

2019

# The Litmus Test of Happiness

Eric Lin Hollen

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The Litmus Test of Happiness

*Eric Hollen*

THE LITMUS TEST OF HAPPINESS

By

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Bachelor of Arts, Susquehanna University, Selinsgrove, PA, 2016

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
Fiction

The University of Montana  
Missoula, MT

May 2018

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## A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

The night before Clay's big party my sister called to say she would pick me up in the morning to visit our mom at the hospital where, for the past month, she had lay dying in the terminal ward and where I had refused to visit. Though I probably should have headed to bed early for a good night's sleep, I texted some of the guys instead, picked up a 30 rack of Miller Lite, and drove down to Brandon's. He and Nate and a few girls were gathered around the fire. The plan was to have a few beers so we could party hard the next night at Clayp's, but a bottle of Jägermeister was broken out and passed around the fire.

The glowing embers. The girls in their swimsuits. The light of the moon reflecting in the pool. Brandon and Nate paired off with two of the girls, and I lay in the gazebo with the third. She asked if I would play a game with her. She lit a cigarette and connected our hands and dropped the cigarette between our flesh; the last one to pull away would be the winner.

"What happened to your hands?" my sister said the next morning in my kitchen. She rummaged through the cabinets. "You don't have anything to make coffee with, do you?"

"I don't drink coffee."

“Well, I’ll have John pick me up something on the way up.”

John was my sister’s husband. The two of them had been married about a year. He’d played football for Tyrone and was a part of their State Championship run that knocked off my former school in the playoffs. I looked outside and saw him sitting in the driver’s seat of the rust-splotched Firebird, looking at his phone.

She seemed to know what I was thinking. “Listen. I don’t want any trouble on the trip.”

I changed my clothes and brushed my teeth before I headed outside to join them in the car. My sister’s husband was sitting in the driver’s seat sporting a black leather jacket and shades. He looked like the disgruntled kids that shot up schools. “How’s it going?” he said, as I climbed into the backseat.

“Alright. You?”

He flushed a white smile. “Can’t complain.”

It was a twenty-minute drive to Altoona to the hospital where my mom was staying. Both my sister and her husband were born-again Christians. For him, it had been the sauce, but for my sister, drugs. She’d done a lot of coke and heroin when she was in high school. There’s still a lot of stories about them. I expected my sister and her husband to burst into songs about Jesus and David or offer up prayers on the drive up, but they listened to the radio. I texted my friends and told them the news. We passed Caraciollo’s garage where our mom used to take us to turn in empty beer and soda cans and flirt with the grease monkey. Beyond that lay Bickles Surplus, where she used to buy cereal because the boxes were dented up.

“The doctors are giving her painkillers,” my sister said, draping her arms over the headrest. “She may seem a little loopy.”

“Like she wasn’t before.”

She turned her back. “I don’t expect you to understand this, but she is your only mother.”

“I used to hate my mother, too,” my sister’s husband offered. “If I didn’t have any pictures, I wouldn’t remember her face.”

If you mentioned your dying mother, my sister’s husband would bring up his. Really. He and my sister were perfect for each other.

“There’s something else you don’t know,” my sister said, as her husband pulled to a stop at a red light he could have easily breezed through. “The doctors believe it’s going to happen sometime soon.”

Did they say when?” I said. “I had plans to hang out with friends tonight.” I tried to explain to her Clayp’s party, how it was all my friends and I talked about that summer, but she interrupted.

“I don’t think you understand,” she said.

We passed a row of ramshackle houses, the Beer Shack, whose advertised Miller and Bud Light specials beat the deals from the ones back home.

“Pull over,” I said. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

I threw up in a bush by the fence in somebody’s backyard. When I climbed back into the car, my sister’s husband handed me Gatorade and ibuprofen. “We thought you might have had a late night last night,” he said.

Altoona Hospital was just beyond the railroad tracks, near the Wendy’s and the Building II, charred from a fire the summer before and sprouting with plants all through the parking lot like the old apocalypse movies my mother used to watch. “You remember how we used to take karate tournaments here?” my sister said. “Our mother would take us to every lesson.”



“When she was sober enough to drive,” I said. “And also, she only took us because she wanted to flirt with our sensei.”

“That’s not true,” my sister said.

My sister’s husband turned and frowned. Just ease up a little, his face seemed to say. I sat back in my seat, and pulled out my phone to play Candy Crush.

At the hospital, we parked in the lot and headed into the lobby. I stood next to my sister and her husband as they checked us in, practicing my facial expressions in the mirror. I expected the nurse to raise her eyebrows at the mention of “son.” She gave us clearance badges. We took an elevator to the top floor where, my sister explained, all the long term sick people were.

The hallway was flushed with light on both sides. My sister stopped in front of a door. “I’m warning you,” she said. “She doesn’t look good.”

How bad could it be? When I stepped into the room, I couldn’t breathe. She lay on the bed with her head tilted upwards, her head polished like alabaster. The skin beneath her eyes a dark bruised purple. Bedsores covered her feet. The nurse adjusted my mother so that she appeared more comfortable. She touched my mother’s arm. “Janine? Your children are here to visit.”

My mother opened her eyes. “Jordan,” she said with a smile. She coughed; the nurse held out a cup for my mother to spit into.

My sister took her hand. “Mom, it’s me,” she said. “Clarice.”

“Clarice,” my mom repeated. There was a hush, followed by the steady beep of the monitor. Nobody moved. After a few moments, the nurse motioned for us to follow her into the hall, where she told us the doctor had increased her morphine.

“Oh, Christ,” Clarice said. She gripped the cross around her neck. Maybe she really did believe.

Back inside my mother’s room, I sat in the corner flipping through a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition. I caught my sister’s husband looking. His face burnt red as he turned away.

An hour had passed when my sister stood up. “I’ll go to the house and get some stuff in case we need to stay over,” she said.

“I can do that,” her husband said.

“No, just watch over my brother, please. Make sure he doesn’t try to leave.”

Her husband put his hand awkwardly on my shoulder. “I’m really sorry, Jordan,” he said, after she left.

I shrugged. “There’s nothing to be sorry about.”

He stood up and made an excuse to use the bathroom. I waited until his footsteps echoed far up the hall before I stood up and put my hand on the mattress, a few inches away from where my mother’s hand rested.

After lunch, I borrowed a phone charger from a pretty nurse who looked at me with pity when I explained my mother was dying. I told her about how it had been happening over a month, and it was finally going to happen tonight. The nurse’s name was called over the PA system. She gave me one last look, handed me the phone charger, before she sped away.

When the phone was charged I called Nate outside in the hallway. “I’m at the hospital,” I said. “My sister dragged me to visit.”

“I guess we won’t be seeing you tonight?”

“I’ll try, but my sister’s pretty worked up. She might not let me come.”

“Well, there’ll be a round of drinks waiting for you if you can make it.”

When I turned to the room, my mother was still asleep. Her face looked like a half-filled water balloon.

“I don’t see what use it is standing around,” I said. “There’s nothing any of us can do about it.”

My sister’s husband nodded awake. He wiped the lenses of his glasses “I know you’re dealing with this in your own way, but there’s other people that, believe it or not, care about your mother,” he said. “So if you want to mope, fine. But get it all out of your system before your sister comes back.”

I left and went out into the hallway. Important looking doctors strode by and people on crutches and wheelchairs hobbled past. Nurses gathered around a circulation desk, and in some rooms, families were gathered around the beds of sick ones.

I left and went out into the hallway. Important looking doctors strode by. People on crutches and wheelchairs passed by. Nurses gathered around a circulation desk, and in some rooms, families were gathered around the beds of sick ones. A priest read from a Bible. Some of the rooms were filled with stuffed animals, balloons, and flowers. Other rooms, like my mother’s, were empty.

The cafeteria was large and grey, filled with blue light filtering through the windows, some of the tables crowded with staff or with visitors or patients. Everyone had the same tired, listless expression on their faces. Some of the young kids would laugh or race around, but the adults were hunched, poking at their food or observing some general agreement of silence.

The displayed cafeteria food looked like the plastic food my sister used to serve up in her Easy Bake oven. She used to make me play the dishwasher or the waiter that was doing a piss

poor job and scaring the customers away, while she got to bed the head chef, the hostess, the restaurant owner.

I headed across the street towards the Wendy's, where I whored myself on the dollar menu.

When I returned back to the room, my sister's husband was in the hallway. "I thought you'd left," he said. "Your sister would have killed me."

"I'm eighteen," I said. "I can do what I want."

He led me a few steps away from a passing nurse. "About earlier," he said. "I know it's awkward, but if you never need to talk."

"I appreciate it," I said. He gave me a look. "No, really. I do."

He rested a hand on my shoulder. "If you pull through this, I'll try and convince your sister to let you go out with your friends. I heard you in the hall," he said, when I gave him a look. "But don't worry. Your mother was asleep. I'm sure she didn't hear a thing."

Back inside the room, I checked the time on my phone. It was an hour before the party. The sun was setting over the rusting railcars in the train yard. Across the street was a museum my mom had once taken my sisters and me to. I still had the bright red train she'd bought me from the gift shop sitting on my windowsill at home, most of the paint peeled off and cracking.

My sister had been gone a long time, a couple of hours, when she walked into the room. "All this time mom's been asking for you to visit," she said. "Would it have killed you, to be just a little less cruel?"

Her husband cleared his throat, but my sister waved her hand. “Don’t bother. I’m done with him. He’s not worth my time.” She slumped on her chair, and her husband and I exchanged looks.

I must have dozed off in my seat, because my sister’s husband was jerking me awake. “It’s happening,” he said, and glanced over at my mother.

My mother was crying. The nurse gave her an extra dose of morphine but she continued to heave. I almost stood up and blurted to make it stop, when my mom seemed to relax, and ease into the bed.

My sister stood up and gripped her hand.

“She’s gone,” my sister said.

I stood there.

My mother had had a hard life.

You could say it was a mercy.

My sister’s husband took care of the arrangements while I waited outside with my sister in the hall. She was looking into the glass window of a snack machine, punching in a few numbers. I scrounged my pockets for quarters, but when I held them out she looked at me as if she didn’t know what they were for.

On the drive home my sister sat with her face smeared against the window. The windshield wipers thumped back and forth, though it wasn’t raining, and I pointed this to my sister’s husband, who flipped them off.

He drove up the driveway where my sister’s truck was parked. We went inside into the kitchen to cook something to eat, while my sister sat on the sofa and turned on the TV. On the

shelves and tables were porcelain figures of Jesus, Mary, and the shepherds. A Bible took a prominent place in the center of the coffee table. I flipped through it while my sister went to take a shower.

“You don’t have to be here if you don’t want to,” my sister said from the sofa, when she returned.

She wouldn’t look at me. I mulled over the right words. “It’s not that I don’t want to,” I said.

“It’s okay,” she said. “No, really. I’m sorry about earlier. I know it’s hard for you, too. You can go with your friends, if that’s where you’d rather be.”

I felt like a once-full room cleared of all its furniture and decorations, the gray light from the window shining on the dust particles in the air.

My sister’s husband called her from the kitchen. My sister’s husband was saying I should go to the party, and my sister was saying it would be better for me to stay. My sister’s husband knew a thing or two about friends, getting drunk and partying, how that could be a whole other family as well. In the end, my sister gave in. She drew me into a surprise hug. “John says you can use his car,” she said. “Just don’t stay out too late, and don’t overdo it on the drinking tonight. Alright?”

I made to leave, but she drew me in tighter.

After a moment’s hesitancy, I held her back.

Free at last.

I sunk low in the seat of the Firebird. The car slunk low to the road, like a prowling hyena. The wind whistled through the windows, and I hit the pedal and sped up on the highway.

I drove for some time through miles of backcountry and farmland that covered Sinking Valley. I wasn't sure where I was going. I took a right and started up the dirt road by the old Sinking Valley Fairgrounds; my car's tires bumped in the potholes. I switched the music from Chance the Rapper to sad Drake, before turning it off completely.

On both sides were sinkholes and valleys. It was foggy, the mist settling into the valley like a lake, the hills rising around it like islands.

I drove back down the mountain to Clayp's house. I recognized some of the cars parked all along the road leading to his house. The lights glowed brightly on the hill. Even at the base of the hill I could hear the music and crowd milling outside on the front lawn. I parked the car, when I saw Brandon and Nate playing pong outside.

"There you are," Nate said, when I joined them at the table. He took a half-finished beer from the table and handed it to me. When he wasn't looking I poured the rest onto the lawn.

"I'm sorry to hear about your mom," Brandon said. "Celeb shot?" he said, holding out a pong ball, but I shook my head.

"There's more beer inside."

I went over to the keg where a blonde girl was doing a keg stand with guys holding her up. A girl sat across from me, the light of the fire in her eyes.

"You look like the broccoli from Vegetails with the fro," she said.

I climbed back into the car, sneaking past Brandon and Nate and the guys. I drove back to my house, but when I got there, I kept driving and went to my sister's. Up above, through the dark trees shone a nest of stars. I breathed in the deep of the night freeze, imagining what my sister would say when she opened the door.

My sister's husband came out. He rummaged around in his pockets and produced a pack of cigarettes. "Don't tell your sister," he said, and winked.

I handed him a lighter after he patted himself down for one. "You mind if I bum one of those?" I said.

He thumbed forward a cigarette from the pack.

"Boy, what a day," he said. "Another pause. "We're not supposed to smoke these," he said, taking another puff. "My mom died from smoking. Lung cancer."

I nodded. A family of deer emerged from the trees and made their way towards the garden.

"She talks a lot about you," he said.

"Mostly bad things, right?" I said, half-joking.

He shrugged. "She's just worried," he said. "She's been there before. She doesn't want you to make the same mistakes she did."

"Is that what happened to you?"

"I don't think people give her enough credit. She's a good person, your sister."

We sat there smoking cigarettes. In the woods the family of deer nipped at my sister's garden. I expected him to scare the deer away, but he squashed the cigarette and turned towards the door.

"There's a couch in the living room that's been prepared for you," he said. I must have looked surprised, because he continued. "Your sister had a good idea you would come back. She laid out pillows and an extra blanket, in case you get cold."

He stood up, and returned back inside, but I sat there watching the soft glow of sunrise begin to make its way between the trees. The deer had bounded off somewhere. I imagined miles



away my friends sleeping. They had their lives, and maybe now I had mine. I grounded out my cigarette, and headed inside to try and get a good night's sleep.

## THE LITMUS TEST OF HAPPINESS

First it was my mother who died 24 hours after I was born. Then it was my father, of meningitis. Then it was grandma, arguably the least tragic out of all my family's demises. I wasn't sure why, but it seemed the people I allowed myself to grow closest to and, by extension, to love, began to disappear from my life. I couldn't believe in anything as archaic as heaven, but I also could not believe that they had disappeared. The deaths seemed senseless, even cruel, and if there were a creator, I might have shot him in the heart.

Gradually I learned to ascertain a certain pattern. Those who came into contact with me died.

I was a cold and aloof boy. On the playground I kept away from all the other kids who called me Scotty though my name was Charles III. My teachers praised me as intelligent but often said I wasn't entirely "there." By seventeen, I had read the Harvard Classics, as well as all of Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Plato, Aristotle, Freud. Universities like Harvard and Princeton were offering me scholarships, though I declined, preferring the company of my books at the

Theodore Roosevelt Library where I could bury myself in a cubby where the light from the giant dome glass ceiling could not reach.

This might have continued for many years, if a new librarian had not been hired the summer I turned eighteen.

Her name was Emily. She worked the circulation desk after the old librarian either quit or died. She wore giant horn-rimmed glasses and carried a purple leather satchel that looked as if it could be concealing a bowling ball. When there were no patrons she would read with her hand pressed against her cheek, a cow-glazed look in her eye.

Heloise and Abelard. Dante and Beatrice. Tristan and Iseult. I had read enough to be able to successfully categorize my feelings towards her as a kind of aesthetic interest in her form; in the strand of blonde hair that came untucked from behind her ear, in the sleek polish of whatever hair products she used in the library's glowering lights, in the little rings and trinkets she wore around her fingers, the treasures a crow might holster up in its nest. It wasn't love so much as a chemical imbalance in my brain. Because of this, I'm afraid I treated her rather contemptuously at first. I ignored her while she checked out the books, the only sound the electronic beeping as she scanned each barcode and the snap of her bubble game.

About two weeks after she first started working there, while checking out a book I noticed she was not wearing her glasses. "You have really pretty eyes," I said, lost in the well of their blueness.

I expected her to return the compliment, maybe with something she liked about me, but she handed me back my book. "The book will be due by the end of the month," she said, "and then you'll be fined ten cents per day afterwards."

“And what would happen if I did not return it? Would a special collections squad from the library come after me? Would the debt be then passed to my next of kin?”

She blinked. “It would be 10 cents per day for every day past the due date you missed,” she said.

That night, my mind buzzed in a glass jar. I kept seeing her taking large big chomps from her turkey and bologna sandwich, wiping her lips of mayonnaise with her sleeve. A fine of 10 cents per day afterwards. Was there some sort of coded message there? Was it love, after all these years, finally descending its gracious wings on me?

I devised a plan. The next morning, I stormed into the library, a lord entering the castle his troops had just taken.

When I approached the desk, I saw that she wasn't reading.

In fact, she wasn't even moving.

“Oh, it's terrible,” she said, when I made some offhand comment about the weather. “My fiancé was run down by a truck driver. I just got the news.”

Run down by a truck driver? How terrible! But I had spent hours on my plan the night before, and nothing, not some *deus ex machina* or hand of fate, was going to deter me now. “I guess that means you probably don't have any plans for the evening?” I said.

“What?” she said, sniffing.

“Or I imagine you'd be busy this night,” I said. “Perhaps with the funeral arrangements? Or the wake?”

She was crying loudly. “There there, now,” I said, handing her a handkerchief, a keepsake of my grandma's that I kept for just such occasions.

“I just don’t understand,” she said. “We were going to get married. We had even sent out the invitations.”

She looked, as they might say, “down in the dumps.” I thought of ways I could cheer her up. “Well, if it helps, the happiest times of a marriage are usually in the courting and honeymoon phase,” I said. “After that, it’s usually a downhill drag. Most marriages end in divorce. Some even end in spousal murder.” I thought about it. “Even out of the most terrible situations there can often be a bright side. It’s the majority of what constitutes literature. Redemption and grace in the face of suffering.”

She blew her nose into my handkerchief. “What are you saying? This isn’t one of your stupid books,” she said.

“You’re right,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

I remembered when I was a young pale-dark haired freckled boy being led by the hand of a stranger to an open casket, where my mother lie, a row of strangers crowded around telling me how sorry they were for my loss. As if those words could carry the weight of what they tried to mean, as if most of those people weren’t just thinking about when the wake would end and they could go back to their own families, maybe hug their loved ones a little closer. It hit me then, not just on an intellectual level, like the sum of 4 and 4 is 8 or the sky is blue, but somewhere close to home that she had lost someone.

The next few days I kept away from her out of courtesy of my blunder and memories on the days following the cessation of my loved ones. She displayed the customary signs of grief, nothing as bold or cathartic as the ancient Greeks, but quieter, as if she was a ghost who had materialized half-transparently. Sometimes, when she thought no one was looking, she would place her head sideways on the desk and begin to cry.

“Hey, how’s it going today?” I chanced one morning, for once disabling my vernacular in terms of how I had read the kids were talking these days. “These books were a ball,” I said. I slid them across the counter. “They were quite a gas.”

“What century are you in?” she said.

“The present one, unfortunately,” I said. She laughed. I told her how life would have been better if we lived in the age of knights and castles.

She seemed to come alive a little. “Those times were pretty misogynistic,” she said. “And don’t forget the Bubonic Plague. They didn’t have toilets or running water or electricity or Taco Bell-”

“Okay, okay,” I said. “I get it.”

That night, for the first time in ages, I remembered my father. He had a heavy gut from partaking in far too many alcoholic beverages. After my mother died, he had increasingly spent longer days outside of home, using up what little money we had on his so called “benders,” the most famous of which ended him in Shanghai.

The next morning, thinking over my experiences with my parents, I brought the librarian a book. “I’m not checking this out,” I said. “This is a book I quite enjoyed after my father and grandmother and mother passed.”

She flipped through *Anna Karenina*. “Your family died?” she said.

“A long time ago,” I said.

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “It is the way of things.”

After that, she would ask me how my day was when I went to check out books, and even asked a few questions about the books I was returning, whether I liked them, would I recommend them for her?

At night I pictured us holding hands strolling through the crowded sidewalks of the city, maybe cozied up together in the seat of a movie theater. I would read through an entire passage before realizing I hadn't really read anything, that I was remembering instead some gesture; the way her lips squirmed, or how she might pick wax from her ear and roll it onto the table in a ball.

Sometimes, on days when it was particularly lethargic, she would change into workout clothes and practice yoga on a matt behind the circulation desk. I would patiently wait with my books as she did downward dog. Kapotasana. She called out the positions to herself before she changed though there was no one else present.

One afternoon, while I was reading in my cubby, she peered her head around the bookshelf. "Is it any good?"

"It's okay," I said, showing her the cover of *The Letters of Heloise and Abelard*. "It's a little melodramatic for my taste."

She sat on the corner of the desk. "What do you do for a living?"

"I do translations. Mostly Elvish," I said.

"Elvish? Can you speak some for me?"

I spoke a few words.

"Wow," she said. "What did you say?"

"I said, midway upon our life's journey I found myself lost in a darkened wood."

"Is that from something? I feel like I've heard that before."

“My poetry,” I said. I pointed to my head. “I don’t write anything down because I have no use for it. I don’t need an audience.”

“Who are your friends? I never see you with anyone.”

“I have some good friends,” I said. “Lev Myshkin? Konstantin Levin?”

She shook her head. “I never heard of them,” she said. “They sound Russian.”

Gradually I began to notice a cooling off of her cooling-off-ness towards me. She began to visit me at the back of the library during her lunch break and often read or write in her journal. Sometimes she would scroll through photos of her recently deceased and start to cry, or look at the wedding invitations, and on these occasions though I wanted to ask her to leave, I never did. Neither of us would talk as she pulled out a chair, the only sounds our stomachs groaning, the chair squeaking, the occasional flip of a page. We would read beside each other, and at the end of her shift when she closed up the library she would wait for me to finish whatever chapter I was on before she locked up.

I’d walk her to her car at the parking lot. As a form of protection, I said.

“I can walk fine on my own,” she said, and pulled out a can of Mace.

One sunny afternoon, when it was particularly bright outside, she asked if I would watch a movie with her.

We headed into the TV room, which had a 22 inch wide flat screen with a few stiff chairs in front. Beyond the television was a model train set whose train chugged merrily along the tracks. I watched the train chugging along, wondering what demon force it seemed to run on, when she returned with a few DVD’s. “My fiancé, Ben, used to watch these with me,” she said.

I flipped over the covers. *Spirited Away. Howl’s Moving Castle. Kiki’s Delivery Service.*



“You can’t be serious?” I said. “These are cartoons.”

“They’re anime,” she said. She touched the crook of my arm. “Just give them a chance.”

“Okay,” I said, leaning back into the rigid structure of my chair. “But if they’re a waste of time I may get up and leave. I’m just letting you know.”

We watched all the movies in the Miyazaki collection before moving on to other movie landmarks. *Star Wars*. *Lord of the Rings*. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. The last one gave us a lot of inside jokes. I’d pass by her at the circulation desk, and say “What, the curtains?” She’d peer behind the bookshelf. “We are the knights who say knit!” or, when I went to check out a book or pay a fine, would demand a shrubbery.

I gradually got to know more things about her. She told me of her and her fiancé’s plan to move to California, where it was sunny and warm, not cold and snowing half the year like it was where we lived. She painted a picture of a small adobe home on the hills of Los Angeles, hosting dinner parties, as she worked a steady job as a librarian or maybe a kindergarten teacher. “I love kids,” she said. “Ben and I used to talk about having them all the time.” Then she trailed off. I had long learned that the adequate response was not to joke or lighten the mood, but to give her space in what she was feeling. Her eyes darkened. She looked down at the desk, but then came back to me again. “What about you?” she said. “Do you want to have kids?”

Did I want to have kids? The thought seemed so remote to me. There was a whole other train of things I had to do beforehand; including, holding hands, kissing, sexual intercourse, love, marriage, a job. It seemed to me as remote as Heaven, though I did tell her that, as a young boy, I often used to fantasize about marriage. I told her I had a nightmare where I was getting married and the priest announced I could kiss the bride, but I had never kissed anyone before (“bear with

me here,” I said, as she snorted laughing) – and as I had never kissed anyone before, I didn’t know what to do. The audience in the pulpits laughed, the priest instantly denounced the marriage, and my wife ran down the aisle with a much more attractive first man, who I always pictured to be my best friend who also owned a motorcycle and was really good at sports.

She was laughing at first but her face seemed to grow more and sadder as my story continued.

“Haven’t you ever kissed a girl before?” she said.

It seemed like this was the moment the books and movies had been telling me about. I closed my eyes, and puckered up my lips, but was only met with air. When I peeked my eyes open, she wasn’t looking at me. She took my hand. “You were there for a difficult time, and I appreciate the company. Work would be hell if I couldn’t goof off with you. But as a friend.”

Was a friend worthy of our mutual relations towards each other? I expected the answer to be no, but to my surprise, I said, “yes,” and I meant it, too.

The summer passed. Soon she was working only part-time, on account of her being accepted to go to a college, not an Ivy League or big-name one or anything like that, but still with a good creative writing program. She said she wanted to write a book. She asked if I had ever thought about doing that before. I told her I only wrote poetry, but didn’t mention that even that was a lie, that anything I put down on paper seemed so dated that it incurred fantasies of burning it, of ripping it to shreds.

One afternoon, she came in with a stack of books. Until then, it had been movies, maybe because of the communal aspect of watching a movie together, rather than reading, which was a solitary experience. “This one’s my favorite,” she said, handing me *Charlotte’s Web*. She told

me about Fern sparing Wilber, to Wilber meeting Charlotte, to Templeton's out-of-nowhere change of heart. She covered her mouth. "I didn't spoil it, did I?"

"I hardly ever read books for their plot," I said.

She handed me some other books. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone.*

I read them all that night. They seemed a waste of time compared to the heights of Melville, Tolstoy, Dickens. I returned the next morning with them stacked in my arms.

"You read them already?" she said. "What did you think?"

"I loved them," I said. "Thanks for letting me borrow them."

She smiled. I would miss that smile. "I'm glad you liked them," she said. "I have other books, too, if you want to borrow them."

I was far behind on my summer reading list. "Yeah, I'd really like that," I said. "Maybe I have some stuff I could let you borrow as well."

A few months later, she quit her job as a librarian because of the pressures of school. She began dating a new guy, though, she said, she never forgot about her ex-fiancé. "There are as many hearts as there are people," she said, and it didn't occur to me until later that night that she had gotten that from *Anna Karenina*.

She still continued to visit me. One afternoon, towards the end of summer, she came in after being caught in a rainstorm. The long strands of her wet hair covered her shoulders, and her mascara was running and dripping so that she looked like a Jack-O-Lantern.

She folded deeper into the cushions of the arm sofa. "It feels like everything is put on hold, you know? Like I'm drifting. Do you understand what I mean?"

I nodded. I told her that was how I felt after my father, who, after my mother had died, built a bomb shelter in the backyard using the proceeds that should have gone for her funeral. I continued to tell her about it until I realized that she wasn't listening.

She jolted back, and turned and smiled to me. "I'm sorry, what?" she said, but I told her nothing, that what I had said wasn't worth repeating.

That night we watched a movie. I could tell her mood had to do with that boy, because when I asked her about him, she clammed up, and didn't go into as much detail as she usually did, delivering a generalization of "oh he's fine" followed by an awkward ringing silence. On the television, Schindler was confronting one of the Nazi guards about the death of his one-armed worker. Most of the time, I watched her. In the light of the TV screen she was something beautiful. I tried to imagine myself as being someone other than who I was. Someone who could operate in the public sphere, who wasn't bookish and, as the kids at my school used to say, "an odd quack," but someone who was handsome, who had a little more courage, who could scoop her off her feet and bend her down to deliver a kiss on the lips, like Patrick Swayze. I had never had someone to talk to before, and though I had long since convinced myself that she didn't talk to me because there was no one else around, because she was bored of her job, because she wanted company, I knew that this couldn't quite last forever. Already I was seeing her through the far end of a telescope; her skin would seem to glow, her lips would move, and the words that came out sounded like music. She would get over the death of her fiancé. She would figure me out as a fraud. She would find a replacement, or I would say something mean-spirited that might push her away.

She was crying at the end of the movie. "Can we watch another one? Maybe something funny," she said. "That was really heavy."

“Yeah,” I said. “That sounds really nice.”

I suppose I am thankful, because she has expanded my world a bit, introduced me to other books, and movies, and every now and then I’ll be reading something that will remind me of her. It seems like the people that disappear from your life aren’t really gone forever, but that you can find signs of them everywhere, if you only know where to look. But even so, sometimes on those dark and listless days, I’ll snap awake from my book, and look longingly at the circulation desk, where an old crone of a librarian now sits. I’ll remember the first time I saw her, how I had convinced myself it was not love, though it had been, of a kind.

## FAMILY VACATION

There wasn't much to get ready for the trip. For my mom, it was snacks of cheddar cheese pretzels and bottles of water. My sisters only brought their dolls and favorite blankets. My mom said it was only a weekend trip, but I packed jackets and long-sleeved shirts in case the summer forecast was wrong, and a journal and pen so I could sketch all the animals we saw at the zoo.

“You know we're only going to visit him for two days, right?” my mom said when she saw what I had packed. It was my hope that, after spending the weekend with my dad, he might ask me to stay with him. As an engineer for Siemens he traveled to places like Brazil, Argentina, and Taiwan. Pittsburgh, the closest he was stationed, was a two-hour drive. As an engineer for Siemens he traveled to places like Brazil, Argentina, and Taiwan. I had been there before. What I don't remember of my earlier trip to Pittsburgh is captured in the photographs my mom kept in an album upstairs; sitting on my dad's shoulders at the rhino exhibit, crawling from a bear pawing at the glass, posing on a sidewalk near a peacock. Really, I was interested in the life of

fancy hotels and restaurants my father lived on the road, even though he said he was busy working and there wasn't really any time to explore.

The morning of the trip came. We set off early in my mom's giant gold Chrysler minivan. The two-hour drive was made longer by my mom exiting the turnpike and stranding us on backcountry roads driven on by horses and buggies. The AC didn't work, and because of the manure we couldn't roll down the windows.

I passed the time by sitting in the back reading my *Deltora Quest* books, where I could pick my nose without anybody seeing.

By the time we reached the hotel it was late evening. My mom's grip was white-knuckled on the wheel. She looked like a demon from another realm.

Not that I or my sisters cared. The Holiday Inn was amazing, a grey drab building with a neon sign on its front. On each floor, balconies faced the turnpike. The glass doors ushered us into the cool hush of the well-lit lobby. I stayed with my sisters while my mom checked us in. When they ripped off a leaf of a plant, I fell on my knees and stuck out my tongue, pretending to be the dog my parents would never get us.

"Tonguer!" they cried.

"Jordan, stick your tongue in," my mom said. "It's weird to do that in public."

We took the elevator to the fourth floor. All the way up I stared at myself in the mirror in the ceiling. Luckily, the elevator doors opened, and I sprinted out. I tracked down my dad's room number from the number on the keycard envelope like a detective.

I imagined my father sitting on the edge of his bed in his work clothes, curly brown hair and the thick stubble of his beard. "Kids!" he'd say, a smile fixing on his face as the girls rushed forward and I trailed tentatively behind, too old for such naked displays of emotion.

My mom clicked the keycard in. She opened the door. His Samsonite luggage lay sprawled open. His Siemens hardhat lay on the table. The sheets on the bed were twisted.

My mom drew open the curtains. “You remembered to call and tell him we were coming, right?”

My mom had not wanted to call. I told her I did, though I had forgotten.

She punched the pillow and curled up on the bed. I turned on the TV to *Suite Life of Zac and Cody*. The girls climbed the bed and snuggled beside her.

When the women were asleep, I opened the door, shutting it slowly, like the character in “the Tell-Tale Heart.” At one point, my mom smacked her lips, and I froze. She started snoring, and I drew the door shut until it clicked.

Free at last! I raced up the hallway, a ball of boundless energy. My socked feet fell softly against the red splash of carpet, as I sprinted between the velvety walls. I raced up the concrete stairwell, footsteps echoing against the cement.

On the top floor I slid across the carpet on my socks, Tom-Cruise, when I heard a familiar voice.

Nothing. No talking, no TV, when the door lock clicked.

“Jordan,” my father said. He blinked. “What are you doing here?”

I thought I was on the wrong floor, and that my mom and sisters were somewhere inside, until I heard a woman’s voice.

“Dick? Who is it?”

The door opened the whole way. She wore a robe so plush it could have been made of polar bear fur. She was toweling off her hair when she stepped into the doorway. “Hello,” she said, speaking in a voice addressed to someone half my age. “Are you lost?”



“Clara,” my dad said. “This is Jordan.”

The buckles of my shoes were shiny. I had polished them for the trip, but a speck of dust shone on the wing of my right shoe.

“Where are the girls?” my dad said.

“Downstairs,” I said. “Sleeping.”

He stroked his beard. He held open the door. I followed him inside, and the door locked and clicked behind me.

I sat on the bed and studied the weird rhombus patterns on the floor. All the questions I had felt knotted up in my throat.

“Would you like a drink?” the woman said. She kept her robe from falling with her free hand as she leaned over the mini fridge. “Pepsi? Sprite?” she said.

“Sprite,” my father said.

She handed me a Pepsi. I took a sip, and kept the soda in my mouth until it started to burn.

“I forgot what day it was,” my father said. “You never called.”

On the TV images of horses on a prairie flashed by.

“Well?” he said.

I looked at him.

“Are you going to tell your mother? This has to stay between us,” he said, resting a heavy hand on my shoulder. “You understand why, don’t you?”

I nodded. It hadn’t occurred to me that this was something that could disrupt our parent’s marriage, not to mention our family trip. On the turnpike cars flashed by. The woman looked down at her legs, polished and shaven. “Do you still love mom?” I said.

My father's eyes were almond brown, his beard a golden lion's mane. "Of course," he said.

I made him show me his hands so I could see his fingers weren't crossed behind his back.

We didn't speak on the elevator ride down. On the fifth floor, the elevator door opened and a woman and child in an inflatable inner tube got on. The child's eyes were red from chlorine. She looked at me, and I watched the woman holding onto her hand, discussing plans for the next day.

My father hesitated outside of our door "You remember what we talked about?"

I nodded. He twisted the knob and we entered the room.

My mom bolted upright on the bed. My sisters jumped off and tackled my dad's knees. He reached against the wall to steady himself.

"Where the hell have you been?" my mom said to me. "I've been worried sick."

"I found him downstairs in the lobby," he said.

She turned to my father. "You were supposed to be here an hour ago."

"I know," he said. "I'm sorry."

She stood up from the bed. "Cut that out," she said to my sisters when they jumped on the bed.

My dad lifted up my sister. She started to giggle as he helicoptered her around the room.

My mom caught me staring. "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing, I said.

My dad settled into the bed with my second sister climbing up his back. "I haven't eaten yet," he said. "Jordan," he said. "Where would you like to eat?"

Outside on the turnpike cars were still flashing by. My sisters now tried to climb my back, but it seemed like I was too old for such childish games. I laced up my shoes. “I don’t care,” I said. “I’ll go anywhere but here.”

We drove down to the Denny’s in the parking lot at another hotel down the street. My mom said not to get soda to spoil our appetite, but my dad said we could get whatever want. “It’s their vacation,” he said. I colored on the back of my dinner sheet with the crayons the waitress handed to my sister. I’d hoped the waitress would pass by and praise my picture.

I ordered a Sprite with chocolate chip pancakes. My sisters ordered mini-pancakes with a bacon smile and egg-eyes. At one point during the dinner, my dad’s phone buzzed.

My mom’s eyes followed him. “He never used to smoke you know,” she said, as he pulled out a cigarette and lit it up. I’d caught him a few times smoking in the garage back home, where he spent hours working with his power tools. The screaming of a saw. The heavy thud of a hammer. I wondered if she knew about the other woman.

She looked at me. “What?” she said.

I looked back down at my dinner plate. My mom stood up and took his cell phone. She stormed outside and slammed it against the ground.

My sisters were still drawing on their napkins and eating their food. Some of the people at the tables around were looking at us.

When she returned she had the car keys in her hand. “We’re going,” she said. She threw down money on the table, not worrying about change as she ushered us outside. My father didn’t look at me as we passed. My sisters began to cry.

It was a long drive back to the hotel. This time, I sat in the front seat. I looked outside at some of the amusements that we had passed earlier. An ice cream store. A golf course with giant dinosaurs.

Back at the hotel, my mom packed our stuff. My sisters seemed to know we were leaving. They screamed and clawed and cried. I tried to be Tongue, but nothing calmed them down.

For a while, my mom was in the bathroom. I heard the shower water, though I knew she wasn't in the shower because I could hear the water patter on the tiles.

Eventually, there was a knock on the door. "Is she in there?" my father said, and I nodded. He knocked on the door. "It's me," he said, and after a few minutes, the door opened, and he went inside.

I sat with my back against the door. They were speaking quietly, my mom's voice sharp and edgy, growing in volume, changing from quiet whispers to sharp accusations. My dad's voice was quiet, soft, apologetic. I heard the shower water turn off, and I jumped away from the door as it opened.

"C'mon, kids, let's go," she said. "We're going home."

The hotel hallway seemed ordinary now. The elevator boring. Unfashionable. Cheap. The lobby with its businessmen with rolling suitcases and its families in swimming suits was empty, dark. The smiling attendant from earlier had been replaced by a young girl with heavy set eyes and mascara who didn't smile at us when we passed.

I helped load our luggage into the car.

On the drive home I sat in the back.

I must have fallen asleep, because when I woke the car was stopped. Up ahead was a green sign which, in the dark, I could not read.

I called my mom's name. My heart hammered in my chest when she didn't answer. I had never thought it possible that she could leave us before, but suddenly in that instant it seemed like she was gone, and my sisters and I were on my own.

After a few minutes the car door opened, and my mom climbed in front. She patted the passenger seat beside her. "Do you want to come and sit in the front?" she said.

I told her I had to pee.

She looked at me and brushed my hair. "Your father wanted me to tell you that he's not mad," she said, but this last part I suspected wasn't the truth.

I felt my bladder pressing up against my groin. "I really have to go," I said, and looked down the bank at the dark line of trees, a field visible beyond it.

My mom turned off the car. "Okay," she said, and unlocked the door. "Just promise you won't go too far."

## THE BIG LEAGUES

I forgot my mitt in the dugout again. The other week I'd left it under the bleachers after practice, and the week before by the creek near the baseball field where Tony and I were building a dam. If he were around, my dad would say you can't be forgetful. A used car salesman with a lot on 5<sup>th</sup> Street, he took off to Texas shortly before my 11<sup>th</sup> birthday, and had only recently sent a "Greetings from So Big, Texas" postcard along with a cactus and his mitt from his high school Varsity days.

It was the night of our first big win. The Tipton Fireman were expected to go all the way to the Dean Patterson this year, on account of Tony, my best friend. Nobody could hit any of his fast balls. He was ten-fold the player I was; I refused to wear glasses, and spent most of my time day-dreaming in left field, only reawakening to the plop of a ball as it landed beside me, along with groans from the infield and a blurry white object in the grass.

Inside the fence the field was dark, the overhead lights shut off long ago. The new scoreboard that the PTO had raised funds for stood apart at the far end. I hopped the fence, crept

into the dugout, and searched for my mitt in a pile of Gatorades and sunflower seeds. I heard my mom talking.

“I told you before, Clara, this is what I want,” Coach Swanson said.

They stood in the infield. My mom’s white dress shimmered in the breeze. Coach wore the bright red uniform of the Tipton Fireman. He held onto the wire rim of a basket, and picked baseballs up from around home plate.

Sometimes, Tony and I would be finishing up a video game match when Tony’s dad arrived to pick him up. My mom would invite Coach Swanson in to have a few beers and give Tony and me extra time to hang. Sometimes, we could hang out for another half hour to an hour longer. He helped around the house with such things as painting, fixing furniture, the car. On odd occasions, I found myself thinking of him as my dad. He tossed a baseball to my mom. I was about to call out to them, when Coach dropped the basket, the baseballs spilling out over the side in tiny moons, as he pulled my mom in and kissed her, hard, on the lips.

I froze. My mouth opened, a perfect Venus fly trap had there been any flies around, and my eyes widened like saucers. I was about to rush to defend her honor, when I noticed my mom wasn’t even trying to fight back. She was kissing him, too.

He led her by the hand towards his truck, and I only breathed again when the truck was far down the road.

On the walk home it seemed like I developed the ability to teleport; every now and then, I would break out of my reverie to find myself at the T-ball field, the waking bridge, Irving’s. When I finally made it home to the trailer park we now lived in now that my dad was gone, it was almost eleven o’clock. The television flashed. I stood outside the door, preparing what I was going to say, when the door opened.

“I thought I heard footsteps,” my mom said, and smiled. From the look on her face I wondered if she had been expecting someone else. She wore a white gray tank top and jeans, and her hair was pulled up in a red bandana. I was supposed to go to Tony’s house to sleep over and wasn’t supposed to be home until tomorrow morning.

The screen door slapped behind me. I kicked off my shoes, as she laid back down on the couch, *Kardashians* on TV, a bottle of wine stood on the coffee table. I went into the kitchen and opened the fridge, grabbing bananas and peanut butter as well as protein for a smoothie.

“No one ever hits it out there, mom,” I said.

“What if someone hits it out there, and you don’t have a good right fielder?”

I scooped the peanut butter and whey protein and milk into the blender and turned it on.

“Well, I guess I don’t know much about baseball.”

“Dad did.”

She was quiet. “Is something wrong?”

I turned the blender onto its highest setting, before I turned it off. “You know he’s married, mom,” I said. “What do you think will happen if the other guys find out?”

She was quiet for a moment, and I felt the electric awkwardness between us. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“He’s Tony’s dad,” I said. “If the rest of the guys find out-.” I couldn’t say it.

My mom turned around, and narrowed her eyes. “I don’t know where you’re getting these ideas from,” she said. “Coach and I are just friends.”

“I saw you,” I said. “You two were in the field.”

Her eyebrows furrowed. “I had a talk with Coach about your playing time,” she said. “Didn’t you say that it was bothering you?”



“I saw it,” I said, suddenly not so sure anymore. “I know I did.”

She turned back to the TV. “Sometimes, you have an overactive imagination, just like your father,” she said. “I don’t know what you think you saw, but there’s nothing going on between Coach and I. Understand?”

The next morning, I woke to find my mom’s car gone. She worked a double shift at Imler’s Poultry in an accounting office without AC. I found five dollars on the kitchen counter along with a note that said the money was for lunch and not to spoil my appetite for dinner. It was signed, love, mom.

I headed outside. It was a hot June day, not too humid like July but not clammy and rainy all the time like in April. The cicadas buzzed in the field, and the heat wavered over the blacktops. I biked down to the field, where Tony and the guys were working on the dam. Tony stood in the middle of on the stream wearing a cut-off Shooting Stars shirt, the ovals drooping down to his waist where the brim of his boxers showed. He had jet black hair and a constellation of dark freckles now that summer had started. He was bending down, trying to heave a large rock onto the dam. The dam had been his idea; he had sold us on the idea of having a few girls come up to swim, and not having to go to the Bellwood pool, filled with little kids that peed and older lifeguards that shrilled their whistles if we dunked someone.

The dam stood three feet high, creating a pool of water behind it, which rushed through the crevices and down the banks with cattails and islands overgrown with grass.

“Took you long enough,” he said, as I parked my bike beside a tree. He finished heaving the rock on the dam, looked up at me, and grinned. “I was just telling the guys, if you didn’t show up soon, you weren’t swimming in it.”

I kicked off my shoes and waded in to join. I climbed down the bank knotted with tree roots and molded with footprints.

Some of the other guys, out of the five of us, worked on a relay system that brought some of the better rocks from downstream. At one point, we took a break to catch a big crayfish that darted from under a rock. Tony scooped it into a Mountain Dew bottle filled with other crayfish that crawled over each other. After we caught it, we worked on the dam for another hour before taking a lunch break. We biked down towards the cool AC sanctuary of Houser's Subs. I bought a Creamsicle and an Orange Stewards, and we grabbed a booth. When I finished, I read the joke off the stick to Tony and the guys. "What do you call a buffalo in a trunk?"

"A buffa-load," they instantly answered.

We bought some Cow tails and another Mountain Dew bottle and tripped back to the stream.

The sun cast spotted patterns on the sparkling water from between the trees. The trees on the hill above us murmured in the wind like a great overhead current streaming about our heads. Tadpoles darted in the shallow banks, and the dark shape of a fish headed away from the dam, towards the deeper section.

The Worthings' ducks started to swim down. The mom and the four little ducks waded down the stream, stopping at the dam and quacking.

Tony tried to lift one over the dam, but it bit him. "Ow," he said, jerking back, and glaring. He took a rock, and splashed it beside the duck. The ducks quacked, their feathers ruffling. He took another rock and skipped it and accidentally hit one of the ducks.

He waded into the stream and picked up the killed duck. It looked small and wet in his hand, its grey feathers ruffled. The mother quacked. "I didn't mean to," Tony said, as if to her.

We followed him up the hill towards the base of the tree where he knelt on the ground and scooped out a grave. He lay the duck inside, and sat with his head bent for a long time.

“Does anyone want to say a few words?”

We were a rag-tag team of boys that killed; birds and squirrels with BB guns, pulling crayfish and fireflies apart. The other guys shuffled, looking embarrassed. I stood up. “I’ll say something,” I said, stepping forward.

The other guys gathered in a vigil around. “Here lies a duck that had passed too young,” I said. “It has been separated from its mother and siblings, but it will join them in Duck Heaven, where, as we all know, all good and noble ducks go.”

Tony’s head was downcast. At the end, he crossed himself. “Amen,” he said.

“Amen,” the rest of the guys echoed.

I followed him back towards his bike parked alongside a tree. “You didn’t mean to,” I said. “It wasn’t your fault.”

He looked at me, and shook his head. He took a long shuddering breath, breathed deeply and wiped his eyes. “My mom’s grilling burgers if you want to come. We can play the new Halo game,” he said.

I must have had hesitation on my face, because he continued. “She always cooks extra.”

“It’s not that,” I said.

His face became a well of concern. “Well, what is it then?”

Should I tell him? Tony and I had been friends ever since 1<sup>st</sup> grade, when he had saved me from a disastrous Pokémon Card trade at the bus stop. We often talked about how later in high school we’d own cars and have girlfriends, and how in college maybe we would go to the same school. Seeing him there with his wet cowlicked hair and his dark splotches of freckles, I

felt somehow to blame. “I’m just not feeling too well,” I said, and tried to look the part. “I think I spent too long in the sun.”

“Oh, alright,” he said, looking disappointed. “Well, if you change your mind, you can come on over! I got the new Halo but I haven’t started it yet. I’ve been waiting to play it with you.”

That night, I returned home to find my mom in the kitchen cooking lasagna. She turned and smiled at me when I came in, unfixing her apron from behind her. The lasagna was on the stove rippled. She had taken all morning to cook it, had perhaps even called off work. “Do you want to set out some plates and forks, and I’ll get the drinks?” she said. I opened the drawer and took out silverware, and she returned from the back patio with two Coca Colas. She poured them into a glass and put some ice on them. “On the rocks,” she said, handing it to me, as we sat down.

She cut and handed me a generous slice. I looked at it, hungry but not wanting to eat.

“What’s wrong?” she said. “I thought this was your favorite. Did you load up on snacks again?”

I shook my head. I poked and prodded it with my fork, then set my fork down.

“Well, I for one am starving,” she said, and cut herself a slice. She looked at me, and I cut off a slice and ate it.

When I finished, I put my dish in the sink and headed towards my room. She called my name. “What did we say about washing dishes?” I wetted a sponge and pretended to put on soap before I cleaned the dish. I placed it in the dish rack and raced back to my room.

I was watching the season finale of *Avatar the Last Airbender* when she knocked on my door. She came in and pulled out a chair at my computer desk. She watched a few minutes with me. When I turned to look at her, she was staring at the cactus. “That’s such an odd gift,” she said. “Do you have to water it, or take care of it anyway?”

“No,” I said, balking at her criticism of my cactus.

She seemed to realize maybe she’d gone too far. She stood and pricked her finger on it.

“It’s sharp,” she said.

“It’s a cactus,” I said. “Cactuses are sharp.”

She sat back down, and we watched the rest of the episode. When it was finished, she asked if I could turn off the TV.

“I don’t want to lie to you,” she said. Beside her, my lava lamp glowed, jello-ish blue bubbles making their way from top to bottom. “You’re getting to be the man of the house. If there’s anything you want to ask, now would be the time to do it.”

I hesitated. I saw how easy it would be to play it off, to act like nothing had happened.

“I did see you and Coach that night,” I said. “I didn’t imagine that.”

She nodded. She started to answer, then stopped. “It’s complicated. Don’t tell Tony, but his parents aren’t very happy together.”

I tried to think whether he had ever mentioned it. I pictured him again from the day before, cradling the duck in his hand. “Not really,” I said.

“Well, Coach and his mom are getting a divorce soon.”

Divorce. It seemed to happen to everyone’s parents lately. Sometimes, it could be okay, could mean two houses and two rooms and birthdays and Christmas presents, and the parents still having barbecues and family outings together. But other times, it could be like the

Osborne's, the custody hearings, the court fights, he and his brother being shuffled back and forth, the parents trying to blame each other.

It seemed like she was on the verge of saying something, but, at the last minute, had decided to say something else. “

Do you still love dad?” I said.

“Of course,” she said. “But it's complicated.”

“I don't understand what's complicated about it.”

She bent down so that her elbows rested on her knees. When she looked up I saw that she seemed tired. “Sometimes, people fall in and out of love, and it's nobody's fault,” she said.

“Grandpa and grandma were married for eighty years,” I said.

“I know,” she said.

“So I don't see what's so hard about it.”

She fingered the corner of her eyes, wiping away a tear. “Just don't mention anything to Tony,” she said. “His parents are going to tell him in due time.”

“And what about you and Coach?” I said. “Are you two going to continue to see each other after?”

She smiled sadly, and started to rise. “I'm not sure he likes me like that.” On the way out, she made sure to shut the door.

That night, I lay in bed looking at the cactus my dad had sent me, its arms raised akimbo, like a sentinel, protecting me from the dark night beyond. Like Atlas, the Greek God who kept the world on his shoulder. I thought about the trailer park we now lived in, and Tony and his mom, and my dad and his mom, and it seemed an intricate puzzle I had to figure out, to put all of the right parts in the allocated order, so that none of this could be blamed on me.

The next morning, Tony wasn't at the dam. The guys and I worked until late afternoon, getting the pool to rise to about our chests. I lay on the grass slope in the sun, feeling the breeze and listening to the stream trickle off the rocks, before I put on my shoes and headed up towards the field.

Tony was there. He didn't look at me, or any of the other guys for that matter. We started to run laps, and he raced ahead of us, running full sprint and almost lapping us on the last one.

Coach had us run another lap. When we were done, he paired us up and had us throw a baseball. I paired off with Tony. He didn't say anything, and I wondered if his parents had told him. If he knew.

After this drill, Coach took us to the batting cages. The rest of the guys stood outside the batting cages, sitting in the dirt and ripping up patches of grass, as Coach led me towards the end and positioned me so that my legs were shoulder width apart. He handed me a bat, and I imagined hitting him with it. "Pretend you're elbowing a midget," he said, and I took a practice swing.

"Good," he said, holding up the baseball from behind the net. "Now, keep your eye on the ball."

After practice, Tony was quick to bike home, a dark figure biking away over the shimmering blacktop.

I didn't go home right away. Instead, I biked up around Deadman's, and past the old high school and church where my dad used to go. I biked past the field across from the fire hall, where, the winter before, Tony and the guys and I had played football in the snow. A man, one

of the caretakers, had stormed outside, and cussed us out. My mom had arrived to pick me up. When she heard him, she chewed him out, and he apologized to her, and eventually to us.

I headed back to Eight-Foot behind the Dollar General. We used to jump off the railroad tracks into the water, but last summer, shortly after my dad had left, the adults had come in and put a cement slab in the pool so that no one could jump or swim in it anymore.

I found my mom sleeping on the couch. She was snoring like a construction site, her head tilted back, and I wondered what Coach could have seen in her. There were other questions I should have asked, how long had they been seeing each other, was Coach leaving his wife because of her, but it seemed like things were moving forward now, and that nothing could be done to stop its momentum.

I was in my room watching an episode of *Trailer Park Boys* when the phone rang.

“Jeremy? It’s Tony. Hey, listen man, what are you up to? Do you want to hang out?”

I glanced at the clock. It was almost 9 PM, an hour before I had to go to bed. “Yeah, I can meet up for a little,” I said. “What do you want to do?”

In the background I could hear his parents fighting. “Let’s meet at the dam,” he said. “It’ll be cool. I’ve never been there at night.”

I biked down to the dam with the weary knowledge of a man about to head to his execution. When I found him, he was sitting on the bank, throwing rocks into the stream. The water was blacker than the hill which rose above it, which, in turn, was blacker than the sky. “Jeremy, is that you?” he said, sounding a little bit frightened. He seemed to relax. He offered me a bag of Twizzlers, and I took one, and bit off the end, blowing through it like a whistle.

“Sorry I called you so late, and that I’ve been weird,” he said. He started to say something but seemed to grow confused and stopped.



“It’s fine,” I said. “I was just watching TV.”

We sat there, listening to the water trickle over the dam, a patch of moonlight grazing on the surface.

“Did your parents fight?” he said. “Before your father left?”

I tried to think. “A little bit early on,” I said. “A lot of small things. I don’t think they were talking about whatever it was.”

“Maybe the fighting is a good thing,” he said.

I shrugged. “My parents were quiet in the last days. I think they’d just given up, and it was over by that point. So maybe you’re right.”

“You really think so?” he said, his face alight with hope. I remembered what my mom had said, about his parent’s divorce, and I told him I was.

“Who did you want to live with, though?” he said. “Did you get a choice?”

“I probably would have wanted to live with my dad.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Texas. I’m sure that’s cool. You’d get to be a real cowboy out there.”

“What about you?” I said. “If you had a choice, who would you live with?”

“If I had to choose between them?” He seemed to puzzle over it, but an answer alighted on his face. “Hell, neither of them,” he said. “If I had to choose between them, maybe I would just run away. Hell, maybe I could just come and live with you.”

## DO YOU REMEMBER?

That first morning my ex-wife Helen arrived to visit the Old Court Mall work site, my foreman, Benny, labeled her a distraction, said men did serious work here, he didn't need his workers ogling some tease. I hadn't seen her in nearly twenty years. She stood at the top of the hill wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a dress that dipped over one shoulder. I still remembered that night I'd woken to the rain pattering against the windows and seen her standing in the doorway, dressed and wearing a coat. Not saying anything as she was leaving, not even "I'm sorry."

"Merville," Benny shouted. His walrus moustache twitched as he jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Your ex says she won't leave until you talk to her."

The men joked that before he became our foreman Benny had been a platoon leader whose men were all killed overseas.

I handed my bull float to one of the workers and tilted my hardhat. The wind whistled under the lid.

Standing behind the fence, the heat from the noonday sun beat around her shoulders. Behind her lay the long strip of traffic in the afternoon rush hour, high apartment complexes and hotels. In

twenty years, she didn't seem to have changed much. She was tan with a few wrinkles and dirty blonde hair. The same piercing blue eyes as Alexis.

She curled her fingers through the fence. "I checked our old house," she said. "It's not there anymore. It's gone."

A loogie caught halfway in my throat. She looked past me, where the guys were watching.

"The guys thought you were a movie star," I said.

Her wedding ring dazzled in the sun.

"You got a fiancé?" she said. "Girlfriend?"

I shook my head.

"You always did like this type of work."

"It pays the bills," I said.

"It does much more than that," she said, and of course, she was right.

The sun glare of traffic crawled towards the city, men returning home to their families where maybe they had kids and spouses waiting for them.

"I have two kids of my own, Jack," she said, and clenched the fence.

The rest of the guys, Benny included, were watching. Machinery rumbled around them.

She took her time. "I just wanted to know how the search is going," she said. "If my husband and I can help."

"You think I didn't invest every goddamn nickel in those cheap fuck detectives?"

"No one's saying that, Jack," she said. She reached through the fence to clasp my hand. "All I'm saying is maybe it would help if you let other people try, too."

Fucking rich, was what it was. My ex-wife showed up dolled up, like she's some movie star, prancing around the outside of the fence.

“You have to leave, Helen,” I said, already turning around. “Next time you show up, it’ll be security showing you out, and not me.”

I started down the hill. No call in almost eighteen years, and she thought – what? That she could flaunt her new wedding ring and offer help? It was bad enough I had to find out from the detectives that Helen and Alexis had been communicating for the past year. What was Alexis thinking? Maybe Alexis didn’t remember those early days when she used to point out the women she thought were pretty walk by, and ask if that was her mother, was that?

The bulldozers rumbled. A gang of men shouted order in Spanish.

After my shift, I clocked out and headed to the parking lot, passing by the spot where Helen had stood earlier that morning. For most of that work day I’d rehearsed what I’d say to Helen about how she was wrong for leaving when Alexis was just a kid. I still remember those early nights when I’d try to get Alexis to stop crying and go back to sleep. On those nights she couldn’t sleep I used to buckle her in the backseat of the car and drive around the city, lights splashing on the windshield, a family of drunks stumbling from the bar. We’d listen to her mother’s old cassettes, *The Beatles*, *Lou Reed*, Alexis asleep in her white onesie, her pink fists curled, the sound of the stereo and the engine a lullaby lulling her to sleep

Helen wasn’t at her spot by the fence, though why I should have been disappointed was anybody’s guess. Some of the guys asked if I wanted to go out and grab a beer, but I told them I had plans. Another time.

When I got home, my sister Janine’s car was parked out front. She was younger than I was by ten years and lived in Oak Ridge about a half hour away. She sat on the front stoop, her legs straight in her daisy dukes, her elbows splayed back, as if she were sun bathing. “I thought you had

off today?” she said. She plucked one of the rhododendron in front of the house. The rhododendrons had been grown by Alexis. Come next spring, the front of the house would empty.

“You don’t have to keep checking in on me,” I said, unlocking the door and letting us inside.

“I know that,” she said. She followed me into the kitchen, and set her jacket down on the stool. “Can’t we just hang out like old times?” she said.

The days of her and Alexis and I hanging was over. Alexis was never coming back.

I took a Miller Lite from the fridge and offered her one. She gave me a dark look. I searched for a knife to cut the lid open so I could drink a bigger pour.

She fidgeted on her stool. “Helen came to visit me,” she said. “She said she visited you today at work. She wanted to help, but you turned her down.”

I tightened my grip on the can, crinkling it slightly.

“Listen, Jack,” she said, and reached out her hand. “Her husband is on the board of directors at Miramax. Do you know what that means? It means they can help out, Jack. Hire some of the best detectives so we can find out what happened.”

I pitied her. Although she and Alexis were several years apart you would’ve thought they were best friends or sisters. Nights they’d go out to movies or shopping at the mall or to get their hair done. I used to come home from work and find them gathered in the living room, watching a movie, talking about men, work, sex.

“I’ll think about it, Janine,” I said, standing, but she gave me another look. “No, really, I will.”

In the living room I flipped on the TV to images of a police shoot out. Janine rested her head on the sofa.

“I mean, do you really want to go through it all again?” I said. “Do you really want to know what happened?”

“Of course I do! Don’t you?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I try not to imagine what could have happened to Alexis, some of the stories you hear about on TV.

“Janine,” I said, trying to keep it civil. Along with the same last name, a divorce was one of the few things we had in common.

She seemed to take the hint. We watched a movie about a sniper pinning a businessman in a phone booth.

“What would you do,” she said, “if you were in the booth?”

I cracked open another beer. “I’d probably crouch down,” I said. “Wait for someone tall to pass by and crawl out.”

“The sniper’s on the roof, Jack,” she said.

The man in the booth asked the sniper to let him live. He has a wife and kids. He loves them.

Janine gently tugged my arm. “Jack,” she said. The movie was almost over, the man in the booth reunited with his wife and kids. A long amount of the story seemed unaccounted for. “I’m sorry about pressing you earlier,” she said.

Through the front windows, one of the neighborhood kids that Alexis babysat cycled by. He stopped at the lawn and looked into the window of the house for what felt like a long time before he cycled away.

I turned off the TV, my reflection glaring back at me. “Sometimes, I like to think there’s a place where all the missing kids go,” I said. “I know it sounds stupid.” I looked to see if she was

laughing, but she wasn't. The tender lights of love and pity reflected in her eyes. "I like to imagine that someday, all the children and loved ones that are missing will go there."

"There is a place like that," Janine said, rubbing my shoulder. "Heaven."

The next morning Helen showed up early as the heat was picking up. She was the perfect picture of the liberal West Coast elite in her summer dress, her straw hat and yellow umbrella. It was a hot day, the clouds pregnant with rain. Once there was a pleasure in waking this early, driving down to the site in the dark, walking in with all the other workers, the dark gradually fading to blue, and the sharp buzz of a saw or bulldozer sounding, and the building we're working on taking shape. When Alexis was little, I used to point out some of those buildings on the drive past. Mercy Hospital. Hard Rock Café. Hotel Hilton. I'd tell her stories about the site, some of the delays or complications. Her favorite was about a woman who drove up to a half-finished Dunkin Donuts and tried to order. She giggled every time, and always made me repeat the story when we drove past.

We started spreading out the concrete from the mixer. We'd finished the first lot when Benny shouted my name. "Why the hell is she still here?"

"Who?" I said.

"What do you mean, who? Your ex-wife!" He waited for an excuse.

I shrugged. "I don't know, Benny. It's not my job."

Even the machinery seemed to have ears, stopping to listen.

"Merville," Benny said. "I'm giving you one more chance. Talk to her. Sleep with her for all I care. Just get her the hell off my site."

He stormed off. I glared at the guys who quickly turned back to work.

“I hope I didn’t get you into trouble,” Helen said, when I joined her at the fence. Her face darkened. The purple masts of clouds hovered over the city. The rush of traffic glinting by on the interstate.

“No, it’s okay,” I said. She waited for me to continue but I didn’t.

“What’s it going to be?” she said.

It took a moment to realize she was talking about the site. “A shopping mall,” I said.

The outline of her breasts pushed against her shirt, the slim curvature of her waist, her hair a golden crown of light.

When we were in high school, I once saw her at a party by a keg. We were both high. After the party, we laid on a couch as the rest of the room slept and asked each other questions. About my father, a drunk, and about her mother, in rehab for heroin, and her seven siblings and her 4.0 GPA that was going to get her to a college out West. To California, she said. She told me about the ghostly rumble of the surf and the classrooms with wide open windows and the breeze and taste of salt blowing in.

She held onto my hands and tightened her grip.

“Jack,” she said. “I’m sorry. For everything. I know it’s long past due, and that you have every right to hate me. But I want to help make things right.”

How long had I waited to hear those words? But hearing them now, they seemed just words, empty, void of promise.

“If you wanted to make amends, maybe you should have thought about that when she was still around,” I said.

She winced as if I’d struck her. “Jack,” she said, and I waited, but she didn’t seem to have any words to continue.



After work, I stopped by Zach's Bar on the drive home. The Penguins were playing on the big screen. Along with pizza and wings, sports seemed to be the only thing my daughter's disappearance couldn't touch. Honey barbecue chicken, chili cheese fries with ranch. The Penguins. The Seventy-Sixers. Playoff season.

I ordered a beer telling myself I would stop at one, but before long, I was ordering shots.

The lights turned on as the bartender shouted out last call. I was watching the replay of the game. I still couldn't tell who had won.

It was dark, almost 2 AM, the parking lot empty. I set my alarm on my phone for work in a few hours. On the drive home the ponderosa and pine trees leapt from the dark. I held onto the wheel by one hand and then only by the hook of a finger. The road and the wheel took second priority to the pine freshener dangling from the rearview mirror, the registration on the windshield.

How easy it would be to drift.

When she was a little girl I used to pass by her room and hear her talking with her stuffed animals, Mr. Kermit and Wrinkles the Frog. I'd open the door and see my daughter, her eyes blue bright, lecturing Mr. Kermit. I'd puff, and she'd catch me looking. "Daddy!" she'd say, rushing over to give me a hug that buckled around my knees. I'd ask her if she'd did her chores. She'd wash the dishes, take out the trash, dust the furniture. She still listened to me then. We'd go down to the ice cream shop on Park Ave where I'd order myself a strawberry milkshake and a hot fudge Sundae for her. On the brick path by the river, spotted with sunlight, she'd beg for spare change to use the fodder machine to feed the ducks. "Here, little duckies!" she'd yell, sprinkling a handful of fodder into the stream. She'd take care not to throw all the feed into one place. She said she wanted to give the other ducks a chance.

I smell the fresh smell of cut grass, hear wind chimes, or the sound of laughter from a playground, and through some side door my daughter returns. She's alive. And I don't know how to reconcile that—the daughter that still exists in my head—and the one that is out there somewhere in the world, missing, maybe never to return.

I don't remember any of that drive. It was a miracle I wasn't pulled over, that I didn't crash or hurt someone. I ended up at my sister's. A light turned on. The door unlocked.

"Jack," she said, squinting like an owl in daylight. The sun cast long shadows on the lawn. A lawnmower buzzed. "What time is it?" She looked down, then back up at me. "Have you been drinking?"

She set me down on the sofa and handed me pillows and a blanket.

When I woke, it was bright outside. A pillow was under my neck and a blanket draped over me on the sofa. Janine sat on the chair across from me.

"Jack," she said, and I heard a mix of tenderness and disappointment. "What if you got in an accident? What if I lost you, too?"

I hung onto the word *too* and thought about what it meant. "That's not going to happen," I said, but I couldn't stand the way she was looking at me. I stood up and headed into the kitchen. Pictures of Alexis hung on the fridge. Ocean City. Yellowstone. Alexis at a fairground, holding onto cotton candy the size of her head.

We sat on the island in the kitchen. "Did you mean it earlier?" I said. "What you said about looking?"

Janine folded her hands on the table and creased out the front of her pants. "I don't know," she said.

"I want to, but I don't know if I can. It's been so long."

The grandfather clock ticked. The refrigerator hummed, a second chance at life.

I blew my nose into a Kleenex. “Helen came to visit me again yesterday.”

Janine drummed the table with her fingers. “Say what you will, but there’s a stain on leaving your child that never quite goes away.”

“How do you know that?”

She shrugged. “It’s not hard to imagine,” she said. “I just do.”

Alexis used to come back every now and then from college. I’d be in the shop, the living room, the bar, and I’d hear her car crunch up the driveway, see her climbing out, her backpack and weekend bag slung over her shoulder. We’d go out for dinner, or maybe have a few beers and order pizza and watch a movie. *Meet the Fockers*. Anything we could laugh at. At night, I’d knock on her door. Her back would be turned, her hair long to her waist, bent over a textbook. She’d take out her earbuds as I handed her a cup of tea. What was she studying? The history of the Congo. Gender and sexuality. Religion.

Her room was just as she’d left it. A poster of Hugh Jackman and a *Jaws* parody with a cat instead of a shark that said PAWs hung on the wall. A row of Christmas lights and a Japanese orb lantern hung from the ceiling. A miniature Buddha from her trip abroad last summer grinned from her dresser. A Victoria’s Secret shirt hung over her chair, pulled out at an angle.

Daylight filtered through the blinds casting purple, rosy lights. The plastic stars glowed from the ceiling. I turned and saw her open closet with her clothes tumbling out, her row of shoes.

I started off to work where I found Helen again standing at her spot behind the fence. She seemed to have undergone a change for the worse in the last few days since I’d seen her; purple bags hung under her eyes, and her hair was knotted. She wore the same dress she’d worn the first day.

“You’ve looked better,” I said.

“I’ve felt better.”

I waited for her to speak. Above us an airplane was flying by, its white exhaust trailing behind. “They say you’re supposed to love all your children the same,” she said. “But they never tell you about your first.”

“When did you get in touch with her?” Our hands were close. Her fingers were nearly brushing up against mine.

“About a year ago,” she said.

“Did she reach out to you?”

She nodded. “She sent me an email to my work address asking if I wanted to hang. She must have written at least a dozen emails, but I couldn’t answer them. What do you say, after all that time of being gone? I was still trying to write when she’d send another email. It said, ‘it’s okay, mom.’ And that was all.”

They say you’re supposed to feel something, some gut instinct, with someone you love. And one morning, about two weeks ago, I woke up with the gut-wrenching knowledge that my daughter was gone. I could feel it, as if she had visited me in a dream, a ghostly apparition I watched peek into my room, smile, and walk out the door.

Helen looked at me as if noticing for the first time I was there. If my daughter, whose mother had left her could find it in her heart to forgive, then for her sake, and maybe for mine, I could also.

“There’s a coffee shop across the street, if you want to go there and talk,” I said.

I looked back at the site, masted with clouds overhead, beams of sunlight filtering through. In a year’s time I could imagine the completed shopping mall, the rows of stores and the families and teenagers in love strolling through the floors, browsing for items they wouldn’t buy, stopping for a

meal in the food court. It seemed like there was a shadow cast on this life, but that shadow had its own source of light. Never out, never fully diminished. Maybe one day news would come, but until then, she was still alive. Helen, her mother, was desperate to learn more about her.

“Okay, Jack, we can go there.” Behind us the guys continued to work, the dust from the site enveloping the air. I waited for Helen to move, and she started towards her car. I followed Helen to the coffee shop. I was going to sit and tell her about Alexis. I was going to listen to all of what she had to say.

## LESLIE IN THE SPRING (Novel in Progress)

The walk home was dark. It was 4 AM and raining as Leslie walked down Academic Row through the puddles reflecting the soft soggy glow of overhead lamps. She walked past the new Admission Building and under the ginkgo trees that, she had been told earlier at the party, had been planted as a senior prank. Ginkgo trees were notoriously pretty in the spring, but when pollinating stunk like something awful. That's what the boy at the party had said. The university couldn't dig them up because it was illegal. She passed under them and decided to take a shortcut through Smith Lawn. The lawn was a black stretch darker than the night sky. Surrounding her, the dorms were quiet, the students asleep. She imagined what it must be like to be in their beds snuggled up under a blanket listening to the warm breathing radiator, lost in what she hoped were pleasant dreams.

The blinds in her room were pulled shut. Daylight cast filtered patterns on the wall. When she woke boys from the lacrosse team shouted outside her window as they warmed up on the lawn. A lawnmower buzzed. Her roommates were up and moving. One of them, Kelsey, sang Mariah Carey in the shower.

She closed her eyes, her head pounding big behind her left eye from a hangover from the night before. She lay on her stomach, and then on her back. She tried not to think about the night

before. What she remembered most of all was the cologne he had covered himself with, smelling like the boys used to in her high school. A Boondock Saint poster hung on his wall, and so she wouldn't have to look at him she had tried to memorize the personalized inscription on the bottom. She looked it up on the phone now, ignoring the text messages from her worried friends and from her parents the night before. The motto was a Latin prayer and promised revenge.

She went back to sleep. When she woke it was evening. The lacrosse boys and lawnmower had been replaced by the quiet hush of chattering students sitting outside on the lawn or benches. A guitar played in the room below her. She stood up, stretched, cracked her back, and went into the bathroom, where she turned on the shower water and brushed her teeth. She closed her eyes and sat with her back against the bathroom door, listening to the shower water run (how it sounded like rain), when there was a knock on the door.

“Lez, are you okay in there?” her roommate Kelsey said. Her knuckles rapped louder against the door.

Leslie hoped she'd go away, but Kelsey said she had to go. They lived in a small apartment complex near Sassafras fields, and had only one bathroom on the top floor.

“Jeez, took you long enough,” Kelsey said, when Leslie opened the door. She filed past Leslie and grabbed a brush and started to brush her hair. She wore her boyfriend's extra-large football hoodie that sunk to her around her knees. “Jackie and I got *so* drunk last night.” She turned to Leslie, with a wink in her eye. “I heard you had a wild night.”

Leslie started to cry. She didn't mean to, hadn't known she was capable at crying, but suddenly at the realization of her roommate having to wait on her as she hung out in the only bathroom, she felt suddenly sad.

“Oh, shit, I was only half-serious,” Kelsey said, placing a hand on Leslie’s shoulder.

“Hey, is everything okay? Did something happen?”

It had happened at the party they had gone to. Leslie remembered dancing, swinging with the girls at the pregame to whiskey and wine and driving down to the baseball house in Jackie’s car (though Jackie was drunk and the car overcrowded so Leslie had to ride in the trunk). How pleasant it had been, sitting in the dark with no idea of where they were, her head humming like a bee in a mason jar. At the party, she danced with her friends, the music thumping heavy in her heart and veins as they sang along to Mariah Carey “All I Want for Christmas is You,” though it was only September, the first week of school. The night was young and they were young and would never be in the same place again, she tried to tell her friends in the kitchen, as they fingered out long sticky vodka gummy worms from a bowl. The night reminded her of that Emily Dickenson quote about poetry she liked so much about the top of her head sailing off.

Then the night had taken a turn. She doesn’t remember how this happened, when everything had seemed to go south. She had gotten into a shouting match with a friend. A guy had offered her a shot, and then another, and she had taken each one, wanting to lose herself in the dark promise that awaited her in the bottom of each shot glass. Gradually, the party began to peter out, though the frat-kid in a Michael Jordan jersey DJ was still playing only dubstep, and none of the music that Leslie and her friends had requested him to play. She reclined deep into the cushion of the sofa and sat across from some guy who was crying and telling her something important about his mother, she couldn’t remember what or understand, so she made some excuse to go upstairs into the bathroom and to be alone. She sat on the toilet, and then opened the lid and knelt over the bowl, promising herself that she would never, ever drink. Her insides felt drained as she opened the door and headed into the dark hall. “Your jacket’s in my room,” she



heard from behind her, and she turned and saw a dark-haired boy from earlier that night. Suddenly it was as though her faith in humanity was restored, thankful she wouldn't have to walk home alone without a jacket in the cold. She stepped into his room at the end of the hall, when he closed the door behind her. He asked if she wanted to sit on the bed, so she did. When she sat down, he kissed her, hesitantly at first, then more forcefully. Her dead lips met his; she felt like a body waiting on a rug, drifting somewhere outside of herself, watching as he lowered her down on the bed and worked off her shirt and stuck his hands down the waistband of her jeans, unbuttoning the two buttons on her jeans and unzipping her pants and working to get them off (while meanwhile, she tried to keep them on, she remembered this, but he was so strong). He stuck his hands down her underwear, into her vagina, and now that part of herself that was outside settled on the chair in the moonlight watching the things he did to her, feeling sorry for that empty shell she had left behind to fend for itself on the bed. She went downstairs, where she chided the DJ for playing shitty music, and opened the door and went onto the front porch where a few guys were smoking weed. The stars above were bright, tiny pinpricks of light, and she wanted to go there, so she did. Floating upwards, she thought of her mother and father back home, her mother probably sleeping alone in her queen-sized bed as her father stayed up late to watch the reruns of the sports games he couldn't watch during the day, on account of his job at the bank office, and her brother, somewhere off in the Navy, God knows where, Leslie had sent him a letter but he either hadn't received it or had chosen not to write back. He never was really good at keeping in touch. And she thought about her roommate, how pleasantly surprised at how strongly they meshed, and her syllabi for classes (did she want to continue her anthro class or did she want to switch to sociology? She liked anthro more but the professor for sociology was a young handsome TA with freckles and a splotch shaped in China on his cheek that some of the

other girls thought was a cigarette burn. She thought he had even smiled at her that first day in class during roll call, though if he had dared to make advances she would not reciprocate, most of the fun an dreaminess being in the fantasy, and not the reality). So she continued to drift further up and out, towards the dark outer limits of space, looking down at the Earth, at its cities glowing in the dark and the dark side of the peninsulas shaded from the sun, the moon shining just above her, a half-crescent, as she had learned about in her astrology class that week. Then she was sinking down, heavy weights attached to her ankles, down below the *stratosphere* and *cumulosphere* back to the Earth and towards her college campus where the students were sleeping, maybe boys and girls in love or having one night stands or cuddled up in the arms of their beloved, listening to the buzz of a fan, the white noise of the crickets chirping or the click of a clock; she was receding down below it a back towards the house, back past the bathroom with the empty stale beers cans on the counter which, otherwise, she had thought surprisingly clean for a bathroom inhabited by a house of men, back into the room, and into her body, where the boy lent spent on top of her and she lying there like a feather boa with death curled up beside her, feeling the heavy weight of her body and flesh. They could take it away from you. She had heard that before, but never truly believed it, how a body could be a thing a person did not own, how they could take it away from you, and once they did, how hard it would be to try and get it back.

She told Kelsey what had happened. Kelsey's face was blank. She went over to the stove and heated up a pot of coffee. Then she started to cry. Leslie watched her from far away. Why was she crying? What was there to be sad about?

“The girls said you left without them. We couldn't find you.”

Leslie shook her head. “I was in the living room hanging out,” she said.

Afterwards, they had a cup of tea, and Kelsey went back into her room and Leslie went back into hers. Leslie looked at her notebooks and textbooks all lined out, and flipped through the notebooks with notes she had taken in class, all of them color coded in purple and green and orange, green meaning it could be on the test, orange meaning a note from the teacher, purple meaning a note that was firmly from herself. She paged through a book of *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* that her mother had given her as a graduation present from high school. She set the book down, and turned on the TV. She ran through the things she had to do still. She had to do her laundry. She had to run to Walmart to get supplies, stickies for her Hugh Jackman and Lady Gaga posters that were going to go on her wall along with the Polaroid pictures of her and her high school friends she would plaster beside her bed, so that when she woke up each morning it was next to them. Her Japanese lantern hung from the ceiling, pulsing like a jellyfish. She needed a lightbulb too, one that was preferably not red, because, she said, she didn't want her room to look like a murder scene. "Unless I need to get in the mood," she had joked with Kelsey earlier. Now, remembering that, she didn't find it so funny.

Outside it was a September evening. The sun shone through the parted curtains. The people on the floor above her were stomping with giant T-rex feet. Inconsiderate. The person below her was playing the guitar, only this time, she sang. Leslie thought about going down and knocking on her door, and telling the singer that she had a beautiful voice.

Her mother called her that evening as she was on her way to Walmart. Leslie's room was currently in the state of being repurposed as a game room for her father and his friends. *There were childhood trophies and photos that could be kept. The rest of the stuff could be donated, right?* her mother said. Books to the library, old clothes to the Salvation Army, furniture sold on Craigslist. "Your father's really bent on making that into a gaming room," Leslie's mother said.

“He said you can have your brother’s old room, if your brother says it’s okay, as soon as we get in touch with him.”

“I don’t want his room though,” Leslie said. “I want mine.”

Was it too much of a request, that the room she had grown up in, gone to sleep in, had even taken her first lover in, was it too much to ask that the space not be transformed, that it could just remain as it was?

“Well, maybe you can pay rent or something or convince him otherwise,” her mom joked.

“If this is a strategy of Dad’s so I don’t have to move back in after graduation-“

“It’s not that. I promise,” her mother said. “Your father and I both miss you, sweetheart. We want you to do well but” – and here she lowered her voice – “I think it depresses him, you know, seeing your room every morning. He hasn’t been the same since you left. You know how fathers can be. They always want their daughters to remain their little girls.”

“So he wants to erase me.”

“There’s no need to be dramatic.”

Leslie knew she was being unfair to her mother. It hadn’t been her mother’s idea, and, when her father first suggested it, her mother had been against it. But her father seemed to be beyond question, and after putting up a brief fight, her mother folded, and sided with him.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into it. You agreed to it. If you didn’t want him to do it you shouldn’t have agreed.”

Did she agree to it? It seemed like there had been a life before last night full of things that the person named Leslie had once said or done, but that all of it seemed washed away, so that she only existed individually, in a separate world as of last night.

“Mom, I have to go,” she said, when she pulled into the Walmart parking lot. She heard her mother say something else, but Leslie hung up the phone. She tossed it into the passenger seat. Then she tossed it harder, so that it bounced. She tossed it a third time, and it bounced and smacked up against the window. Then she left it be.

When she returned home, her roommate came into her room. She knocked on the open door and came in and took a seat. “I’m sorry about this morning,” she said. “I just wanted to check in with you. Make sure everything was okay.”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” Leslie said. “Thanks for asking.” She unstuck the backs from the stickies she put on her poster. She placed the poster on the wall, and Kelsey told her whether it was crooked or straight. When she got it straight, she pushed hard into the corners. She stepped back, and admired the poster.

“You know,” Kelsey said. “I don’t want to pry, but have you thought about reporting it? I know the administrations trying to do better with dealing with these things.”

“Why would I report it?” Leslie said. She saw a look of concern in Kelsey’s eyes, and took her hand. “Look, I appreciate you helping,” she said. “But I’m fine. It happened, and it’s over, and there’s nothing I can do about it but move on.” She must have seen uncertainty appear in Kelsey’s face, because Leslie didn’t continue to try and push her case. Hearing herself say it aloud, she was taken aback at how false it sounded, like how coming from her it sounded like something that wasn’t true.

The next few weeks of college seemed to pass by in a blur. Leslie woke early to go to Starbucks and did work before heading home and going to the gym. She didn’t have class until the afternoon after lunch, a schedule that Kelsey and some of Leslie’s other friends said they

were jealous off. “It means you can go out any night of the week and party,” Kelsey had said when Leslie had first told her. Leslie hadn’t realized that there had been parties on the weekdays in addition to the weekends. Not that she wanted to go. Since her assault, she utilized her late nights at the library, staying there until it closed at two in the morning. She delved into her studies with a persistency that surprised even her. During lunch and dinner she ate alone with a book propped open, apparently taboo for freshman eating alone in the dining hall as Kelsey had pointed out. Leslie liked the dining hall food with its healthy vegan options and its Stir Fry line. She limited herself to one plate for meal, already having heard enough warnings about the infamous Freshman Fifteen.

She enjoyed her classes. She participated in the discussions and volunteered to read or to share her thoughts on topics such as Plato’s *Republic* or the misogyny inherent in the creation myth of Adam and Even. She had never thought of herself as one holding any particularly strong opinions, she didn’t follow politics like some of her friends back home did and rarely ever read the news, but listening to some of the other students in class speak, most notably the boys, she found herself disagreeing with a lot of the things she said.

A week after the assault, at the end of her *Justice and Social Responsibility* class, her professor, an old wizened man in a wheelchair who wore veteran hats, asked her to stay. Leslie waited as he talked to one of the other students about continually showing up late, hoping that she wasn’t in some sort of trouble. When the other student left, her professor turned to her, and smiled. He asked about her major as they journeyed into the hallway. Leslie replied that was undeclared. He wheeled into the elevator, and held the door open as he talked to her. “You should consider declaring a philosophy major,” he said. “You’ve made some excellent

contributions to our class,” before the elevator doors shut, and Leslie stood there, feeling silently thrilled.

That night, she looked up the philosophy major in the course catalogue along with some of the other classes offered. She filled out the paperwork to declare her major, and emailed her professor asking her if he would be willing to be his advisor. The return email came back so soon that, if she had not known better, she might have suspected he was sitting by an open inbox waiting for her to email him. “Would love to,” he said, and signed off on the email with his first initial. *T*.

She didn’t understand why some of her classmates or her roommate would complain about the work. Most of them wanted to get drunk and party. Or get laid. She didn’t mind that not doing that stuff. She didn’t like to think of herself as someone who looked down at that, who was judgmental. To each their own, she thought but still, she didn’t appreciate being looked like an invasive species when she talked about her classes, when she declined offers to go out because of her studies.

Her roommate, Kelsey, was the only one who had known what had happened. One night, while the two of them were chilling in the living room watching Netflix, Kelsey tried to bring it up. “You know, maybe you should report it,” she said. “I know it can be weird, and that public safety can’t really do jack shit, but still, years later maybe you don’t want to look back and regret you never did anything about it.”

Leslie wasn’t going to report it. In fact, she didn’t even want to think about it. The fact that she was drunk and didn’t remember much, and also that it was early in the morning, almost four AM, seemed so different from her daylight, waking life, that she didn’t want to mix the two. She kept herself busy during the day and felt relatively happy participating in her classes, going

to the gym, and practicing piano in the practice rooms at the music building, something she had done as a kid. But at night sometimes while lying awake she would feel a warm body hovering over her in the dark, feel his grave hands crawling up her body, and she would jump, turn on the light or call out. One time, Kelsey came over, and sat in bed with her and held her as she cried. Leslie appreciated it, but after that, when she was scared, she tried to keep her cries down to whimpers. She found if she studied hard enough, and maybe if she had a few beers or some wine before heading to sleep, she could more easily forget.

Only some days she was waking up hungover. On one such morning, at the beginning of October, she messaged her professor and apologized for missing class. She wanted to cry. She felt so ashamed that she hadn't shown up, and was surprised at her professor's nonchalance, how he didn't even question the lie that she wasn't feeling well. But also, in that same instance, how much she wished he had tried to delve further, or maybe ask what was wrong, so that she could tell the truth.

One night, towards the end of September, she thought of home and felt it aching inside of her. Outside students were tossing a Frisbee on the lawn, and cross country guys, shirtless only weeks before, now ran in the cold with long sleeves.

She called home, and her mother picked up on the first ring.

Leslie loved her mother. Her mother worked as a maid cleaning the houses of some of the wealthier families in Blair County. The Wolf family, who owned a furniture store. The Degol's, who owned a carpet store. The Delgrosso's, who owned a spaghetti factory beside a local amusement park. A deeply religious woman, she had converted to Christianity when she met Leslie's father, and wore a cross around her neck and often snuck in pamphlets about religion



and church in Leslie's *Cosmopolitan* magazines or when Leslie had packed for school. Among the many things she had snuck in, along with a \$40 gift certificates to Applebee's and Olive Garden, was a pamphlet with a religious quote. Leslie admired her mother, but sometimes, she hated her mother's simple and luminous goodwill, how naïve she seemed and blinded to the outside world. Aleppo. The Charleston Shooting. Her mother wouldn't ever watch the news. "I don't like to hear stuff like that," she'd say, and change the TV, and Leslie and her father would go upstairs to the upstairs TV room to watch.

"Are you okay? You don't sound too well," Leslie's mother said, and Leslie told her she was sick. Which was true. She had felt it the past few weeks, like she was coming down with a fever.

"Do you want your father and me to come and visit? We can bring you the rest of your stuff. We've been meaning to make the trip up, but your father's been so busy."

Hearing her mother's voice, Leslie felt ashamed. She felt as though she had done a very bad thing, like she was sullen or dirty somehow, and that if her mother had known what had happened to her that first week of college, she wouldn't see her the same way. "Thanks, mom, but how about another time? I'm not really feeling well. I'd rather you guys come and visit when we can hang out and catch up."

"Well, alright, sweetie," her mother said. She asked how school was going.

"It's okay," Leslie said. "Classes are going well."

"Did you declare a major yet?"

"No," Leslie lied. She had still been trying to figure out how to tell her parents she was doing philosophy. They worked hard to earn enough money for college so she could get a good job. Become a lawyer. A doctor. An accountant. Both her mother and father were blue-collared

working class. She couldn't explain to them about philosophy, about how it got her to start asking questions, how it wasn't the answers but the search itself in some ways felt like it set her free.

"Honey, your father wants to talk to you," her mother interrupted, and before Leslie could say anything, there was the sound of the receiver changing hands.

"Hey there, Skip," her father said. Skip was his nickname for Leslie, part of Leslie's theory that her father had always wanted a son. "How's it going? You and your roommate getting along alright?"

"Yeah, we're getting on fine," she said.

"Hold on, honey, we want to put you on speaker phone." She heard the sound of numbers being pressed, as well as her father swearing, and her mother admonishing him not to swear. After a few moments, she heard his voice from far away, and her mother's too.

"Dad," she said. "Dad, I think it's working."

"What's that?"

"I said I think it's working."

"Oh, alright. Okay." Her father laughed. "So tell us about school! Is it like in the movies? Like *Animal House*?"

"Not really," she said.

"You got a boyfriend?"

"Dad," she said.

"Your father's kidding, honey," her mother said.

"But still, remember to take a break every now and then. Give yourself some room," he said. He lowered his voice. "Don't listen to your mom, but college is also the time to have fun.

Never went to college, but I partied a good bit back when I was your age. Know you can't see it, but your dad used to be quite the party animal. Your mom, too." Leslie was about to say she didn't want to hear this, but her father kept going. "But we always knew how to be safe. So, if you're going to do it, just be safe, okay?"

*Safe.* The word hit her like an arrow coming from far away, and she was aware there was a big torrent inside of her, a dam in danger of crumbling, and that if she didn't get off the phone she would begin to cry.

"Honey," her mom said. "We also have to figure out what to do with your stuff. We haven't touched it yet, but if you can let us know as soon as possible. We'll have the movers moving in soon."

"Ok, mom."

"I know you're upset, but you can have your brother's old room," her father said.

"What if I want to come home?" Leslie said. She said it quietly, in a tiny voice that she thought maybe her father couldn't hear. Home. She didn't know what that meant anymore. The very idea of it seemed so far away.

"Honey, it's still the first semester. I know maybe it's rough, that it can be nerve-racking, being in a new place and making new friends. But just give it a chance, okay?"

"Okay," Leslie said, and promised them she'd try.

In October, Leslie saw the man who had raped her. She had just gotten out of her Spanish class and was headed down Academic Row, and had adjusted the strap on her backpack as she headed towards the cafeteria to meet her friends and get lunch, when she saw him, or, more specifically, the back of his head. She froze. It was as if her motor functions had gone offline,

like she was trapped in a shell and forced to watch as the people jostled past her. He was standing by a bench, and when he turned, he saw it was indeed him. He was talking to a girl who wore a shirt that cut above her belly button and tight jeans. He wore a Patagonia shirt and shorts with high white socks and Nikes and a backwards cap. He was thin, tall, an athlete, from the looks and muscles on him. She froze again as he looked down Academic Ave. His eyes met hers, then brushed right past her, and Leslie knew he didn't recognize her at all.

That afternoon she skipped lunch and headed back to her room. She curled in a ball in her bed and laid there with the blinds drawn, the sunlight struggling to peer through the windows. How she hadn't seen him before was anybody's guess. Susquehanna wasn't a big school. Maybe they were on different schedules; eating at the dining halls at different time, going to class in different parts of the campus, not going to the gym at the same time. Why hadn't she prepared for this, or thought of this as a possibility?

"I think I might know who that is," Kelsey said, when Leslie told her about it, later that night. The two of them were sitting on the dining room table, a pot of macaroni and cheese bubbling up on the stove. The tea kettle started to whistle, and Kelsey stood up and took it off, turning off the stove and pouring the hot water into a pot. "His name's Jordan. He's on the baseball team. I'm not surprised it's him to be honest. He's an asshole."

Gradually, Leslie found out that everything Kelley knew. He was a sophomore on the baseball team. A business and finance major. He lived in the house they had gone to that night to party, which Leslie had not known. She had been told it was not sports-affiliated.

"He has a girlfriend, too," she said, shaking her head. "Just fucking sick." She took Leslie's hand. "Are you sure you don't want to report him?"

“Fuck that,” Leslie said, after a moment’s thinking. She wrote down what she remembered of the night, taking notes, and looking up information online to get a good understanding of what the Public Safety officers would ask her when she reported him. When she finished, Kelsey walked down with her. The Public Safety Office was located in 18<sup>th</sup> Street beside the on-campus upperclassmen living.

She opened the door and stepped into the bright lights of the lobby. The door in front of them was locked. “Can I help you?” a receptionist said, behind a glass partition. Leslie told her that she wanted to file a complaint. The woman looked down. “Can you tell me what this is for?” she said.

“I was raped,” Leslie said, in a small voice.

The woman didn’t look up, and Leslie wondered if she’d heard. The woman wrote something on a clipboard. Leslie wondered how many times she had heard that before. “You can take a seat, and someone will be out with you shortly,” she said.

She and Kelsey waited for almost half an hour before the door behind them opened, and a red-faced, swarthy officer with curly blonde hair came hustling in. “I’m sorry,” he said. “We don’t have as many people working on the force this year. Now that we’re moving to having everyone on campus, a few of them got smart and decided to quit.” He smiled, and Leslie instantly felt at ease. The receptionist buzzed the door open, and the officer looked at Kelsey. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to wait here,” he said.

This much Leslie hadn’t anticipated. Kelsey gave her a reassuring smile. “I’ll be right outside,” she said, and left through the front entranceway.

Leslie followed the officer through the building. It seemed like a maze, with some open rooms giving glimpses to rooms with desks, copier machines, unsmiling public safety officers.

She was beginning to question whether the officer knew where he was going, if he wasn't just leading her through an endless maze, hoping maybe she'd drop her claims, when he unlocked a door and opened it.

It was a small, defunct room, with a desk and a computer and a bookshelf. On the desk were pictures of the officer and his kids. Two young boys. Leslie was surprised to find she wished they had been daughters.

"Okay," he said, and readied his pen. "Would you like some coffee? A glass of water?"

"I'm fine, thanks," Leslie said.

"Okay," he said. "Whenever you're ready, you can tell me your story."

Leslie told him everything. She started with that night, finding herself editing down on parts of the story, how many drinks she had, where the house was. To her relief, the officer didn't ask many questions or push her in these spaces. Every now and then he would stop to clarify the time, the date, the location, who she was with, other people she might have known. Leslie gave up some of her friend's names, but not before making sure they wouldn't get in trouble. The public safety officer smiled. He took off his glasses and set them on the table. "We've got bigger fish to fry than getting a few girls for underage drinking," he said, good-naturedly. So Leslie continued.

When she got to the actual rape itself, she faltered, and couldn't speak. She tried again, but there was an odd swallowing sound that came from the back of her throat closing and opening as she tried to tell him what had happened.

"Take your time," the officer said. When Leslie finished, the officer flipped over a page.

"What was the guy's name?" he said.

Why couldn't she remember? Kelsey had told her, but she had forgotten about it.

“Jordan,” she said, after some time.

“Last name?”

Kelsey had never given her that. “I don’t know,” Leslie said. “But he’s on the baseball team. A sophomore.”

The officer looked at his notes. “We’ll reach out to the parties involved, and do the best we can. But you should know, these things are difficult to process. If both of you were drunk, it will be your word against his, and while we try to not show any bias, this might be hard to prove.”

Leslie said she understood. The officer wrote his number down on a card and handed it to her.

“If you should need anything at all,” he said.

She thanked him. She found Kelsey outside sitting on a large rock, watching a group of kids being led by a teacher. “How did it go?”

“Alright,” Leslie said. She was shaking, but something in her felt good. Proud. Like a heavy weight had been lifted off her.

“I’m hungry,” she said, suddenly realizing that she had not eaten all day. “Why don’t we go get something to eat?”

For the rest of that week, Leslie felt good about the world. It was as if there were some higher order and justice now being done. She imagined the terrible things that would happen to her rapist after the investigation. His name would be slurred, spat upon by the girls and guys on campus. He would most likely to be kicked out of school. He would have to face his father and mother and explain to them what he had done and why. The last scenario Leslie enjoyed

imagining the most, thinking of him standing in some room facing his parents (who, in her mind, were dressed in yacht clothes, a tweed blazer and corduroy pants for the father, a white dress and lots of bracelets and neckless for the mother). The expression especially on the face of his mom. “Didn’t we teach you anything?” she’d say. “Didn’t we raise you to *be* better?”

Things seemed to be taking a gradual turn for the better. She found herself able to pay more attention in school, and when she woke at night, turning on the lights to make sure she was alone, that she was in fact in her room and not back *there*, she was mostly about to go back to sleep. She was in such a chipper mood that her roommates all noticed. One night, while Kelsey was donning up her makeup, Leslie sat and watched. Her roommate and her friends had been talking about a big football party at a place called the Warehouse, and Leslie told her that she was thinking of going.

“Really?” Kelsey said, brushing her cheeks with blush. She turned and looked at her. “Are you sure?” She turned away from the mirror with mascara in her hand, half her eyelids shadowed in eyeliner.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I?” Leslie said. Then, sensing Kelsey’s worry, she said “don’t worry. I’m not going to drink. It’s just, why should I not go out just because of him, you know? I’m not going to let him ruin all my fun.”

Kelsey seemed to weigh in on whether or not this was a good idea. “Well, if you’re not going to drink, do you think you could drive us?” she said. “The party’s far away, and it’s cold out.”

They arrived at the party a quarter after ten. It was as she remembered it before; bright lights, loud chatter, the smell of sweat and booze. The party was in a three-story house called The Warehouse located next to a cemetery. This time, Leslie knew not to reach into her wallet



and try to pay as she and her friends approached the door. She strode in with Kelsey into a blast of heat, bodies pulsing or relaxing in various states around the sofas in the living room. The DJ behind the speakers had headphones on, and was jerking his head like he was bashing it against something heavy in the air. She made her way to the bar and ordered a water, but something in the atmosphere made her nervous and edgy, so she asked for a beer. One beer wouldn't hurt, she told herself.

She ended up getting a little buzzed, but not drunk. Kelsey wasn't around; she had gone outside to smoke weed with some of the guys who lived at the Warehouse, so Leslie thought it was okay to have another beer. She hadn't realized how much the beer would hit her, not having drunk since the night of the party.

"I thought you said you weren't drinking?" Kelsey said when Leslie joined her outside.

"What are you, my mother?" Leslie said, smiling. "I'm just having a few drinks to take the edge off."

Then, after a few beers, she was making her way outside when she saw him. This time, he looked at her, and seemed to recognize her. He was about to say something, but seemed to think better of it. He whispered something into the ear of one of his friends, who also looked at Leslie. After a moment, the two of them left out the back door. Leslie stood rooted to the spot. It had happened so quickly she wasn't sure if it had really happened at all.

When Kelsey found her at the end of that night, Leslie was in the backroom crying. The room was filled with bicycles and a kayak. "I heard what happened," Kelsey said, and went up and hugged her. "I'm so sorry, I knew we shouldn't have come out."

"Fuck him, if he thinks this is going away," Leslie said. "He's lying, you know that? He's lying," but Kelsey hesitated, only for a split second, but long enough for Leslie to know.

“You don’t believe me, do you?”

“Of course I believe you,” Kelsey said. She took Leslie’s hands.

“You’re lying,” Leslie said.

“No, I’m not. I swear.”

“Then what is it? Why does it seem like you don’t?”

“I don’t know, Les,” she said. “It’s just, you said it was a guy on the baseball team? Well, I happen to know all of the baseball players, and they said that that weekend that guy had gone home-”

“And you believe them?”

“My friend wouldn’t lie to me,” she said. She paused. “Are you sure it was him? There were a lot of guys at that party. You don’t think one of them could have come into the room and found you-”

“I was conscious! I remember talking to him.” She looked around as if looking for someone to back her up, and gestured around wildly with her hands. “I saw him the next morning.”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry, I believe you. I just have friends on the baseball team and I’m trying to not get in the middle of this and be fair to both sides-”

“Fair to both sides. I was raped, Kelsey.”

“Leslie,” Kelsey said. “You’re screaming.”

In class, she found she couldn’t concentrate on what the teacher was saying, or her assignments. She found herself staring out the window at the clouds passing by, thinking how sad they looked, with the tops of trees blowing in the brisk October breeze. Walking around

campus, it felt as though she were walking in a cloud filled with heavy traffic, and that she was almost being run over and apologizing to every car that almost did. Some nights she woke up, and it was as if there was a tiny child crying inside of her, and she would hold her pillow and listen to the white noise of the fan blowing at the far end of the room, looking at the far wall and at the occasional patch of light that was thrown from passing cars. Sometimes, she woke up in a cold sweat, convinced that she was not in her room, that in the dark she was now back in his room. She could feel his hands moving over her, unbuttoning her button, lifting up her shirt. Making their way down her legs. When it had first happened, her first thought had been one of disgust. She had wished she had shaved her legs that morning, they seemed prickly, almost like pears. She thought about why she had felt that way for a very long time.

From there on out Leslie's life seemed to take on the quality of a walking nightmare. By now, word had spread to the rest of the guys on the baseball team, and Leslie found them staring at her or pointing or whispering when she passed them in the hallways or on her way to class. Soon she began to understand more of their schedule – it was as though the baseball team were a single unit of hive mind who traveled together in packs, had similar classes, and frequented the gym and dining room facilities around the same time. At times, Leslie would be walking to class and see him walking ahead of her, and she would study him, the easy lope and swagger in his step, he and the rest of the baseball guys laughing loudly at something that was funny. She understood that, until recently and perhaps even now, his concerns had to do with parties and girls, and if he was a good student, maybe even grades. He didn't have to exist in a world where he felt like precious Chinaware always on the edge of breaking, like if he made too sudden a movement some part of him would break and he would never be able to put himself back together again.

Her friends were growing more and more concerned. “Leslie, are you okay?” they asked her. She didn’t return any of their texts or emails. Soon her professors were emailing her as well. She was getting notices from the Office of the Registrar. She looked through her emails and calls, waiting for the only one that mattered. Eventually, about three weeks after the incident, as she referred to it in her mind, she got the call. “We can’t press charges,” he said. “Right now it’s his word against yours, and we don’t have any evidence. These things are typically hard to prove.”

That Saturday, she called her parents, and told them she was coming home. She told none of her friends, not even her roommate, goodbye. She packed her luggage, her books and clothes and shoes and jewelry and laptop, and drove the two hours home to her house in Bellwood, Pennsylvania.

At first, her parents didn't say anything, when Leslie showed up on a Wednesday morning, her luggage packed. She returned to the university only a few more times, for her stuff; extra clothes and her laptop charger and some of the pictures of her and her friends that had been hanging on the wall. It was a slow gradual removing-in process, where as her college apartment seemed to empty out her room back home, the room she had grown in as a child, complete with stuffed animals and trophies from basketball and track, started to take on the appearance of a lived in place, until one night, when sitting on her bed reading her old Harry Potter series, her mother knocked on the door.

"Leslie, are you okay?" her mother said. "It's been almost two weeks, and you haven't left the house. Your father and I are worried. We wanted to know whether or not you had any plans for returning back to school?"

"I'm not returning back to school," Leslie said. It wasn't something she had planned, but saying it in that moment, she knew it was true. She would drop out, at least for a year, take some time off. Maybe see about transferring. She didn't want to go there anymore.

That night, her father came upstairs after he returned home from work. He was a blue collar working class man who worked as an engineer and who often traveled away from weeks at a time. When he was home he was usually in the living room watching ESPN and sports. His reaction wasn't nearly as docile as Leslie's mother. He started out yelling, after bursting through the door, and somewhere outside Leslie knew her mother was waiting. Leslie didn't catch all of what was said, only snatches of "we've been working our whole life" and "better opportunities than we ever had" and "if you think we're going to let you drop out, you better think again." By the end of his tirade, he seemed spent, his face haggard. Leslie saw the brief well of concern and fear on his face. "We're worried about you, Skip," he said. "The school called. We think you should see someone. Maybe a psychologist. And don't worry about the money. The thing we care most about is you getting better, okay?"

Leslie's mother snuck in after her father left. She sat on the edge of the bed, the springs squeezing. She stroked Leslie's hair. "Your father's just worried," she said. "You know how he is. He doesn't know how to communicate these things well. But he loves you. We both do."

What more could be said? She knew she was being selfish, that if she really wanted to this was a thing she could beat. But it was like a ferocious animal to her, lurking in a cave which she was afraid to enter. Whenever she thought about that night, the feel of his hands or his stubble pressed against her cheek, his hand darting down between her legs as she tried to push him off, something inside of her would die, as if rotting off and falling apart from her.

She promised her father she would go back. The next day, she packed up her car, and started the drive towards her university. She was on the highway when she saw the old familiar green sign advertising the exit. But instead of taking the exit, she continued driving. She drove on I-90, and after a few hours, she had made it out of the state through Ohio. Then it was Iowa. And Illinois. The landscape started to change, the rolling hills and fall foliage of Pennsylvania foliage flattening to farmland with sprinkler systems that looked like the backbones of whales, prehistoric fossils, across the land. By the time she made it outside of Chicago it was dark. She pulled over to the side of the road, and nestled back into her car. When she woke it was to a policeman rapping on her window.

"Ma'am," he said. "Have you been drinking?"

"No," Leslie said.

"Would you mind stepping out of the car?"

The officer didn't charge her with anything, and Leslie drove home. The door was locked. She knocked on the door and found her parent's inside waiting.

"Everything's fine," Leslie said, in a hollow distant voice. She could see the cause for worry in her own words. To try and put them at ease, she smiled, and grabbed her mother's hand. "It's nothing," she said. "I just had trouble with a boy." She was surprised at herself for saying it, the lie, and now the lie grew more elaborate and complex, taking in amusing anecdotes and a story of incredible heartbreak and tragedy. His name was Brad. He was a lacrosse player. He had cheated on her with her roommate. She found herself enjoying the lie, weaving it and creating it so dramatically it could have been published in one of the shared story columns in her old *Seventeen* and *Cosmopolitan* magazines.

By the end of her story, her father was scarfing down food, reading the newspaper out of the corner of his eyes. Her mother, however, continued to look at her with sympathy.

That night, her mother knocked on her door. Leslie was reading *Inkheart*, just at the part where Meggie accidentally releases Capricorn. Her mother settled down on the edge of her bed. She ran her fingers through her daughter's hair.