and parted hair shines in the dim light. Couples and men

trickle in, smelling of aftershave and soap. From the window, a breeze carries with it the scent of low tide, which makes Millie feel queasy. The salty, fishy smell makes her think of dog vomit after the creek floods in the spring and she buries her nose in a full glass of beer in an attempt to mask the odor.

A few hours have passed since arriving. The sun is finishing its long climb down the backside of the mountains on the horizon. Dark clouds part to reveal an ink blue sky speckled with light. The faint noise of crickets chirping can no longer be heard now that the bar is filled almost to capacity. People stand beside the bar and double up on benches to wait for Pat and Otis to fill their cups. At the booth, Tony is quiet, but has begun to speak more with every drink he finishes. Johnny has switched topics again, talking about logging unions up north when he had just been discussing his truck. Yushie nods and agrees with everything he says, ignoring the fact that Johnny's mind wandered off topic and he has yet to finish a story once he began it. Her brothers take turns rolling cigarettes and passing them between one another, the thin lines of smoke climbing the warm air.

When Riley Peckner walks in the door, Millie does not see him. She is searching the room for the doctor. His appearance has never been described to her and yet she feels she would somehow recognize him. Perhaps she envisions a stethoscope around his neck or a white jacket with his name sewn on the pocket, she isn't sure. All the men she lays eyes on are familiar. They are faces from the mill or the store or the bar or church when she used to go as a child. The few women in the room are wives or girlfriends of the men whose arms are around them like coils, with the exception of Mary Bents, the daughter of Pat and Otis, who Millie has never seen in the bar, but tonight, there she is with pink lipstick and her hair partially up in a barrette, the rest draped across her shoulders giving

the illusion that she almost has a neck. Mary is not a pretty woman; at least Millie does not find her pretty, yet Johnny and Yushie always comment that she was in high school. As far as Millie can tell, she looks no different than she did in high school and, therefore, must still be pretty in their eyes. It is then, staring at Mary Bents' perfectly curled hair, that she sees Riley Peckner in the booth in front of where her brothers and she sit. Millie has not seen him for over a year. The sight of his thin nose and crooked mouth make her shudder, which she hopes her brothers will mistake for a cold chill. Yes, it is getting cold. Tonight more so than the last, especially in the ride over, wind rushing in through the window Tony insisted on keeping open. The thought of having to speak to Riley, or even worse, him coming to sit at their booth, makes her sink down in her seat.

Riley sits with two boys who look vaguely familiar from high school but whose names she cannot recall. She pictures them in football jerseys behind the wheels of expensive cars. She studies their movements, how they speak, in hopes that some small gesture will trigger her memory. Her gaze must be unwavering, because she barely notices Yushie tapping her forearm from his seat beside her. She watches a smile grow across his face as he runs his hand across the top of his head like he is shaking sawdust out of it. Millie looks across the table to find both Johnny and Tony staring at her. She straightens her back, stiff as a rake, and gives a faint smile. She goes to cross her arms and knocks her beer over onto the table. They sit and watch it spread and fill every knife hole and carving before dripping to the floor where it pools unnoticed by anyone else in the bar. Yushie flips Millie's glass right side up and refills it. Not entirely unaccustomed to this happening, she is so *clumsy* lately, Johnny and Tony begin talking about buying another pitcher, never mentioning the spill.

“I got it, I got it,” Johnny stands from the booth and feels in his pocket for his wallet.

“Don’t take too long,” Tony says. It comes out sharp, accusatory. Millie shakes her head at his impatience.

Johnny heads for the bar without answering.

Yushie rolls a cigarette slowly and tightly between his dirt-caked hands that, like their father, no amount of soaking and scrubbing can wipe clean. He lights his cigarette with a match and flings it into the puddle of beer where it hisses and lets off a tiny puff of smoke. Millie’s gaze returns to Mary Bents, who is now sitting at a table across the room with a man Millie cannot identify because his back is turned to her. He speaks with his hands, making the green sweater draped over the back of his chair sway back and forth. Mary smiles often and touches her soft fingers to the barrette in her hair, perhaps afraid it had fallen out, Millie supposes. But that’s not it. She is trying to flirt, like the girls in high school used to do with Yushie. The man she sits with turns around to say something to Johnny, standing not two feet from them at the bar. With a good look at his face, Millie does not recognize him. Her heartbeat quickens.

She tries to participate in the conversation that Yushie and Tony are having, but she can’t concentrate. Milking parlors and hay interest Millie very little. Even when Johnny comes back to the table and changes the conversation to fishing as he fills each glass to the brim, Millie keeps her eyes on the man she is sure is the doctor. His hair is graying at the temples and the neck and is shorn so short she can see his white scalp underneath. He wears a gray shirt stretched tight over his broad back.

“If Dad saved his Saturday wages, he could have enough money to buy the electric pumps in a couple of months,” Yushie says, switching the conversation back to milking parlors.

“We could install them. It wouldn’t take no time at all,” Johnny adds.

“He’ll never go for it. You’re talking about the guy who still won’t use a chainsaw,” Tony says, pouring half his glass of beer down his throat in one gulp.

“Be worth asking, don’t you think?” Yushie asks. “Don’t you think, Millie?”

She nods, but can’t bring herself to say anything. She fears that if she loses sight of the doctor, she will lose him for the rest of the night and won’t be able to make an appointment. What if he gets tired and stomps upstairs? She can’t go knocking on his door! Or if him and Mary get closer, start leaning into one another and stealing kisses? She can’t interrupt them. How awkward that would be. Worrying is never a simple endeavor for Millie. One bad move leads to a chaotic series of bad consequences. People will see her climbing the stairs to his apartment. They’ll start talking. Think she is jealous of Mary when she taps him on the shoulder so rudely. She decides she needs to move fast and excuses herself from the booth. Yushie stands up to let her by and all three brothers watch her walk away, craning their necks in the opposite direction of the bathroom, of the back door where sometimes she needs to go to *get a little fresh air*. Millie makes it not ten steps when an arm reaches for her from the next booth over, stopping her so quickly at the hips she nearly doubles over from the force of it.

Riley smiles up at Millie. His lips are shiny and wet and his eyelids droop so low she can only see half of his eyes. A lone black stitch above his eyebrow holds together the soft skin on either side of a thin cut, no doubt the result of a recent fight, which Riley

has always been so fond of getting into. His soft fingers encircle her wrist a little too tightly for comfort. He releases his grip only when she stands perfectly still and leans in ever so slightly to hear him above the buzz of the crowd.

“How long you home for?” Millie asks, her mother’s voice in the back of her mind, *You didn’t say hello? Didn’t even make an effort?*

“Indefinitely.” His small nostrils flare when he speaks, a small mannerism she had forgotten about, but makes her shutter now staring at the tiny holes on his face gasping for air. Millie forces herself to stay in close proximity, despite the overwhelming urge to lean as far back as possible. Fiona Jenkins sits beside him, overly dressed for the bar. She has not seen Fiona, so small and hidden, from her booth. Fiona Jenkins is pretty, but plainly so. The Jenkins live on East Bay Road in a house that rival the Peckner’s in size.

Millie smiles at Fiona, who smiles back and waves a manicured hand.

“Oh, you’re here to stay,” Millie answers Riley. She can feel her eyebrows lift, mimicking the expression of pleasant surprise. She steals a quick glance at the doctor and sees Mary Bents standing up from her seat.

“Haven’t seen you around much,” Riley says. He takes a slow sip of the amber-colored liquid in his glass and clenches his jaw when he swallows – *savoring the taste*, like Millie has seen older men do in movies.

“Busy with work at home.” She sees that the seat across from the doctor is empty. The doctor sits in silence, staring into his empty glass.

“Still at home?”

“Yeah, ‘fraid so.”

“Maybe I’ll stop by sometime to say hello,” Riley shrugs his shoulders. Fiona shoots a sideways glare at him, so subtle that Riley does not notice, but Millie sees it. Feels it like a needle pricking her skin.

A small group of people migrate toward the bar, blocking Millie’s view of the doctor. “Sure,” she answers, not fully aware of what she is agreeing to. “I’m gonna go pee,” she says, knowing Riley will find her *uncouth, so vulgar!* For sharing. He nods to her and Fiona waves again. Millie turns and walks away, allowing herself to be swallowed by the crowd.

She bumps her elbows and shoulders into backs and ribs, steps on a couple of boot toes but makes it to the other side of the room virtually unnoticed. Her hair has begun slipping from its braid. She tucks the loose strands neatly behind her ears and straightens the front of her shirt. The crowd grows even larger now, swelling and pulsing so much that it pushes Millie closer to the doctor’s table. A loose floorboard catches the sole of Millie’s shoe, or maybe it is another foot, she can’t tell. She trips, awkwardly turning around in the air so she will not land on her face. When the side of her hip hits the floor, radiating pain up and down her ribcage, she takes a moment to look at the ground. She had to have tripped on *something*. There is nothing but worn floorboards, flat as water against the horizon. She looks around her, hoping nobody saw her. Oh, why is she so *clumsy* these days? To her horror, she is directly beside the doctor, who is presenting her with two outstretched arms and a half-smile that strikes Millie as almost a smirk.

As the doctor lifts Millie to a standing position, she notes that his skin takes on a weathered quality in the poorly lit bar, smooth but creased like a carefully polished, old

leather boot. Short wrinkles sprout from the thick skin surrounding the corners of his eyes. His hair is much darker than she first thought, with gray hair not only sprouting at the temples and neck, but all over his head, like spattered paint. His shirt is not gray at all but an old white shirt tinged darker by washing improperly in warm water along with other dark colors. He says nothing, his only gesture a long finger pointing at the empty seat across from him. Millie sits, taking a moment to look around. She exhales a small sigh of relief when she finds that the only person looking at her is the doctor, but in quick glances that fall on the table before Millie can hold his eyes with hers.

The doctor opens and closes his mouth several times, which Millie takes as him trying to say something, but is not sure what. She saves him the discomfort and introduces herself. He smiles when he hears her name. Repeats the word, *Mill-ee*, under his breath. When he tells her his name is Gael Young, a small panic erupts in her chest.

“The doctor, right? I thought you were the doctor.”

“Yes, the doctor,” he attempts another smile but ends up making a pained expression.

Millie feels relieved, but nerves make her heart beat fast against her sore ribs.

“Do I need to schedule an appointment with you?”

The doctor doesn't answer right away, sitting still and rigid, all the while drumming his fingers on the tabletop. Millie opens her mouth to repeat the question, but he speaks first.

“That depends what you need me for.” He stops drumming his fingers and holds his gaze on her face.

“I've been having stomach problems. Can't keep anything down.”

“How long?”

“’Bout a month, more or less.”

The doctor nods his head gently and continues staring at the tabletop for much longer than Millie thinks necessary. He looks almost possessed, Millie thinks, just sitting there, his eyes lifeless, as if he is thinking of something else entirely.

“Yeah, we better schedule an examination,” the doctor sits up straight in his seat.

His face comes to life now, his lips softening and his head holding itself perfectly still. He is almost handsome when he speaks, Millie thinks. She can feel her cheeks redden. *Examination*. The word alone makes her feel naked. The doctor shoves his mouth to one side of his face and scratches his cheek.

“Why don’t you come in tomorrow, after lunch? Say, three o’clock.”

“Any idea what’s wrong with me?” Millie gives a weak smile to conceal her disappointment. A small part of her, she realizes, must have thought that simply meeting the doctor would make her feel better. Or was it she wanted him to tell her she was fine, like with the fainting spells when she was twelve? Maybe she believed that if he said it enough, she would believe him and the nausea would go away.

“No. Could be any number of things.” Something in his face tightens up again and the smirk from before returns to his lips. He resumes drumming his fingers on the table.

“Will you have a drink with me?” he asks.

Millie opens her mouth to speak but can’t think of what to say. She has been avoiding drinking all night, which has been easy with three tipsy brothers there to distract one another. This is different. She can’t read him, can’t figure out what his curled lips

mean, why he finds it so hard to look her straight in the eye. *Like a nervous child*, she thinks. Something about the intensity of his eyes makes her feel cold, like someone blowing on the back of your bare neck. She feels the hairs on her scalp stand on edge. “Can’t,” she finally says. “Here with my brothers. We’ll be leaving soon.” She thinks of sounding rude only after she has finished speaking. Her words, so bluntly stated, hang in the space between them.

“It’s still pretty early.” His face does not change expression. She hesitates for a moment, nervously scratching at her ear, before smiling weakly and standing up. As soon as she is upright beside the table, Mary Bents returns to the table with two glasses of beer so full they slosh over the sides and drip down her hands. She looks at Millie with something resembling regret. They say hello to one another, Millie offering to help her with the glasses. Mary refuses, feigning politeness. She thrusts the beer in front of the doctor, who takes it by the rim, perhaps careful not to touch Mary’s hand, Millie thinks.

“Thank you, Doctor. Nice to see you, Mary,” Millie says before turning around to leave the table. With her first step, she feels a tug on her hand, holding her in mid-step. She turns around to find the doctor gently clasping her hand by the fingers.

“Tomorrow, then?” he asks. His face is tight and his eyes wide.

“Yes,” Millie nods, thinking yes, the doctor is indeed handsome. Something about the clean lines of his broad shoulders, the strong bones visible under his hard skin. She looks over to see Mary. Her face is scrunched up like a wilted piece of fruit.

Millie turns and walks sideways around the crowd hovering over the bar, making sure her back is to Riley’s booth before rejoining her brothers. Yushie and Tony palm their empty glasses as they wait for Johnny to return with more beer. Yushie’s lips are

shiny and red. Tony's eyes are little damp slits peeking out from heavy lids. Millie is relieved to see that her glass has been removed from the table, most likely by the hands of Pat or Otis sweeping in unnoticed, a tower of glasses stacked and teetering from the crook of an arm.

Johnny returns, his face so red, his freckles appear to have disappeared. The conversations for the rest of the night hold very little of Millie's interest. She wishes they would speak of Mark and Harold who, like her brothers, moved from Odanodan to work the shipyards in Tokam. Mark and Harold live in a small apartment a few blocks from the water in the industrial area. Next door, Tony, Yushie, and Johnny share a two-bedroom place, on the sofa rooming extra men who come to work when there are more ships to make than men to make them. Millie wonders if there are any new workers down at the docks. Or maybe Johnny has a new girlfriend. He always seems to be going on dates, yet no one name sticks in Millie's head. They could discuss the weather changing, autumn creeping in on gray clouds and cold winds. Millie will discuss anything but their parents or their animals, as they did now. It is too much to live at home and then do nothing but talk of home when you are finally away from it.

Sometimes, Millie feels Riley staring at her from one booth over or Mary Bents glaring at her from across the room. Millie slowly leans forward on the table until her chin rests on its sticky surface. Her brothers, too drunk to notice her unease and boredom, drink until they can no longer lift the pitchers to refill their glasses. They finally pile into the truck a little after two o'clock in the morning. Millie takes the wheel, driving fast with the thought of Henry waiting for her in the field. They are loud coming in the front door, Johnny unable to speak without shouting, Yushie tripping over muddy

boots, Tony stumbling up the stairs. Millie lays in bed until she hears the muffled voices of her parents quiet behind their closed bedroom door then the sound of all three brothers snoring coming from down the hall through their open doors. She slides quietly down the stairs, and walks out the front door into the darkness. With no porch light or lantern to illuminate her way, Millie waits until her eyes adjust to the muted light, the moon trapped behind thin clouds, before crossing the driveway into the field.

Millie tries to picture the Cadillac nestled beside the ridge in the south field, tries to see Henry's glasses reflect the moonlight when she opens the car door, but can only think of him in daylight, standing outside the car trying to hold her with his lanky arms. Her boots feel heavy on her tired legs, as if they were filled with water. She walks slowly, fearful of tripping and hurting herself in the dark. The wind blowing through the trees makes a hushing noise, almost a *there, there* noise. Tall blades of grass lash at her pant legs as she rounds the ridge in the field. She is not surprised to find no car, no Henry. Nothing but a field bathed in black.

The living room feels empty in the darkness, save the presence of the deer head whose immense shadow on the wall makes Millie feel surrounded by the thing. Stale cigarette smoke clings to her clothes, the cold wind still underneath her coat raising goosebumps on her neck. The grating noise of her brothers' snoring floods in from upstairs. She thinks of Henry, asleep in his bed. Of Riley, still at the bar when she left, probably standing outside the bar, yelling at Otis for kicking him out. Had Henry come earlier, had she missed him by only a few minutes, an hour at most? She will see him tomorrow, she reassures herself, just like they planned.

The clock in the kitchen chimes four times. Her father will awake in little more than two hours. Millie feels like she is going to be sick, wants to get it over with, but she can only barely make out one of the deer's shiny eyes, the small tips of one antler. She fixes her gaze on the deer head's large silhouette on the wall, its thick antlers splitting and turning sharply to the ceiling. Reduced to flat shadows, the antlers are no longer disgusting to Millie. Their curved lines are maybe even beautiful, she thinks. Like some tree growing up the wall, one she would have climbed up as a child to hide in its branches until called in by her mother's voice shouting from the porch. Millie remembers the deer hide blanket Solie kept on her bed. The afternoon she had sat hunting for the bullet hole, Millie still too small for her feet to touch the floor of the truck in the passenger seat earlier that morning. Solie's hands were not much bigger than Millie's, she noticed, as she finally got up to help her scour from both sides of the hide. They did not find a bullet that afternoon. Only a slit from where Millie's father had stabbed the deer below the neck to bleed it upside down from a tree branch. When Millie's father came to pick her up, he had shaken his head and smiled with closed lips. *Shot it in the throat*, he said, *we got the bullet hole back home mounted to our wall*. She had gotten in trouble, she remembered, for leaving without saying goodbye, so disappointed she had been looking in vain.

Just as she had done as a child upon returning to her house that evening from Solie's, Millie walks to the stove, now cold with nothing but ash leftover from the afternoon fire. She uses the last of her strength to climb atop the stove balancing her knees on its sooty surface. The buck's nose is dusty beneath her hands, cobwebs thin as thread dangling from the antlers tickle Millie's fingers. She feels around its jaw, letting

her fingers linger on the stiff fur. Her hands pet and wander, eventually finding and putting her small finger in the bullet hole in the buck's throat.

Millie quietly steps down from the stove, stops to hold still until a wave of nausea passes. Then a flutter in her belly, light and fleeting. One final pain releases itself in her abdomen, hitting her stomach with a sharp stab. And, as if by some miracle, the nausea breaks, little pieces of pain dissipating into her thighs and chest until she feels nothing but her steady pulse. Millie walks into the kitchen, turns on the light, and grabs the tallest glass she can find from the cupboard. She fills it to the brim with frothing cold milk and takes big, loud breaths between gulps, not caring if she wakes the house.

Chapter 15

Gael, unable to fall asleep, stares at the dark ceiling above his bed. He had been drunk when he crept upstairs without anyone noticing. He watches the room spin for a while then sips water until his vision levels and he can rest his head on the stiff pillow that is not his. He recounts the night's events, which lead into an inevitably blurry ending where he can't remember who he had been talking to before leaving the bar, which still hums under his bedroom floor. Mary Bents rarely left his side, he remembers that, her barrette dangling from a limp curl by the time he was too drunk to pretend to listen to her anymore. It is possible he was rude to Mary, he doesn't know. On top of the usual awkward pausing, he may have interrupted her or stopped listening to her altogether, risen from the table without speaking, told her to change the subject. She spoke incessantly, not of the children she taught or her fellow teachers, but of trivialities: people she saw from high school, how she was styling her hair differently, clothes she

wished to order from catalogs. It was all Gael could do to stop himself from getting up from the table every time she opened her mouth.

Then there was the girl. Not Mil-'dread', as her brother mentioned, but Millie. Mill-'ee'. Such a soft name. He hasn't been able to stop saying it in his head. She is much paler in person. Her small hand so white as it reached up to brush a strand of ink black hair from her cheek. He couldn't remember exactly what he said. Had he slurred his words when he asked her to have a drink with him? The thought of the word 'drink' coming from his mouth, of it tilting in the middle, makes him cringe. Had he smiled at all? Or just sat there, his face hard as rock? He could hear some girl's drunken voice teasing him, *Such a serious face!* Trying to pout, mimic his expression, but unable to keep from smiling, laughing loudly for everyone to hear.

The thought of unbuttoning Millie's blouse to listen to her heart, to lay a hand on her stomach and press into the soft flesh, makes Gael's palms sweaty. A month of nausea. There is little else it could be, but he knows he has to be thorough. He will check for infection anyway, look in her throat, ears, nose. He will ask about food, medication, although he already knows it is no allergy. He will suggest milk maybe, her stomach coating itself in a thick layer of mucus every time she drinks it. He will check for cancer, take blood. A month of nausea. The obvious. Pregnancy. A swollen uterus, hard to the touch. Swollen breasts. The soft, darkened cervix. He holds his hands to his chest, tense at the thought of having to touch her. He has not been nervous to touch a woman in years. Has not ever been nervous, he thinks, except for the very first time. Sixteen years old. The girl he was with a full year older. If he had had any friends, he imagined them slapping him on the back afterwards, toothy grins and looks half envious,

half impressed. The girl so pretty. Perhaps the prettiest girl he has ever been with. Long hair draping over his face like a tent. His little bird chest, heart fluttering. She could feel it under her hand, said it felt like it was beating just beneath the skin. This was before he discovered nerve-numbing booze. How confident he felt after a couple drinks. Like any girl could be *his, his, his*.

He wonders how many children were fathered overseas during the war. He wonders how many are his. Sometimes, he thinks about what it would be like to find out he has a son. It is always a boy who looks like him. Who he sees on a street corner, waving, smiling, then continuing to walk. He can't bear the thought of having a daughter. There is something about a little girls' eyes that weaken him. Something about the way they look up at him, like a dog begging, without meaning to. That night after Christmas in Italy. In that room with the pregnant whore. How had he forgotten the nook under the stairwell after he left her screaming in the bedroom? A makeshift nursery. The children sleeping despite the noise of the bar. Or perhaps the bar drowned out the noise of the bombs, illuminating the world briefly, a man-made lightning storm. There was no rain. Only plaster falling from the ceiling. Him asleep at the table that was really a door on top of a pile of crates. Too drunk to remember. Wasn't that the point, after all? Drink to forget. But how could he have forgotten waking to children's screams. All of them crammed in such a small place. Not scared, just playing like children do. Can't ever tell if they're having fun or if someone is trying to kill them. The little girl playing with old blocks. Color faded and corners chipped. Her cooing. Drool dripping from a smile. A blue dress. A wrinkled dress. An explosion rattling the walls. Another one, closer. Then windows breaking, the deafening creak of metal. Blocks

spilling out from under the stairs to roll at his feet. Wall crumbling. Screaming. No, crying. Broken table leg. Cracked crates collapsing under the door. Laying down, forehead numb from where it smacked the floor. Wailing. Children's feet. A bloody dress. Wet and red.

Gael sits up in bed, looking around the room for something to hold. He finds nothing but his worn suitcase, fraying at the brown edges that used to be black and smooth. His heart beats as if he has been running. A panic claws at his back. He gets up from the bed and walks across the small room. A little smoky, sweaty air wafts in, changing the room just enough for Gael to shut the door again and get back in bed.

Gael is still drunk when he wakes up. There are voices coming from downstairs. It is dark in his room except for a line of light radiating from the crack between the door and the floor. He is not thinking of Millie, but of the boy. Not jealous, just curious. Like seeing a trail of blood and following it to its owner. Has he seen him in the bar? Never thinking he could be the father of Millie's baby? He must be young, Gael supposes, although most men are younger than him now. At least, that is how Gael feels.

He is tired, perhaps even a little hung over. He lets his head sink deeper into the stiff pillow and drifts into a dreamless sleep thinking of Millie – of her pale, naked skin.

Chapter 16

Millie waits at the bottom of the Peckner driveway, just as Henry had told her to do. She has not slept all night. She drank milk, waiting for the nausea to return. When it didn't, she made toast, bacon, and eggs, ate them quickly before the nausea came back as

suddenly as it had disappeared. But it never did. She left the house when she heard her father rise at a quarter past seven and watched the sun finish rising on her walk down the road. She has been standing for a little over a half an hour she guesses, finally sitting down on a damp root jutting up from the dark soil beneath the giant madrona tree that marks Henry's driveway from the road. She peels thin sheets of the tree's bark off in strips. They are moist and malleable, easily rolled into tubes Millie looks through like a telescope, eye never leaving the driveway, until the bark dries and cracks between her cold fingers. Her curved spine rests against the giant madrona tree's trunk. Millie feels a little drunk from her full belly, her body finally able to relax without the fear of vomiting.

The steep incline of the Peckner driveway turns and twists its way up the hill before straightening and flattening out just before the enormous green house emerges from the trees. Millie has climbed the long path at least once a week for several years to return and retrieve the Pecker's laundry. She is scheduled to deliver their next clean load tomorrow morning. But Millie is not thinking of that now. She is staring at the grass sprouting up from between the tire lanes in the driveway. Her heart quickens at the thought that, at any moment, Henry Peckner will round the bend, suddenly materialize from behind tall trees and bushes too thick and overgrown to see through, and walk towards Millie, maybe even run in excitement to see her there, waiting for him just as she said she would.

Millie does not mind waiting, not even when it begins to rain. Tiny pinprick sized drops of rain soon grow into gloppy drops that fall on the crown of her head, tickle her scalp before sliding down her skull. She wears her rubber boots and coat, never changing from the evening before. She rolls a fresh telescope from the damp bark, but instead of

watching the driveway, her eyes follow a yellow slug inching its way up the side of a rock nestled next to the madrona's thick trunk, antenna eyes drawing circles in the air. It does not see her, she thinks. Doesn't care that she is there. Every few seconds she steals glances at the bend in the driveway, thinking Henry is walking right towards her and she missed it, busying herself with examining slugs. But every time she looks, Henry is not there. She waits for another hour, drawing shapes in the mud with a curved stick until it breaks, but Henry does not come. Even when she clambers up the drive, pausing around every bend in case Henry is coming, pausing so he can stumble upon her like some treasure waiting to be found, Henry does not come. She reaches the place in the driveway where it straightens and flattens, the house's wide roof now visible above the tree line. Henry has not left the house. If he had, she would have seen him by now. The driveway, like the field the night before, has been empty. Such a fool I've been, she thinks before turning around, waiting and waiting.

On the walk down, Millie stomps her feet so hard it made her cheeks rattle with each step. The heavy hood of her coat pulled down to let her warm neck breathe allows rain to pool on her head and slide down to the back of her neck. She is wet, cold, and tired. Had he done it on purpose? Made her wait as some sort of payback? Surely not, she thinks. What good would it do with him leaving? Wasn't it him who likes her more? Millie can't decide. She always knew she liked him enough to keep seeing him. Knew she liked the way he makes her feel. But with the idea of losing him, of not having those nights in the backseat of his father's Cadillac, makes Millie feel hollow, exposed. Is that love, she wonders. No. Love has to be more than the pain of its absence. Love has to feel like something when you are in it, why else would everyone make such a big fuss

about it? Or are they pretending? Some sick joke she never understood, maybe. She keeps looking behind her, expecting to see Henry and Riley in through the windshield of the Cadillac pointing and laughing at her. Something is building and building inside her as she clops down the start of the driveway and onto the road, making her walk faster and faster until she is at the front door of her house. It isn't until she stands in the threshold, both parents newly dressed and staring at her in confusion, that she realizes the building inside her is that of nausea, but not the old nausea that burned and lingered, this one is heavy, urgent. Millie runs to the bathroom and vomits up her breakfast. She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand and stands up to find the nausea gone once again.

Her mother says nothing as Millie opens the bathroom door and walks to the kitchen sink. Millie sticks her mouth under the running faucet. Her father is sipping coffee and reading the newspaper, his hair still damp from his morning shower. They mumble to each other, ignoring Millie as they often do. Millie splashes cool water on her face. She uses a dishrag to wipe off the back of her clammy neck. She cannot revel in the absence of nausea, the thought of Henry making her feel sick all over. The dishes in the sink give her something to pretend to look at, both arms propped on the kitchen counter by hands pink with cold. Her brothers' footsteps thud thud thud on the floor above them. They will be getting ready by now, Millie thinks. They are leaving soon. They will smile, wave, leave in some kind of hurry to cover up their hangovers.

Millie's father excuses himself from the table. The newspaper drifts off the table on the breeze of his leaving. He grumbles something about a cow breaking loose, about having to bring it back from the Armstrong's field before it starts raining again. Millie glances out the window to note the rain has indeed stopped, gray clouds fading to white

around the sun. Millie's mother carries a crate full of folded linens into the kitchen and sets it next to Millie by the sink. It is the Peckner's laundry crate. She can tell by the Ivory soap stamp on its side.

"Got done with it early. Drop it off for me, will you?" her mother asks. A small, rusty safety pin holds her mother's apron strap to the front of her apron, but it keeps coming undone. Her mother stops to refasten it before walking across the kitchen to retrieve the newspaper spread open on the floor, face down, as if hugging the ground.

"I was supposed to help Yushie with something," Millie is too tired to think of an excuse.

"Well, I have to stack firewood on the back porch."

"I can do that," Millie offers.

Her mother shakes her head.

"I'd rather stack wood than go to the Peckner's," Millie explains.

"Riley's home, I heard."

"Saw him last night." She is sure to scrunch her face up in disgust.

"He's not such a bad kid, Millie," her mother sets the newspaper on the kitchen table and begins folding a pile of laundry from the basket perched beside it.

"You don't know him."

"It'll just take a few minutes. He might not even be awake."

"So why don't you do it and I'll stack firewood," Millie suggests.

"I'm not asking you where you been all night or all morning," her mother starts, never taking her eyes off the piece of fabric she is folding carefully between her arthritic hands. "I'm not asking you how you're feeling because I know it annoys you. All I'm

asking,” her mother continues, “is for you to deliver that laundry. Then you can do whatever it is you do the rest of the day.”

What has Millie been doing? Staring at the deer head, sitting around the house. “I’m going to see the doctor tomorrow,” Millie says, although she wonders if it is necessary now that she feels better, the nausea still gone after the last purge. Perhaps caused by eating too much after not eating hardly at all, she thinks. She puts a hand on the soft folded sheet atop the crate. She looks up to see her mother frozen in place, a towel dangling from two outstretched arms and her eyes like two headlights staring at Millie.

“What time?” her mother asks. Millie thinks she detects the corners of her mother’s mouth turning upwards.

“Afternoon,” Millie answers.

Her mother nods and finishes folding the towel she is holding. Millie feels a small surge of hope that she is off the hook. Her mother picks up another towel and resumes folding, her face falling back into a stern expression.

“You’ve been sick for quite a while now,” her mother states. “It’d be easier on you to deliver the laundry than stack wood for hours, don’t you think?”

Millie nods, knowing there is nothing she can say now to change her mother’s mind. Not even that felt better, still afraid the nausea will return. She picks the crate up off the kitchen counter and stands for a moment to demonstrate her reluctance.

“Might wanna hurry before it starts raining again.” Her mother meets two shoulder seams of a shirt together and presses the garment to her chest, folding it in half

and stacking it on the table. She looks up at Millie, still standing there, and tilts her head to one side with a look that says hurry.

Millie turns on her heel and heads for the door.

“She owes from last week,” her mother hollers after her. Millie pretends not to hear, letting the door slam behind her.

It is still early when Millie passes the giant madrona tree at the bottom of the Peckner’s driveway, not much past nine. While a small hope has risen in her chest as she trudges down the road, it quickly vanishes upon finding the bottom of the driveway as desolate as she had left it. Even the yellow slug has disappeared from the rock. Millie walks slowly up the steep driveway, fearful of what is waiting for her at the top.

She takes a few deep breaths outside the door before ringing the doorbell. The loudness of the ding dong makes her jump. Has it always been that loud? She wonders. She clings tightly to the crate of carefully folded linens, brushing off stray leaves and nettles that have accumulated among the fabric from the walk over. The door swings open suddenly, revealing Kathryn Peckner, dressed in a crisp black skirt and yellow sweater, which reminds Millie for a brief moment of a bee costume her mother made her in the second grade for the school play. Kathryn waves her hand to come in, her red fingernails startlingly bright against her smooth, white skin. She quickly turns and half-runs to the den just off the entryway. Millie follows her clacking heels, careful to shut the door quietly behind her. She stands in the doorway as Kathryn sits down at the desk and picks the phone receiver off its holding hook. Kathryn resumes whatever conversation she had been having before Millie came over. Millie, of course, pretends

not to listen, inspecting the laundry and brushing off imaginary debris. Kathryn presses her red lips to the receiver, the gold trim of the ivory-colored phone balancing on her powdered chin. With her free hand, she fiddles with an earring that matches the one hiding behind a perfectly coiled blond strand of hair.

“I’m sorry,” she says into the phone, “It was the laundry girl.”

Millie stops inspecting the laundry and sets it on a quilted leather chair beside a plant overflowing from a ceramic pot. *Girl*, she repeats in her head. Does Kathryn call Millie’s mother that? Millie shakes her head gently, shrugging off the comment. Her mother always tells her to be agreeable, to not challenge people no matter how much she wants to. She feigns interest in a book on the shelf so as not to look at Kathryn, whom she would undoubtedly glare at if she gave herself the opportunity. Kathryn’s voice is low and tired sounding.

“... Mmm hm, and that’s at one o’clock? ... So, we’ll see you then,” Kathryn leans forward in her seat, then back again, the side of her face still pressed firmly against the receiver. “Oh, they’re fine, thank you... That was Riley... He’s home now, just got home last week ... Stanford, yes... No, a full year early... Yes, very proud... He’ll be working with his father now... Yes, in the next couple of years, although I can’t imagine Edward every retiring,” Kathryn laughs then pauses to listen, her red mouth falling open in concentration. “Henry, yes... No... No, we hoped for someplace closer but he chose Princeton... Yes, a wonderful school,” her voiced quivers, which she hides by quickly clearing her throat. “We still have him ‘til tomorrow... Yes, a big dinner... Edward and I are driving him to the airport, leaving early tomorrow... Mmm hm... I will... Yes, I should get started, still have to run to the store... Thank you... Mmm hm... Goodbye.”

Millie hears the click of the phone hitting the hook, but she cannot bring herself to turn around and face Kathryn. *Tomorrow?* Kathryn had said, Millie is sure of it, repeating the side of the conversation she heard over and over now in her mind. But she stops for a moment to steady her legs beneath her. She has not slept all night, she reminds herself. She should double check before overreacting. Millie composes herself, turns around and even musters a weak smile to give Kathryn.

“You’re early,” Kathryn half-laughs, swiveling around in her seat. She looks at Millie behind heavy lashes painted black. “I’m not ready for you.”

“I can come back tomorrow, if that’s what you mean,” Millie offers.

“No, no,” Kathryn stands up. She smooths the front of her snug black skirt before putting a hand to her chin. “Give me just a minute,” she says, “Wait right here. I’ll be right back.” Kathryn’s heels click out of the room and up the wide staircase to the second floor.

Millie sits on the quilted leather chair and listens carefully as she empties the crate, stacking the clean linens on the matching chair beside her. She is relieved that the only noise she can hear is Kathryn’s footsteps. They are right above her for a moment then trail off down some hallway, stopping randomly and picking up their steady pace only to stop again. A door creaks open, followed by muffled voices, one belonging to Kathryn the other much lower, undecipherable. Millie’s heartbeat quickens. The footsteps resume, but this time there are two sets – Kathryn’s sharp heels and another, flat soles stomping on the hardwood floor. Millie stands up, as if to brace herself, when the two sets of footsteps begin descending the stairs. She faces the bookshelf once more, listening carefully to the footsteps hoping she will somehow be able to figure out who it

is accompanying Kathryn into the den, where she stands holding a laundry crate in the same clothes she wore the night before, smelling of stale smoke and wet skin.

“Millie?” Kathryn calls.

Millie turns around to find Riley carrying a large laundry bag filled to capacity, Kathryn beside him lighting a long white cigarette dangling from her red mouth. Millie, partially relieved that Riley is not Henry, cannot bring herself to look at Riley, who she can feel staring at her. She pulls the collar of her coat up further around her neck in an attempt to hide from him.

“Here you go, dear,” Kathryn says, signaling for Riley to hand her the bag. “How much do I owe you?” Kathryn asks, taking a long drag of her cigarette.

“Fifty cents, I think,” Millie clutches the bag’s thick canvas strap in her hand.

Kathryn looks at her sideways, blowing a thick cloud of smoke into the air that expands and drifts up to the crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling.

“My mom said something about you owing from last week, too.”

Kathryn nods and walks to the desk, returning with an outstretched hand. Millie holds her own hand out, letting Kathryn drop the two quarters into her callused palm. Riley watches on, waiting for what Millie does not know. She can hear the whistling of his breathing from several feet away.

“It’s raining again,” Kathryn says gesturing toward the window. “Why don’t you let us give you a ride home?”

Riley nods deeply, a small smile growing from his crooked lips.

“It’s fine, really,” Millie nods for emphasis.

“Don’t be silly. We’ve got to go to the store anyhow,” Kathryn waves the hand holding the cigarette, drawing an imaginary circle in the air, before heading out of the den. “Riley, help her, would you?” she calls.

Riley pulls the canvas bag back from Millie’s hand then waits for Millie to walk first. Millie grabs the empty crate and follows Kathryn into the entryway, where she is sliding into a coat with a fur collar. Millie and Riley walk behind Kathryn in a single file line outside and around the house to where the Cadillac is parked. Riley sits in back, his arm around the bag of laundry like it is some girlfriend he has grown bored with. Millie sits in the passenger seat, the empty crate balancing on her lap. Kathryn stubs her cigarette out in the ashtray and reapplies lipstick as they bump and turn down the driveway. Millie grows cold against the slick leather seat, the thought of Riley so close, breathing behind her just as he did in school. Kathryn asks Millie how her parents are, how her brothers are doing up north as Riley sits silent in the back. Millie answers quickly, politely, returning the questions – how is Kathryn’s husband, her sister in Tumchuck Valley. Millie’s mother has always told her to not ask too many questions, especially of their employers. Millie has to bite her tongue to keep from asking about Henry. But then, as if Kathryn can read Millie’s mind, she says,

“I’m sure you’ve heard Henry’s leaving?”

A quiet “yes” is all Millie provided. She lifts her eyebrows, trying to keep a pleasant expression on her face.

“Shame you couldn’t say goodbye,” Kathryn adds. “Although I don’t think you two were ever very close. Him being so much younger than you and all.”

“Yes, a shame,” Millie says. She can’t decide if it came out condescendingly. She steals a glance at Kathryn who is checking her reflection in the rearview mirror. The car, once so familiar to her, seemed strange in the daylight, in the passenger seat with Kathryn and Riley in there with her.

“He’s running errands with his father in Bigmount.”

“Oh,” Millie says.

“We leave bright and early tomorrow morning to drop him off at the airport,” Kathryn’s voice trails off.

They pull into Millie’s driveway, the Cadillac idling in front of the house. Millie is sure no one is home, Johnny’s truck now gone from its spot beside the barn. Her father’s truck, also nowhere in sight. But then she sees the front bumper of the car behind the barn. Her mother is home, of course. Stacking wood on the back porch.

“Here we are,” Kathryn says, pulling the emergency break.

Millie thanks her for the ride and gets out of the car. Riley is already standing with the laundry bag in his hands. He follows Millie to the front porch and sets the bag beside the front door.

“See you later, Millie,” he says in his nasally voice. Millie stands, the crate dangling from her hand. She doesn’t like the way her name sounds in his mouth. She waves goodbye to Kathryn, checking her reflection in the rearview mirror once more.

“Bye,” Millie blurts to Riley, who walks toward the car without looking where he is going, his bottle blue eyes peeking out from his floppy hair, looking straight at her. Millie grabs the laundry bag off the porch and throws it on the floor once inside, pausing for a moment to clutch the crate with both hands and shudder. A stabbing pain, hot as

fire, in her chest at the thought of Riley so quiet and polite in front of his mother, at the thought of all the Peckner's surrounding the table at Henry's farewell dinner.

Henry is not leaving until tomorrow. Not this morning, not even today, but tomorrow. Millie feels something like nausea welling inside her. It fills her up to her throat before she realizes it is not nausea, but something else entirely. Something cracks inside her – in her mind, the image of rope snapping from too much weight. Millie lifts the crate and chucks it onto the floor with all her might, shattering it into little, pale pieces. Her mother emerges from the kitchen to stare at her blankly, stopping to refasten the strap to her apron with that small, rusty safety pin.

Millie slumps onto the kitchen floor out of habit. The nausea has not returned, not even with the scent of urine hovering in the air, wafting up from her father still dressed in his work clothes. The scent is strong. Even with the chicken fresh out of the oven, the distinctive odor of urine still clings to the air. Her father sits at the kitchen table reading the paper, his body encrusted in a thin veil of sawdust. The smell means the mill was processing hemlock that day. With each fresh cut on the bandsaw, the pungent particles flew up into the air and coated his skin, clothes and hair. Her father apologized when he entered the house for smelling like *dog piss*, but has yet to shower or change.

Her mother putters around the kitchen, walking back and forth between counter and pantry, stepping over Millie's legs, retrieving one item at a time as she always did, no matter how many times Millie pointed out how much easier it would be to grab all the things she needed at once. After all, she had the recipe with the list of ingredients right in front of her. But Millie is too tired to say anything. Her chest feels heavy, a dull ache

pulsing through her veins with each heartbeat. She can't stop thinking of Henry, picturing him around the dinner table with his family, not knowing that she knew. She wants to walk up to his house and break a window. Or perhaps just stand behind one until he notices her through the glass. What a silly idea, she thinks. How quickly the story would filter through the town. Crazy, lovesick Millie, making a fool of herself.

“What are we having for dinner?” her father asks, licking his thumb and turning another page of the newspaper.

“Chicken and potatoes,” her mother answers. She holds a thin knife in her wet hand and peels each potato in a single curl. An assortment of small boxes and tins litter the countertop beside the chicken in the pan, browned and speckled with spices. Millie can see the top of it from her seat, the cold hard cupboard against her back. Even the sight of the animal's slick skin under the harsh kitchen light does not make her nausea return.

“Alright,” her father grumbles. He doesn't like chicken. *It's got no flavor*, he would mumble under his breath.

Millie stares at her feet and thinks of not going to her appointment the next day. What would the point be if she isn't sick anymore? She examines the bottoms of her socks, worn thin at the ball of the foot and heel, the red fading into a dark pink over her skin. She thinks of having to take them off during the *examination*. Of having to sit there, naked in full daylight. She wraps her arms around her ribs in comfort.

“You look like you're about to fall asleep,” her mother announces. When Millie looks up, she sees her mother is staring directly at her, both hands hovering in the air, each holding a skinned potato.

“Just a little tired is all,” Millie answers. She thinks of just not showing up the next afternoon, of staying in bed all day and sleeping.

“Set the table, would you,” her mother says. Again, she is looking at Millie as she drops the potatoes in a pot of boiling water.

Millie rises from the floor and heads for the hutch. She hears her father fold the newspaper back up and drop it somewhere, most likely his lap. She can hear him smoothing the tablecloth in front of him. She opens the cabinet door and takes out a stack of three plates. When she heads for the table, she smiles weakly at her father, who sits with his hands at his sides, poking his red tongue through the gap in his front teeth.

“What you doin’ tomorrow?” her father asks.

Millie places plates in a triangle on the table and says, “Just the usual.”

Is she lying, she wonders? If she doesn’t go to the doctor, she will most likely run errands in town as usual. At least it felt *usual*, despite the fact she hadn’t run errands since her nausea began. And if it returns in the morning? If she wakes up feeling sick again, she will keep her appointment, she decides. But even if she wakes up feeling fine, how can she simply ignore a month of feeling sick. Surely something is wrong with her.

“Guess they’re havin’ problems paving the roads in town,” her father announces.

“Yeah,” Millie feigns interest.

“Concrete keeps sinking,” her father continues.

“I coulda told you that was gonna happen,” her mother chimes in from behind a curtain of steam rising from the boiling pot of potatoes.

“Mitchell had to close the General Store, I guess. They got it all blocked off in the front and I guess no one can figure to go in through the back, so he just closed up

shop for a few days.” Her father traces the rim of his plate with the thick pad of his index finger and squints his eyes trying to remember the article he has just finished reading.

Millie remembers going into the General Store the month before. Mitchell, an old, wiry man with a voice that always sounds like he desperately needs to clear his throat, was already grumbling about the roadwork. He took a minute to look out the window at a pair of large men closing off the sidewalk, *weeks in advance*, he grumbled, which was nothing more than a muddy strip of ground between the tire tracks and the front door of his store. Millie had to call his name several times before he stepped behind the cash register and rang up her purchases: laundry soap, cornmeal, flour, and oil. Was that all, she tries to remember. She has forgotten something, but what?

“They just keep laying more concrete, hoping it’ll eventually just stop sinking,” her father adds.

“Good luck,” her mother laughs. “Maybe when it hits the bay floor. It’s all fill down there. Don’t they know that?”

“It’ll hit rock, probably,” Millie says, without realizing she is speaking. They had learned about the building of Odanodan in sixth grade. How they kept laying rock and dirt into the Sound until they could build on top of it. She hears her mother say something, but doesn’t listen to the words. Her father grumbles in response, but Millie isn’t listening. What else had been on the counter? What else did Mitchell grab with a wrinkly hand and place into the canvas bag Millie always brought with her? Cotton balls? Toilet paper?

“Potatoes will be done soon. Go get some cream, will you?” Millie doesn’t have to look at her mother to know she is talking to her. Millie walks to the icebox on the

back porch, now framed by stacks of wood almost to the awning. Her chest feels tight, like someone has wrapped both arms around her and is squeezing her from behind. She thinks of screaming as loud as she can just to get a little release, but the thought embarrasses her. Her parents would think her crazy if they didn't already. Instead she picks up the bottle of cream and brings it inside where she watches her mother mash cream and butter into the potatoes in between dashes of salt. Millie's stomach grumbles. She sits down at the table, hoping her mother will not ask for any more help.

"Same thing happened when they built the Main Street bridge. 'Member?" her father has taken the plate of chicken from the counter and begun carving it at the table. He carves it slowly, thoughtfully, making sure he cuts down to the bone. Thick, steaming slices fall from the shiny blade.

"What happened?" her mother asks, still mashing potatoes.

"The beams kept sinking. They kept digging and digging," her father's face narrows in concentration.

Had it been sugar she bought when she was at the General Store? Her mother has not baked anything for a while, but she has not baked anything since Millie's last trip to the store, either. No, it couldn't have been sugar.

"Took 'em three months over schedule. Had to drive all the way around to get to the west side of town," her father says without ever looking up to see if anyone is paying attention.

"Tacked on twenty minutes to get to the Murphy's place to deliver laundry," her mother says. "Although, awful glad they stopped having me do their laundry. They never could pay for it."

Of course, Millie thinks. How could she have forgotten? It was a package of sanitary napkins she bought. Mitchell bagged them quickly; Millie thought she could detect a slight flush to his sallow cheeks. She had looked down to save him further embarrassment. She remembered coming home, unwrapping the pads from the brown paper packaging and putting them under the sink in the upstairs bathroom.

“Probably the same thing’ll happen with the street. It’ll be winter before we know it and they’ll still be working on it,” her father finally sits down, helping himself to a large piece of dark meat. Her mother walks over and plops a hot bowl of mashed potatoes on the table.

“Come to think of it, the Murphy’s still owe me money,” her mother tisks.

“At this rate we’ll never get the roads finished,” her father spoons potatoes onto his plate. “Where’s the gravy?” he asks, waving a fork in the air.

“Right her, right here,” her mother answers, already carrying the gravy boat over to her father. “Dish up,” her mother announces. Millie knows she is not talking to her, her father already sitting in front of a full plate. Millie reaches for the spoon in the mashed potatoes, waiting for her mother to serve herself before eating. They say a prayer, her mother’s claw-like fingers hard in her hand, her father’s rough and slightly shaking palm pressed against her own. Her father says the prayer low, quick, words melting into little more than a mumble. Her parents eat hungrily, silently. Millie stares at the pillow of potato innards, white as cotton against the dark dish. The General Store visit was weeks ago. She would need to go soon and buy more pads. But then she pictures the pads under the sink, lined up side by side in a solid brick. Only one is missing from the original package, wasted on the morning Millie awoke to a cramp

pulling from underneath her into her lower belly. And then the memory of unbuckling the belt seeped into her mind. She had anticipated blood, a small smudge indicating the start of her cycle. But there was no blood, just a dull ache in her womb and a starch white pad. The blood had never come. Millie shuts her eyes tight in the hopes of pinching the thought into nothing.

“You alright?” she hears her father’s voice ask. It seems to come from far away, and therefore, does not need an answer.

Millie lies in bed, her head turned toward the window overlooking the driveway. Her room is a thin strip running along the side of the house with windows surrounding it on three sides, which means she can see everything around the house, save the road side and the beginning of the driveway. The latticed windows climb the walls in narrow columns. Despite all her mother’s efforts to seal the windows with cloth, the cold still creeps in through the thin glass panes and the chipped-paint moldings, warped from years of damp and wind. The moon hangs low, straining behind thin clouds. Its weak light makes Millie’s room look wrinkled and cramped. Silhouetted corners of chairs and shelves jut up in the darkness as if in resistance to her looking about the room, as if hiding something behind them, something she isn’t meant to know is kept in her room.

Millie is tired, but can’t sleep. Her nerves are shot, from lack of sleep, from stress, she does not know. The muscles in her arms and legs are wound tight. But her chest feels weak, hollow, like if she exhales too forcefully it will collapse in on itself and she will be left crushed on the bed for her mother to find in the morning. The slightest noise makes her flinch and when she raises a hand to her face she can feel it trembling on

her warm cheek. The house creaks suddenly, *settling*, as her mother liked to call it.

Aren't you settled by now? Millie thinks of whispering to the walls.

Her mind wanders. Or is that really it? More like thoughts, images, rushing into her mind's eye before she can stop them, beg them to go away. They make her nerves pulse and her skin tingle. The first time in the car with Henry. The surprise of the hard center of his lap when she crawled on top of it. Henry's face without glasses, so naked. His eyes so alive, looking for her in the darkness. Why has she never noticed how warm he felt? Not the slick heat, not the burning of her thighs sliding back and forth on his. But the warmth, like her own cocoon of it beneath the sheets, soothing her asleep as a child. It is perhaps not real after all. This ache of Henry lying, Henry leaving, nothing more than the moment you wake up angry after a bad dream. This moment, but prolonged, burrowed deeper underneath the skin. It is a dream. She never wrapped her legs around his hips and bit his chest, savoring the soft and salty skin on her tongue as he rubbed and breathed heavily above her, arms shaking, not because he wasn't strong enough to hold himself up – although he was thin enough to make one think so – but because that is what Millie made Henry do: shake. What good is someone, Millie wonders, if she can't make you shake? Tickled, ecstatic, nervous. If she can't move him to feel any of these, why would he keep her? But he hasn't kept her, has he? Kept, like some stray dog wandering onto the field, children asking, "Can we keep it?" as the parents stare at its mangy fur and protruding ribs, clucking in disapproval. Millie thinks of trying to call him at school, but can't remember if they have ever spoken on the phone. She wouldn't even be able to recognize his voice, she doesn't think. Writing letters, telling each other how much they couldn't wait to see each other at Christmas. She

wouldn't be able to decipher his handwriting from any other's. It bothers her, really, how little she knows him. And then the summer would come and they would resume the late nights in the backseat of Henry's father's Cadillac. Millie both wants this and doesn't want this. Wants Henry, yes, perhaps only because he is gone now, but it is more than that, she is sure. She doesn't want to give up kissing him, touching him, him doing the same to her. Even if it isn't love, these are the gestures of love and so feel at least a little like loving and being loved. And that is what Millie wants, after all. *How simple*, she thinks. *Where was I when it felt like loving? What was I thinking of when I was wrapped around him like a child?*

The house settles once more. The creaking noise makes Millie's back and limbs tense up. She holds her breath for a moment, waiting for the tension to leave her. In the silence, she hears another noise, fainter, concentrated. It is a little tap, then a few seconds of silence, followed by another little tap. Tap, tap. It sounds like a fingertip on glass. Tap. Someone trying to get your attention through the window. Tap. A pebble, maybe, on her window. Millie sits up, her body rising out of bed slowly, afraid, not of what she will find, but of what, in the secret hollow of her chest, she knows she will not find. Tap. As she steps around the bed, she tries to picture Henry peering up at her from the gravel driveway. She tries to imagine the smudges on the window from small, muddy rocks he has found and thrown to get her attention. Tap. Her heart, she is sure, is in her ears, drowning out the noise she so carefully follows. She puts her hands on the window ledge and slowly leans her forehead onto the cool glass. Tap. Fainter now. Her heart shaking, making her whole body expand with each pulse. The driveway is empty, gravel still shiny from the day's previous rain, softly illuminated by the lone porch light below

the awning underneath Millie's window. Empty. There is no face staring up at her in desperation. No Henry begging and pleading for her to come down. *Of course*, she thinks. *How silly of me.*

Millie climbs back into bed and pulls the covers up to her chin. She closes her eyes so tight, she imagines her face scrunched up into a little pale ball. The tapping noise grows fainter, familiar. It does not test her nerves as it had, her nerves now replaced by a shallow stinging sensation that hums under her skin. She thinks if she keeps her eyes closed, sleep will somehow creep up on her and take her away. She listens closely. Tap. Tap. So faint now she can barely hear it. Tap. Does not know if she is truly hearing it or if she only thinks she hears it.

When Millie awakes, she knows immediately that the tapping from the night before had been the flies. She pictures them hovering around the porch light beneath her window, desperate for warmth in the cold. Their compact, black bodies, fast and skittish as they circle each other in the air. Wings beating so quickly you can't see them as the flies pull away from the light only to throw themselves once again against the bare bulb. It is a noise that kept her up every so often as a child in the summer nights. A noise she knows well but hasn't noticed in her discomfort of the past month, lying in bed, waiting until the other side of her pillow has cooled so she can flip it over and bury her hot face in it. Tap. Tap.

Of course, she thinks. *How silly of me.*

Chapter 17

Sima runs through the rain to the truck idling in the driveway. Her husband already behind the driver's seat, she shuts the door quickly as he shifts the engine into first gear. They are late; although, Sima is sure it matters very little since it isn't exactly a formal doctor's office. Dr. Young will be waiting in the Bents' pub, probably unaware of the time or even grateful that his next appointment is late, seeing as how his current client won't stop asking questions. Yes, only twenty minutes late. Nothing to worry about. Sima hasn't been able to find her heavy raincoat, buried in the back of the closet along with her hat and gloves. She had been sealing up windowsills downstairs, having finished all the upstairs windows the day before, and lost track of time. The appointment had been made casually, over the Spar Pub's phone. The doctor's voice was slurred and muffled by a loud crowd in the background. Emmitt, to her surprise, offered to give her a ride to the appointment. He came home unexpectedly, having forgotten his lunch, and was going to the hardware store on Main Street for a machine that needed repairing at the mill. He said he didn't mind taking her, even waiting if necessary. The gesture had made Sima giddy. She felt her heart beat strongly in her chest and she ran to her husband warming up the truck for her. Excitement, she thinks. Something Sima hasn't felt in years.

The doctor will be perfect for Millie, she knows. She only hopes they would both realize it, too. She feels transparent, as though the doctor will be able to tell what she is thinking if she even mutters Millie's name. She pushes the thought away, nerves building in her stomach. The truck lurches and rattles down the driveway. Emmitt looks

out the side windows as he turns onto the road. Sima notices he smells faintly like a Christmas tree.

“Fir at the mill today?” she asks. She crosses her legs at the ankles and jostles her foot.

“Yup,” Emmitt replies. “I’ll take fir over hemlock any day.”

“Sure makes laundry a little more pleasant.” Sima hates the days they process hemlock at the mill. Its acrid scent makes her gag when she launders his clothes. Fir is a sweet, spicy smell that lifts her mood. She pulls her gloves off by the fingers and examines her hands, which are shaking slightly.

“Nervous or something?” Emmitt shifts the truck into third, the gear scraping as he does. The sound of metal against metal makes Sima shudder.

“A little, I guess,” she replies without thinking. She has not felt excited for so long, she can’t say with certainty that what she feels now truly is. The panic of the night before, laying awake, waiting through the terror of her body wanting to leave its skin. She rubbed her throbbing hands as a distraction and finally drifted off to a dreamless sleep a few hours before sunrise. She awoke feeling well rested, senses sharp with anticipation for her appointment with the doctor.

Her hands, when held out in front of her, look like an old woman’s. The fingers are swollen and red at all three knuckles and curved downward like talons. They are beginning to slant away from her thumb, which she can hardly bend any longer. Veins wind through the bones on the back of her hands down to her wrists, which are meatless and sharp looking. Sima looks over at Emmitt, at his freckled face. He is not such an old man, she thinks. The deep creases on his forehead are barely noticeable. His teeth are

childlike, with their wide gap in the front, and still white. She rarely looks in the mirror, but knows that her eyes are framed by wrinkly skin and her teeth are stained from coffee, the taste of it still lingering in her mouth from her morning cup. *I am an old woman*, she thinks.

Gravel pings against the undercarriage of the truck as they make their way to town. Sima leans her forehead on the window and listens to the hushing noise the tires make in the wet. She wants to tell Emmitt her hunch about Millie and the doctor, but fears her husband will discourage her from doing anything to test it. She listens to the hushing noise outside her window, submitting to it, keeping quiet, despite feeling like she is going to burst. *Like a dog*, she thinks, *unable to stop itself from barking once it hears another bark*.

She had said nothing to Millie the whole morning in fear she would say something that gave her away. *I've heard the doctor is handsome. He's not married, Millie. Did you know that?* Oh, how Millie would have rolled her eyes at her. Or traipsed upstairs without a word. Or worse, promised her mother not to say anything, which she, of course, would do and keep. *Promise?* Like she did so many times as a child. *Promise me you and daddy won't die? I promise*, she had told her daughter. All those nights thinking, *what a lie!* What else could she have said? *Promise me daddy won't ever leave? Promise me you won't ever leave? Promise, Mom?* Sima never knew a child could worry so much, could think so much of the future. Her boys had been so present in the here and now, she could barely get them to bathe, because hadn't they *just* bathed. *No*, Sima had to explain. *That was yesterday*. A whole day had gone by and they hadn't noticed. It was all one continuous day for them. Tomorrow was some

abstract concept that didn't matter because it wasn't *today*. And there was Millie worried about not only tomorrow, but the next day, the next year, forever. All those promises she made to soothe her daughter. How long ago that seems to Sima now, an arthritic woman, a *sterile* woman. *I am old*.

Emmitt has not aged as much as her, she thinks. She looks at him in his blue flannel shirt, his big, dirt-encrusted hands gripping the wheel. His arms are long, sinewy, but strong, Sima knows, for they hold her so tight at night that they squeeze all the air out of her lungs. She looks at his hair, still red, peppered with white, wondering if it will one day turn pink. His jaw is strong and cleanly shaven. His back curves towards his lap, but it is more like a teenager slouching than an old man hunching over. Suddenly, it strikes Sima how handsome her husband is. She is overwhelmed by the urge to reach out and touch him. Sima is not the *touching kind*, as she had put it when first married to Emmitt, at least, not outside of the house. There has always been some unspoken rule in her head. A hand in his for a moment at dinner, an exchange of smiles. Everything else is permitted only in the bedroom. Emmitt, who is indeed the *touching kind*, has always been patient with Sima when she cringes at his hand reaching for hers in public. She does not know how he would react if, after all these years, it was her hand, instead, reaching for his out in broad daylight surrounded by windows. Such affection might startle him and he would crash the car. She has to keep so much from him, she thinks.

"I'm sure he'll give you some medicine. Maybe some exercises to do." Emmitt smiles with his lips touching.

Sima nods.

“Look pretty in that coat, Sima,” Emmitt smiles again, always smiling, like Millie, this time exposing his gapped teeth. Sima wants to kiss him square in the mouth, but holds the urge in, thinking it will pass.

“Real pretty.”

Promise? she thinks. Her cheeks sting with blood.

He has surely mistaken her excitement for nervousness, not having been to the doctor for herself since before the children were born. She can't tell him how happy it has made her to find a proper match for Millie, but it is still too early to know for sure. She can't tell him how light she felt running out to the truck, her husband waiting for her, warming the cab for her poor, arthritic hands. How stupid words would seem, especially these words of girlish glee, in the cab of his truck on a Monday morning. Not the time or place. They pass the rest of the ride in silence.

When they pull up to the side street closest to the Spar Pub that is not blocked off for construction, they both pause for a moment and stare out of the windshield. The wiper blades are too heavily coated in pine nettles to function properly, each swipe smearing rainwater across the glass in a blurry streak.

“I'll wait for you if I get done before you,” Emmitt says, turning to her.

Sima opens the door and dangles a rubber boot over the muddy sidewalk.

“Love you,” Emmitt calls out. But she has already closed the door behind her.

Promise? she thinks as she walks through the rain to the bar's entrance.

Emmitt Mulch parks the truck in front of the hardware store. He stops quickly, muddy water splashing up from the puddle underneath the front tires and onto the

windshield, already littered with leaves and twigs. The road is soggy and uneven. Emmitt has to reach out and grip a lamppost so he won't lose his balance on the slippery earth. The heavy rain reminds him he has forgotten his hat at the mill and makes him blink profusely. It is still morning but he is already tired. He got to the mill early to make sure the band saw was working properly or if he needed to gumm it, bench it, or fit it. He was the only one who knew how. The bandsaw workers would wait outside his small workroom in the center of the mill, laughing and smoking, until he was finished grinding, swaging, fixing cracks or welding broken teeth. If he took too long, they would heckle him through the window or stand in the open door, sighing heavily out of boredom.

When he showed up this morning to the mill, the flattened grass slick with frost beneath his feet on his walk from the truck to the back door, he knew something would be wrong with the band saw. Mondays, she – it was always female in his mind, with the high-pitched screaming, the gentle touch she required – was temperamental. Machines grew bitter and spiteful with disuse. Cold and stiff, they grumbled and barked when finally turned on and had to be turned off so their wounds could be dressed. Sundays, the mill was closed. One whole day of neglect and she was an unhappy machine. Emmitt blew the sawdust out of her valves, sealed her gaskets that were loose from overheating the week before, and filled her up with fifty gallons of gasoline, only to find that her piston was bent and she was missing several saw teeth. Emmitt fingers the list of parts he needs in his jacket pocket as he walks into the hardware store. Bells dangling from the door handle clang behind him. It reminds him of the strings of shells and beach glass hanging from Solie's bedroom door.

Solie wasn't home on Saturday. After his sons and Millie left for the bar, he made up some excuse about the mill and left Sima at home to go see Solie. It ate at his conscience as he drove, but he pushed the guilt deep down inside him; let it get swallowed by the desperation he felt welling in his throat. He has not seen Solie in weeks. Every time he stopped to think that it was probably for the best, that it was high time he stopped this affair - with a woman from the Res, no less - there was something holding him back. He loved her when he wasn't with her. With her there, telling him she loved him in return, it felt empty. He would leave feeling hollow, only to think of her fondly in the middle of the day at the mill. Loading logs onto the table, listening to the shrill grinding of the saw blade, watching the belt of teeth burying itself in the grain, his tired eyes stared through his sawdust-caked goggles and he wondered how things would have been different if he never met Sima. Perhaps if he had married Solie instead. Then, the realization that his whole life as he knows it would be gone. He would have half-breed children, disowned by his parents and brothers. For a moment, he could convince himself that it didn't matter, that he would have gotten over it. How rarely he spoke to any of his family anyway. They hadn't liked Sima in the beginning. *Yugoslavia?* His father pronounced it slowly. *Yu-go-slav-ya. A fisherman's daughter? Emmitt, whatever happened to that nice blond girl you dated in high school? The Norwegian one,* his father said, scratching his red beard and shaking his head.

Emmitt told himself that it could have just as easily been *Squaxin Indian* he said instead of *Yugoslavian*. But he knew it was a lie. An Indian wife. He couldn't bring himself to think the words. He could only picture Solie, a young Solie, in a wedding dress. They would have lived on the Res, Emmitt supposed, exchanging awkward hellos

with neighbors, getting in fights with Solie about her family's drinking, laughing when others did because he didn't get the Indian joke. If he loved Solie, it wouldn't matter. They could get through. But it doesn't matter now. He has always kept her an arm's width away. Now she is gone, he is sure.

Saturday evening, Emmitt could see from his truck that her kitchen light was on. He scraped his boot soles on the bottom porch step and set an overturned paper bag, filled with droopy carrot stems and browning celery, right side up. The scraps were for the bunnies Solie liked to feed at her neighbor's house through the tall, elaborate fence designed to keep coyotes out more than to keep the rabbits in. His fist was cold and heavy as it knocked against the front door. After a few minutes of waiting, he opened the front door – the lock broken long ago – and stepped into her living room. The familiar hand woven blanket draped across the arm of the sofa. A cold cup of coffee sat on the corner of the kitchen table. In the bedroom, a pair of jeans had been strewn haphazardly across the foot of the bed, covers pushed to one side. A lone sock lay on the floor next to a scarf. It was as though she left suddenly, knowing he was coming. How she knew, he could never tell, but she hadn't been home when he came over since the middle of summer. He remembers the last time he saw her so vividly. Her opening the door, wearing a blue sundress and gray sweater with two buttons missing. She was barefoot, her brown sandals beside the door. Her voice, usually booming and filled with laughter, was airy and dry, as if she had just returned from a long walk in the desert. *I don't think you and me is a good idea, Emmitt.* She looked right at him, into his eyes. He stared at the top of her head – solid black interrupted by a line of white scalp at the part.

When was it ever? He sounded nervous, felt his throat gasping for air.

It's not fair to either one of us, she said before closing the door, the too long arm of her sweater the last thing he saw before the crack in the door narrowed into nothing.

She had said this kind of thing before. Even cried while saying it, gotten mad, screamed at him so loud the walls of her small living room seemed to shake. This time didn't feel any different, hadn't begun to feel any different until Saturday. She had never gone so long without opening the door, at least letting him come in for a cup of coffee. Maybe she really means it this time. The thought makes Emmitt's skin cold beneath his shirt.

Almost thirteen years with two women and Emmitt has never been lonelier. Solie does not want him anymore. His wife is happy, as far as he can tell, and it has nothing to do with him. In fact, she is happy in spite of him. Over the years, he has kept so much love from Sima, it has built up inside him, pressing firmly on the perimeters of his heart. He can only release a little at night, before falling asleep, with a caress from behind, a kiss, an *I love you*. The *I love you's* throughout the day canceled out by the lack of reciprocation. When they make love, it is Emmitt, alone, Sima's mind somewhere else, and him, unable to ever bring her back. Emmitt alone on top of her, underneath her, closing his eyes, pretending it is Solie he is inside of and thinking of Sima, which normally brought him such satisfaction in Solie's small bedroom. He can never be *with* Sima. Always a distance sprawling between them like spilt water on a flat surface, amplified by moments when they should feel closest. Even when Sima cries out in pleasure, her body shaking against his, it is always to herself, to the room, and has nothing to do with Emmitt. Afterward, the striations in her neck pulsing under a thin layer of sweat, she turns on her side, away from him, and falls asleep.

In aisle two of the Main Street Hardware store, Emmitt can't find the bit he needs for his drill. He searches the shelves, picking up calk and a saw file, before heading to the back, looking for Buck. Buck will tell him that the drill bit he wants will be coming in soon. Emmitt already knows their shipments come on Wednesday and he supposes he could wait that long to sharpen the alternate blade at the mill. Emmitt reaches the back counter and is greeted by a kid with cheeks purple with acne, who he recognizes as one of the shelf stockers. The kid tells him Buck is out until the afternoon. Emmitt writes down the exact bit he needs and places the items he cradles in the crook of his arm onto the counter. As the boy rings him up, Emmitt can't help but feel pity for the poor child, his face so bumpy it looks like it hurts to touch it. The boy bags his things, hands them to him with soft, thin fingers. Emmitt nods, manages a smile, before turning to leave.

As he walks down the main aisle on his way to the door, he notices a figure standing outside the window, its back facing the glass. It takes him a moment to realize it is Sima, waiting for him. She comes into clearer focus with each step he takes. She is staring out into the street, daydreaming, most likely. Her arms dangle at her sides. Her hair, usually pulled back, is down and lies across her thin shoulders. Emmitt twists the doorknob, the bells jangling against the doorframe. The noise makes Sima turn, her cheeks red with cold. The coat she wears, a dark blue, draws attention to the rim of her irises, the same blue surrounding an amber that seems to burn Emmitt when he looks at her.

"Look pretty in that coat," Emmitt says. She smiles demurely, hiding it behind an open mouth ready to speak.

“Already said that,” she says. Now the smile, uncontainable, erupts across her face. Her teeth, slightly crooked, remind Emmitt of children’s teeth when they first come in – the strong and new, pale yellow, too big to fit in such a tiny mouth. He can’t remember the last time he made her smile like that.

“Doctor’s appointment went well, I take it,” Emmitt says.

Sima nods, holding up a paper bag similar to the one Emmitt holds in his hand. She holds her eyes to his, the smile still lingering on her lips. They stand still outside the hardware store, Emmitt staring at his wife like she is someone he hasn’t seen for a very long time and isn’t sure if it is really the same person or if his mind is playing tricks on him. Without thinking, without hesitating, Emmitt wraps his hand around the back of Sima’s head and pulls her face into his. Such a hard kiss, almost painful. He is sure she will push him away, waits for her hand against his chest in protest, for her neck to strain back and her cheek to turn. But she does not. To his surprise, instead of wriggling away from him, making it seem playful in case someone is watching, he feels her small, hard hands wrap around the back of his neck. Feels her lips pressing back against his, her tongue separating his teeth. He wants to wrap his arms around her waist and pick her up, hold her against his chest, but hesitates, fearful that, at any moment, she will change her mind about this public display of affection. So he holds still, matching her kisses, touching her face as delicately as she touches him. *There she is*, he thinks.

Then as quickly as it had begun, Sima pulls away, just barely, which Emmitt takes as a sign for them to stop. It doesn’t occur to him until moments later that perhaps she was simply repositioning her face, coming up for a moment of air. Too late. They are walking now, several feet between them. Emmitt opens Sima’s door for her. She hops

up onto the passenger seat, her face flushed, her lips pursed, but smiling underneath. As they drive home, Emmitt says nothing, fearful he will break what they shared in that moment. He does not want to test it, reach for her hand to have her pull it away, put a palm on her thigh only to have her let it fall by crossing her legs. She is still there, with him, in the car. He can feel her and he wants to savor it, because he knows he may never feel it again.

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